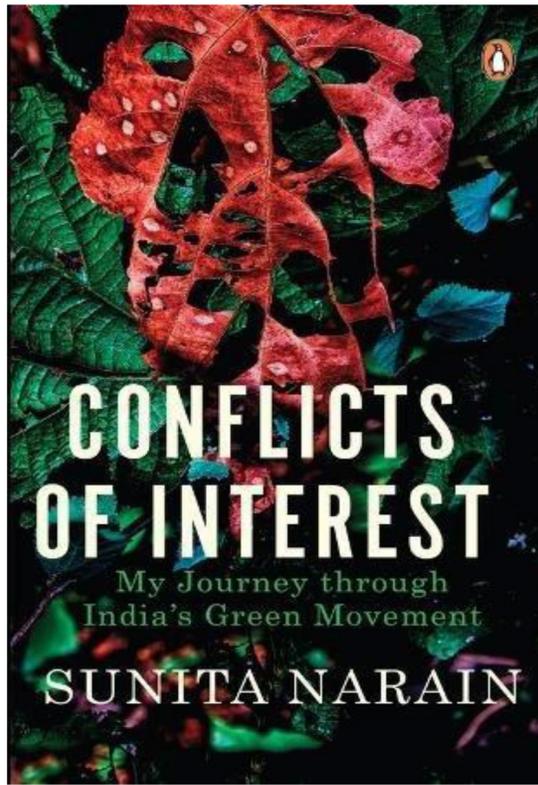


Conflicts of Interest: My Journey Through India's Green Movement



Conflicts of Interest: My Journey through India's Green Movement,

By

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“We have forgotten how to be good guests, how to walk lightly on the earth as its other creatures do”.

Barbara Ward

The British writer, economist and one of the early proponents of sustainable development, Barbara Ward expressed her concerns for the global environment through the above words long before the earth had observed the kind of destruction it is subjected to today. She could realize the early warning signs of peoples' unsympathetic attitudes and approaches towards the environment and worried about its alarming future consequences. For the past several years, Dr. Sunita Narain, through

her incessant efforts, has constantly been cautioning us about the present state-of-affairs of the environment, particularly in the Indian scenario. The book, “Conflicts of Interest: My Journey through India's Green Movement”, is a testimony of her relentless battles as an integral part of India's green movement. From her confrontation with the country's leading vehicle manufacturer Tata Motors to the global carbonated-beverage leader Coca-Cola, the book depicts the journey of India's one of the most prominent environmentalists today. Divided primarily in seven in-depth chapters namely, (1) Air Pollution: Breathless, (2) Endosulfan's Curse, (3) Cola Wars, (4) Climate's Charge, (5) Tigers and/or People, (6) Water and Waste Wars, and (7) A Blueprint for the Future – the book is dedicated to Late Anil Agarwal, another pioneering environmental activist who had returned to India from London to set up the inspiring Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) (of which Narain is now the Director General), and to her mother.

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In the very first chapter itself, Narain addressed one of the grave concerns of the country today – the air pollution. In a startling report, the WHO in early May 2018, revealed that 14 of the 20 most polluted cities in the world are Indian cities with the alarmingly high level of particulate matter (PM) 2.5.^[1] The CSE sensed this coming around 20 years back in 1999 when the organization argued for the cease of diesel-powered vehicles, introduction of compressed natural gas (CNG) which emits much lower levels of both PM 10 and PM 2.5, and was even involved in a bitter fight with the Tata Motors where the company sent the CSE a legal notice of a massive Rupees 100 crore (to be withdrawn the same later). Although the CSE could push forward the introduction of CNG, the situation of the capital city of India during the winters of 2015–2016 was nothing short of a public health emergency. The air quality in Delhi became worse than the infamous London Smog of 1952. Narain proposes the implementation of an efficient public transport system in the city and add spaces for buses, cycles, and pedestrians in order to combat the pollution, nonetheless also talked about her own accident while adopting an eco-friendly measure of cycling in the very city. On a positive note, she is determined not to give up her fight against pollution “so that we can breathe easy”.

The CSE's research on pesticide poisoning in Punjab and Kerala welcomed the wrath of some major pesticide companies. It involved personal attacks on Narain in the form of demonstration in front of her house, circulation of obscene cartoons among other such assaults. Nevertheless, the CSE's long battle against endosulfan – an organochlorine pesticide already banned/restricted in several countries – finally resulted in the ban of the pesticide in Kerala in 2005 with the Supreme Court prohibiting the manufacture and use of the pesticide completely in the country in 2011. Started in the year 2000, it took an overwhelming seventeen years' long battle to ensure adequate compensation to over 5000 victims of endosulfan poisoning in Kerala. This leads us to the famous case that Narain has called “Cola Wars” in her book which involves the CSE's study on pesticides in soft drinks. Although she and the CSE, after five years of continuous pursuits through legal and research activities, made sure that the maximum level of pesticides in carbonated water was notified by the government, she considers this victory as significant yet symbolic. With banning of junk food by schools and Indian government's stern position on sugar-sweetened beverages, she declares that the battle to take control over our food and, thus, our bodies has indeed started. The challenge rests in carrying forward the movement both responsibly and effectively.

Climate change is the unfortunate reality of our time. Illustrating historical and recent climate negotiations globally in her book, Narain argues that while the Indian landmass is showing signs of suppressed warming, the Indian Ocean

is showing signs of large warming. This will eventually lead to catastrophic future changes – weaker Indian monsoons, which is the lifeline of this agrarian economy, will be one such disastrous event. Referring to Narain's own words, as a ‘make-or-break’ situation, climate change “forces us, perhaps for the first time in our history, to realize that we live together on one earth”. Challenges appear while addressing issues associated with conservation of nature, for instance, conservation efforts associated with tigers. Whom should be preferred – tigers and/or people? From a personal point of view, at the very outset, Narain's appointment as the Chair of the Tiger Task Force set up during the UPA regime was challenged and her credential questioned by several wildlife conservationists in the country. Nevertheless, carrying forward her work, she and her team submitted the report on 5th August 2005, recommending ‘inviolable’ spaces for tigers and establishment of a crime bureau to break wildlife crimes among others. The adequate relocating provisions and compensations for the displaced people should be a central theme in any conservation endeavour. She warns that although due to the conservation efforts, the number of tigers in the country increased approximately from 1411 in 2006 to 2226 in 2014, the habitat of the animal is shrinking alarmingly. Thus, she calls for an inclusive conservation effort for the tigers towards ensuring the requisite protection of this magnificent species.

Water and waste are two major concerns in the present day world. Explaining the current state of affairs pertaining to water scarcity, Narain in her book emphasized, among many others, on investing sufficiently in weather sciences in order to ensure future security. Further, she documents a few inspiring success stories, such as the remarkable water harvesting account of the Maharashtrian village of Hiware Bazar in Ahmednagar district. The take away from this story is the society's determination and consent to fight together both water-depletion and over-extraction. Taking forward the debate on water and waste and considering ‘excreta’ as a subject, Narain put forth an exhaustive detail of the sad status of exceedingly polluted Indian rivers, many of which are, unfortunately, converted into mere nullahs today. She cautioned that with this rate of degradation, days are not far when our future generation may end up considering the Yamuna, Cauvery or the Damodar as simple ‘drains’.

The book ends on a futuristic note. Narain believes that global environmental movements are at a crucial crossroads. It is upto us to carry forward its fundamental essence –ensuring an inclusive growth towards sustainability, confirming measures such as sewage treatment plant and reinvention of mobility to combat water and air pollution respectively, getting rid of the Not-in-my-Backyard (NIMBY) syndrome while, for instance, addressing ‘waste’ etc. Narain's journey through India's green movement is both inspiring and courageous.

The book is an interesting read towards understanding the role of vested political interests and corporate lobbies in environmental conservation.

REFERENCE

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