
LEARNING AND TEACHING WITH INDIA'S GREEN MOVEMENT
A REVIEW OF SUNITA NARAIN, *CONFLICTS OF INTEREST. MY JOURNEY THROUGH INDIA'S
GREEN MOVEMENT*, VIKING, GURGAON, 2017, 227 P.

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Sunita Narain was born in 1961, and she has been with the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) since 1982 as an activist, journalist and after 2002, director. The CSE has published books, reports and a fortnightly journal, *Down to Earth*, it also houses an archive of environmental conflicts in India. It is a centre of knowledge and often also of successful advocacy. Sunita Narain became well known as Anil Agarwal's co-author and editor of the publication on *The State of India's Environment 1984-85: A Second Citizens' Report*, CSE, New Delhi, 1985. The title and contents were typical of the CSE. The report was based on cooperation with local scientists around India but also with local knowledgeable people who often knew better about water harvesting and forest management than the certified scientists.

Not yet 30 years old, she reached world fame with Anil Agarwal before the UN Rio de Janeiro conference of 1992 when they published together a powerful pamphlet on climate injustice titled "Global warming in an unequal world: a case of environmental colonialism". They calculated the per capita figures on emissions showing an obvious fact: if the per capita emission of greenhouse gases by impoverished countries (in history and at present) would have been the universal norm, there would be no enhanced greenhouse effect. The oceans and the new photosynthesis would absorb all the carbon dioxide emissions caused by humans. The increasing concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (around 300 ppm in 1900, 360 ppm in 1992, over 400 ppm today) is caused by the "luxury" emissions of the rich, and not by the "survival" emissions of the poor. Remarkably, twenty-five years after this resounding call for climate justice, the

Paris international agreement of December 2015 explicitly excluded the notion of “liability”. Otherwise the governments of the rich countries would not sign any agreement.

In Paris, this travesty of justice won the acquiescence of the governments of India and of all other countries of the world after Pablo Solon (Bolivia's ambassador at the international meetings on climate change in Copenhagen (2009) and Cancun (2010)) and a few recalcitrant representatives of other governments had been forced into submission. Or in some cases officials from countries of the South were bribed into acquiescence to injustice. Over many years, Ambassador Todd Stern of the USA was an eloquent spokesman for the rich against the recognition of liability for climate change. There are still some competent academic voices (Warlenius, 2015 & 2017) calculating the “sinks appropriations”, i.e. the disproportionate use by rich people of the atmosphere, the oceans, and new vegetation to dump excessive emissions of carbon dioxide. The historical responsibility for climate change is certainly unevenly distributed between countries, largely following the North-South divide. Warlenius argues strongly in favor of assigning payments for climate change in proportion to historical responsibility. There are also non-academic voices pointing to the ecological debt from North to South as stated explicitly in paragraphs 51 and 52 of the Encyclical “Laudato si” of 2015. “Laudato si” however does not quote Agarwal's and Narain's famous contribution published by the CSE in Delhi in 1991.

Sunita Narain's *Conflicts of Interest* (dedicated to her mother, and to Anil Agarwal (1947-2002), the founder of the CSE, “who taught us the art and science of environment”), does not start with her own international intervention on climate justice. This only comes in Chapter 4 competently bringing the story from 1992 to today. The book starts on a more domestic note with traffic pollution in Delhi in the mid-1990 deploying a characteristic mixture of science and activism; also belief in public policies and the courts of justice in India and at the same time vociferous exposure of hidden damages through influential environmental journalism. The first chapter then narrates the successful fight in Delhi to introduce compressed natural gas as a fuel substituting for diesel. “We won (against the motorized traffic industry) and we lost”, she concludes. The CSE won the battle for CNG but the number of vehicles in the region of Delhi and in other cities in India has increased so much that air pollution and its death toll also

increase. This was and is “slow murder”. It is not like the Bhopal accident, a case of sudden, mass murder; neither is it the persistent police repression against the “environmentalism of the poor and the Adivasi” causing many deaths over the years against environmental defenders. It is, for instance, the everyday slow killing through pollution by PM 2.5 (atmospheric particulate matter (PM) with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometers). In other parts of India, the dust of booming coal fields and coal fired power plants has become a regular part of life. There are occasional deadly massive mining accidents but also everyday killing from respiratory illnesses, such as pneumoconiosis. “Slow murder” is a concept introduced by the CSE.

In city traffic as in climate change there are issues of environmental justice. Atmospheric pollution appears to be class-blind but who has the right to disproportionately appropriate the city for private motorized traffic against bus lanes, and against cyclists and pedestrians?

On a similar line of uncovering truths inconvenient for industry, the next two chapters deal respectively with the Endosulfan controversy in Kerala and with the nation-wide issue of pesticide residues in beverages of two powerful international companies, Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola. The CSE was faced with SLAPP court suits (strategic lawsuits against public participation) in both cases. It survived them. Endosulfan spraying was done by a state company, Plantation Corporation of Kerala, growing cashew nuts in Kasagarod. By the year 2000, a local doctor (Y. S. Mohana Kumar) practising medicine in the village of Padre in Kerala since 1982 was noticing more and more cases of cerebral palsy and deformities. The CSE had by then a pollution-monitoring laboratory. With faith in the combination of local knowledge and objective science, samples of soil, food, and water were taken by members of the CSE and analyzed back in Delhi. After “study vs study vs study” (as Sunita Narain puts it), the conspiracy of establishment science against the CSE’s effort was exposed. In 2005 the Kerala government banned Endosulfan and in 2011 the Supreme Court imposed a ban in India as a whole. (Endosulfan was already banned almost everywhere in the world). Surviving victims were paid some compensation in 2017 but what has been done to humans and other forms of life cannot be now amended by money payments. Although Sunita Narain does

not say so, criminal court convictions would have been perhaps a more effective way for imposing liability than suing for damages.

The “Cola Wars” described in the third chapter brought Sunita Narain in 2003 into a new terrain of politics, a Joint Parliamentary Committee chaired by the veteran politician Sharad Pawar. The Cola Wars had international aspects with Washington lobbyists flying to India. The CSE laboratory had found that bottled water and also Coke and Pepsi bottles had pesticide residues. “A public relations blitz followed. Film stars Shah Rukh Khan and Amir Khan were brought in to convince people that we were wrong. Both wore white laboratory coats ... and studiously informed people (from the screen) that the drinks were absolutely safe”. The case was won in the sense that the courts agreed that there were not yet obligatory standards in India regarding the presence of pesticides in soft drinks in India, and there should be. Calculations were needed on MRL (the maximum legally acceptable amount of pesticide residue) plus the acceptable daily intake (ADI) of each particular pesticide. The industry argued that in India apples and many other foods had pesticide residues. The CSE retorted that food intake was needed but drinking soft drinks was not needed nutritionally.

The CSE has accumulated much experience on pesticides. Members had travelled to Punjab to study the devastating impact of pesticide exposure. Cancer patients from Punjab go by the trainload (in the so-called “cancer train”) to a hospital in Bikaner. There were no rules on the application of pesticides. The CSE was accused of focusing on Cola Cola and Pepsi Cola in the search for publicity and because they were foreign firms, instead of paying attention to local events as in Punjab. In the end, however, the Joint Parliament Committee’s report in 2004 praised the CSE’s “whistle-blowing act in alerting the nation to an issue with major implications to food safety, policy formulation, regulatory framework and human and environmental health”. There were still many other skirmishes but the reputation and the personal and financial solidity of CSE were not damaged by the SLAPP suits. “In 2011, colas were back in our life” - writes Sunita Narain; this time because of obesity and diabetes concerns.

There is a change of track in Chapter 5 (“Tigers and/or People”) away from urbanization, industry and health towards exclusionary conservation of the wilderness. The CSE’s standing brought Sunita Narain (through Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s

direct intervention) to chair in 2005 a Tiger Task Force. Here there was an instructive clash between representatives of the “cult of the wilderness” and those who believed in an “environmentalism of the poor” (as the CSE did, since the first reports by Anil Agarwal on the Chipko movement in the mid-1970s). There was no denying that tribals had lived for a long period of time in forests housing also tigers but growth of population and deforestation had made the encounter between humans and tigers more deadly (on both sides). The initial question for the 2005 Tiger Task Force was, why had tigers disappeared from the Sariska tiger “sanctuary” in Rajasthan? The displacement and relocation of local populations, the militarization of conservationism, and the prevention of poaching of animal parts for external markets are common issues in reserves of tigers and other wild animals (like rhinos in Kaziranga park, in Assam), as also in some other countries. But tigers are something special to India in symbolic terms and in actual numbers - now down to a little over 2,000 living in the wild when there were perhaps 100,000 one hundred years ago. Sunita Narain could draw on the experience of ecologist Madhav Gadgil in discharging her duties for the Tiger Task Force and in writing her report, “Joining the Dots”. The science of counting tigers was contested, and a new contribution was made to it. The issue of “coexistence” between tigers, cattle and humans was discussed, as also the sharing of the benefits from tourism with a wealth of examples much beyond the sad Sariska case. And not only tourism, also other economic activities (like fisheries in Jambudwip, a small island in the delta in West Bengal) could be compatible with the conservation of tigers. Through tourism there was a danger, however, of moving to what Sunita Narain calls the “zoo-fication” of the tiger.

Chapter 5 also contains a very competent discussion on forest policy. Sunita Narain is not an enthusiast for cooking for biomass, even with improved chulhas or stoves – she is for making LPG (liquid petroleum gas or butane) available and affordable as much as possible to poor families everywhere.

Regarding forests, the CSE was for a time a supporter of calculations of their Net Present Value introduced by the Kanchan Chopra committee mandated by the Supreme Court. Forests have many values and provide many services, and perhaps economic calculation and payment for their loss would have a good influence. I was surprised at

the time by the enthusiasm for Net Present Value in the pages of *Down to Earth*. There has been more skepticism later about the economic valuation of deforestation: how to calculate such costs, what to do with the money collected from companies as compensation, and whether money valuation is counterproductive by denying the relevance of other values. A longer book could have gone into the analysis of examples from India of world-wide pertinence such as the debate on the Niyamgiri Hill. My own view is that the approach of standard economics (even when labelled 'environmental') is to use a common unit – a monetary numeraire – for all the different values and then to look for a trade-off between all of them. This approach assumes value commensurability. Ecological economists and activists, in contrast, acknowledge value incommensurability. We argue that it is misleading and could be counterproductive for conservation to reduce the diversity of valuation languages (livelihood, identity, territorial rights, ecological values, sacredness, aesthetics) to a single monetary measure that denies or detracts from the legitimacy of those other languages deployed in ecological distribution conflicts.

In Chapter 6 the topic is mainly water management, another 30 pages of argumentation based on detailed accounts of visits to different places. The beginning of this chapter could have been the beginning of the book. Sunita Narain and Anil Agarwal were driving down a winding road going to Bikaner in Rajasthan in 1990. Anil had learnt to drive a new red Maruti 800. There they were taught about old and new water harvesting and distribution systems about which they had no idea. They captured the vocabulary and the workings of such systems, later including in their training the new social experiments as in Hiware Bazaar in Maharashtra. Anil was an engineer; he and Sunita learnt fast about the water knowledge of the very different regions of India, publishing together in 1997 *Dying Wisdom: Rise, Fall and Potential of India's Traditional Water Harvesting Systems*. Here colonial hydraulic political economy had been manifestly inferior to local knowledge. Sunita Narain writes: "Remember the film *Lagaan*, where Amir Khan stands up to colonial rulers who want the lagaan (tax) paid despite rain failure? The stated objective of this tax was that it would be used to build facilities by the state. The public works department was set up to build huge irrigation facilities to bring water to the fields. But the outcome was that there was no money available for investment in local resources by local communities".

The final chapter with the title “Blueprint for the Future” is a brave attempt to propose alternatives: a different type of urban planning (with an equitable use of urban and road space); better water management and sewage treatment; building of some new dams but leaving a minimum ecological flow of 50 per cent in all rivers in all seasons; new solutions suggested by the political economy of defecation; measures for forest conservation. In summary, there is need to take the environment into account at local, national and also global scales (since India is such a major world actor) by resorting to old and new institutions and technologies, despite the present rush to economic growth based on fossil fuels. There is praise for ecological modernization and practical, plausible policies in this last chapter and throughout the book, and in this sense Sunita Narain is less radical than her contemporary Ashish Kothari (also born in 1961) and his “radical ecological democracy” and *ecoswaraj*. It is unlikely that either of them will become a cabinet minister for the economy and the environment in the present government. Their influence must be exercised locally and internationally through other means and in other constituencies, including writing and publishing very readable books.

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