
Book Review

Why I Should be Tolerant: On Environment and Environmentalism in the 21st Century

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This is not yet another book on environment or environmentalism. It serves many a purpose — educating the environmentally educated and those who need to educate themselves on matters and problems in environmentalism and the discourses around it. Having been an insider to the problems and issues of environment and environmentalism over three decades, Sunita Narain brings out environment issues, problems, policy-making and practices, which the contemporary world is engaged in and aware of but is not willing to address for reasons known and unknown. Deliberate and not so deliberate actions and practices

of government and people are discussed with a focus on anecdotes, events, processes involved in the developments over the last four decades and suggesting ways and means to overcome them for making the Earth a better place to live in.

The title may suggest that ‘tolerance’ is the most frequently discussed word after the current government at the Centre assumed power three years ago. Sunita Narain has chosen to tell us why poor nations need to come out of the argument that we also need to undergo the processes of wealth production i.e., development, which necessarily has an impact on the environment, why

the problem of drainage in urban India is not addressed and many other issues. The merit of the essays is in their succinctness and brevity and this can be seen in every essay for no essay is more than three pages long, but each tells a tale in depth, some disturbing and some damaging.

With nine themes on environment viz. climate change, excreta, energy, governance, urbanisation, air pollution, health, water and forest, Sunita makes case for comprehensive inclusive rethinking on environment and the need to reflect on the much debated issues on environmentalism. One thread which runs throughout the essays is the western model of growth that countries like India and China are trying to emulate and the need for rethinking. She says, in her preamble, “The Western model of growth that India and China with most feverishly to emulate is intrinsically toxic.” The essay titled, ‘Two cities, two cultures’, is an eye-opener for us, wherein she presents a parallel between the later Romans and the people of Edo, which later became the city of Tokyo. She talks of how Romans could not manage human waste which resulted in the destruction of rivers, while the people of Edo managed their waste outside the city, far from rivers and water bodies. She makes us understand that the Roman rivers are now history and archived for tourist and Edo still lives on. She says, “Today, we are all children of Rome, not Edo.”

She cautions, “Literally, no small or medium river today is clean. Every river that passes through a city or a town becomes a stinking sewer.” No one can deny this. The essay, ‘Why excreta matters’, shows how the water you flush into toilets (in cities) is dumped into rivers, making them drainages. “Coming generations will forget that the Yamuna, the Cauvery and the Damodar were rivers. They will know them as drains, only drains.” This reminds us of Chennai’s Koovam, which is now a big drainage channel and was a river hundred years ago.

Essay after essay makes us feel guilty of the ‘human acts’ which are detrimental to the environment and in due course will be dangerous to humans. Unmindful use of natural resources and complete absence of concern that our actions are leading to a kind of degradation about which scientist Stephen Hawking, says, “fight for resources will be the final war on Earth and between planets.” He says the Earth is facing the danger of attacks from aliens who have exhausted all resources on their planets and are looking for Earth-like places to conquer for resources. Sunita puts it rightly, “Today Indians take water from their rivers — for irrigation, drinking and power generation — and give back waste. Water no more flows in its rivers. It is the load of excreta and industrial effluent.”

In one of the essays in the chapter, ‘Urbanisation’, she discusses

the smart cities project of the present National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. This, the author believes, will work only if it can reinvent the very idea of urban growth in a country like India. She further argues that our (old) cities have been built to be car-free. “We are now desperately shoving, pushing and parking vehicles down the narrow lanes. Think smart. Change the idea of mobility itself — build space for walking, cycling, bus and metro,” she says.

The chapter on air pollution has three essays — ‘Cars, more cars’, ‘Lifeless on the fast lane’, and ‘The right right’. All three deal with how our roads, particularly urban roads are behaving or are used today. Citing the example of the city of Chennai, which has seen 10 per cent growth in population and a staggering 108 per cent growth in private vehicles in the last decade, Sunita claims this can be accidental because public transport in many cities caters to 50-70 per cent of commuters, while private vehicles constitute over 90 per cent of all vehicles. The story of Nano and its wish to meet the aspiration of every Indian to own a car reveals how the subsidy, which the government gives to cheap car production, acts as a booster for people (who may not actually need) to buy cars. The question the author asks has to be answered, “Can the government write off the costs Nano style so that all can buy the car? Can the government pay for our parking, our roads and our fuels, so that all

can drive the car?” This is the telling testimony of our reality to make India a developed country. One can recall what Ramchandra Guha asked in his book, *How should a person consume?*, “If everybody owns a car where will we have space to park them?” It is not that Sunita Narain wants to provoke the people who take decisions related to environmental issues in the country; she is also offering solutions to them.

The chapter, ‘Forests’, has the caption, *If you alienate people from their habitations, you will only beget violence and lose productivity*. The most important thing we can do for people of the forest is letting them live there. Managing and conserving forests is a burden on states and states are no longer able to afford the costs. The statement, ‘Our forests are too important to be left unused and uncared for’, makes sense for conservationists like Madhav Gadgil and environmental historian Ramchandra Guha to advocate the same to protect our forests. Similarly, the essay, ‘Money does grow on trees’, makes a case for making use of trees for productive purposes.

Essay after essay makes the reader feel not only guilty, it makes us realise that we are part and parcel of what is happening, but also that there are possibilities of solutions in our own hands, if we reflect, introspect and initiate actions. As an educator, I feel this book is a must-read for teachers and students in schools, and also students in the

university, so that we learn about the real environmentalism, not simply the theories of how pollution happens. Most children study about the ill-effects of the use of plastic bags and waste of water, but they do use such items in real life. This book will have an impact on students and teachers. It is also a must-read for those at the helm of affairs — policy-planners, people in ministries (including ministers), implementers and above all the public, who in a way are made to feel that 'I can't do anything to stop environmental damage. It is irreversible.' I would also prescribe

the book to people who speak for and believe 'urbanisation alleviates poverty'. The question is, "Can we make all people (from villages) move to cities, even to smart cities in the name of reducing poverty?" The book, while presenting the environmental crisis the world faces today, instills hope through doable actions. Finally, a word about the production of the book — great cover, readable print for all and the arrangement of essays based on the themes. Sunita Narain conveys what she wants and what is needed to be conveyed. Let people listen to it.

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