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Chronicle of an Environmental Campaign, with Messages for the Future. A Review of *Saving Aarey – The Undoing of an Environmental Campaign*, by Rishi Aggarwal

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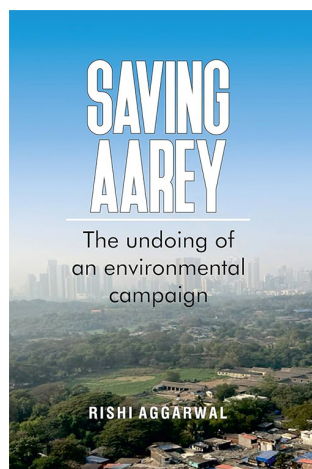
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Aptly dedicated to his mother's city Mussourie and the sylvan landscape thereof, *Save Aarey*, as the blurb synopsis says, is a 'first-person account by Rishi Aggarwal, which is more emotional than academic...' Rishi, whom one can consider to be a born environmentalist presents a compelling story about a campaign in Mumbai to conserve an ecologically-sensitive site not far away from two big lakes – Powai and Vihar – in northern Mumbai. The story raises a lot of questions which are answered in part by Rishi, but they also serve as 'take-home-ponderings' for readers who are encouraged (by this reviewer) to read the book with heart, mind and soul, and consider themselves to be both 'contributors to, and resolvers of' environmental issues that plague the developing world. Messages and lessons can no longer be relegated to the backburner, not in the 2020s when one and all have first-hand experiences of the repercussions of environmental damage on human well-being.

Aggarwal wishes the best for the environment, and campaigns to save/protect it, in India, (urging strength and unity within them as sine qua non to weather storms of all types), but his first-hand, 'on-the-field' active experiences make him sometimes doubt the possibility of significant



Picture source: www.amazon.com

improvements in advocacy efforts. *Aarey* is one of many such examples in the country, where the politico-economic dimension trumps the environmental, with society not really being able to decide which way to sway. Ten parts (each with its chapters) neatly chronicling the stimuli (distal and proximal causes), and reactions (undesired effects on the environment, and the campaign to stop the rot), before prophesying about the future of environmental activism in the city of Mumbai (and for that matter, in general, in the country), take the reader on an absorbing journey, which worries and inspires at the same time.

Slow-Burn, Pick-Up and Endgame

Rishi points out that often there is tendency to rush to bolt the stable doors after the 'environmental horses' have already bolted. If awareness about the environmental damage that would follow the implementation of a transportation-related project – construction of a car-shed at one terminus of a metro-rail line, in Aarey – had been widespread in the early years of the second decade of the 21st century, the campaign would have been more than just a few protesters, few quotes, and a few thousand people reading them; and thereby more effective. History is to be studied to make sure that some or most of it does not repeat itself (easier suggested than accomplished in a city which has neither the time nor the need for it). Rishi states that the central purpose of his book is 'to contrast between the efforts to safeguard the environment, and efforts to damage it'. He hopes that the latter (which is compensated for) is discouraged and discontinued, in the interest of the former (which is gratis and voluntary). What is gratis and done voluntarily can very easily be funded by the rich and affluent inhabitants of the city, desirous of bringing about a change, and walking the talk! Caring for the environment must be more than just lip-service to ride the bandwagon and not be left out. It requires heart-mind-body-soul-wealth engagement with the process, if it is to be labelled as genuine – not different from serving God (Who is the one manifest in the Environment around us). Hypocrisy has been rife, and true and abiding environmentalism like the one lived by the author Rishi gets shrouded and obfuscated, by the sensational variety which starts with a bang and ends with a whimper.

It is seen how with environmentalism suddenly gathering steam globally (courtesy the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, formally put in place by the United Nations in 2015), persistence paid, and slowly but steadily, more support was garnered to make the technocrats and politicians consider alternatives to the proposed car-shed,

after also factoring in the necessary ecosystem services being provided by Mother Nature through her trees and arboreal wildlife. People matter when politicians dither, more so those people who are convinced that conservation of Nature is a duty they need to perform, for the sake of the generations to follow. Rishi takes readers from 2014 to the beginning of the pandemic (in 2020), without forgetting people and places, politicians and protesters, posters and press coverage, which are destined to be a part of this campaign the intention of which was not to 'delay and obstruct development' but to motivate and impress upon the technocrats and politicians to find alternate solutions which would contribute to more sustainable urban living for the 'genuine larger good' (striving to reach Pareto optimality in other words). The author is of the view that nature education and awareness are at best the lowest denominator when it comes to conservation – necessary but far from sufficient. He laments that there are 'millions of people' in the developing world cities (like Mumbai) who are losing their sovereignty to choose better standards of living, mobility, sanitation and dignity'. The DNA of the book, so to say, is an intermeshing of the happenings over time, connected to the campaign, with the author's own personal struggle to self-actualise and fulfil what he saw (and sees) as his designated purposes in life.

Wheels within Wheels...

Environmental issues cannot and should not be studied in silos. The socio-economic dimension needs to be always factored into a more integrated assessment (Venkatesh 2019a). Mobility is vital to Mumbai residents, and the existing bus and train networks are veritably spines of the commercial capital of India. The metro-rail system while being acceptable on the 'greening agenda' – assuming that it will radically decrease the passenger-miles clocked by privately-owned automobiles – is more of a problem shifting when environmental impacts other

than global warming are given short shrift. ['Open spaces' for instance, which Rishi uses as a proxy for environmental issues]. In SDG-parlance, it is a conflict between SDG 13 on one hand, and SDGs# 14 and 15 on the other (when trees have to be cut down to accommodate new infrastructure, and wildlife residing therein imperilled). Rishi wonders if modifying/expanding what is already there – adding a bus rapid transit system within the bus network – instead of adding a new 'rigid' and inflexible mode of transport (the metro rail network) disruptively, would have been a far more sustainable option. Readers must read and deliberate and expand the system boundaries when performing any comparative environmental life-cycle assessment (Venkatesh 2019b); and also add in a cost-benefit analysis (Venkatesh 2019c), and a social life-cycle analysis (Venkatesh 2019d), to get as holistic a picture as humanly possible. Rishi has a point when he writes about the road being a political theatre, which the elite wish to lord over, while relegating the proletariat (to use Marxian lingo) underground and above-ground, so to say.

He urges every citizen to insist on knowing about the decisions being made on his/her/their behalf by the individuals they elect to power – more so now, than ever before. He believes that the dairy industry in Aarey and its environs (dating back to 1949) deserved 'heritage status' long ago in addition to recognition of its role as an urban natural recreation area, and the source of a vital consumable for Mumbaikars. He argues that any land use changes motivated by business interests and profiteering – benefiting a handful and destroying both the intrinsic and instrumental values of environment for the majority – is deplorable. Support for environment-friendlier alternatives for urban development should not be difficult to come by if more and more of us appreciate and understand the aforesaid values (either or both) of the environment. But what if there is benumbing apathy all around, despite awareness and knowledge about

the advantages of trees and green open spaces in a tropical megapolis like Mumbai?

The State of Maharashtra, Rishi points out, is the most industrialised State in India, and thereby the residents of its capital city Mumbai have a greater responsibility towards conserving the environment therein. Direct confrontations with politicians and bureaucrats are the need of the century, when trust in the judiciary (rule-interpreter, more often than not, unwilling to set precedents), media (eyeball-seekers), Right-to-information activism (merely for intellectual stimulation) is becoming questionable. He calls upon the consumerist middle class (which is burgeoning), and largely serves capitalists, and takes care of its status and lifestyle – to pick up the cudgels against the powers that be, as and when necessary. Indeed, all roads lead to Rome, and everyone may not have it in him/her/them to be a true-blue activist for environmental causes. Some may resort to writing, some others to art, and some others with the gift of the gab may wish to speak and lecture about environmental issues, but what is very necessary to walk the talk at the same time! Live what you write, talk or paint. Practise what you preach and let people be aware of the fact that you are not just a talker but a walker too, so to say. It is hypocrisy which enrages the sincere and committed individuals.

Et tu, Mumbaikar?

Caring for the city (and its natural environment) one dwells in must be a priority for any duty-conscious, conscientious citizen. Using Mumbai and all that it provides you – schools, colleges, and the built environment in general – merely as a launchpad to a cosier and more comfortable life and career in the western world, is lamentable as Rishi points out. This is what ails the megapolis. Nature which has nourished and nurtured you, and facilitated the built environment of the city, needs your support! You may adopt an anthropocentric view if you wish, but if you wish to get the best of your built environment (which itself has been

fashioned out of abiotic materials extracted from Nature), and be able to avail of it comfortably for a long time, do not forget that you continue to be dependent on Mother Nature. The more you introspect, the more you will realise that what you and the ecocentrists seek are actually one and the same, albeit for different reasons! Politicians, celebrities and businessmen may well be opportunistic and self-serving (even when the second-named promote environmental messages on large hoardings or in TV commercials – of course, for a big fee in return!), but the common man/woman has it in him/her to make a difference, if he/she persists silently and inspires others in the process. However, what sounds ideal is actually frustrating, painstaking and depressing, and a lifetime is often not enough for such persistence to be rewarded. But hope springs eternal in the human heart...

Read, and Carry on the 'Environmental Crusade'

Reviews have to be short, so as to motivate the readers thereof to purchase a copy of the book, and read it to get to know more about what has been written. I would thereby leave it here, and conclude...for me, reading *Saving Aarey* was quite like a mini-spiritual-reawakening, bringing back memories from the fag end of the 20th, and the early years of the 21st century, when I was observing, thinking, reading, listening and agonising in Mumbai (and working in the print media), before leaving the country in a last-ditch effort to resuscitate some hope back into my life and career and try to fulfil some of the many ambitions I nursed fondly in my heart. The author, as mentioned earlier, has elaborated upon the facts, and on-ground realities. The purpose is not to make readers cynical and demotivate them. Absolutely not. It is actually the contrary. It is a challenge to everyone who reads the book, to come together and fight for such causes which are central to our existence – a fact which is Gospel Truth, but only half-understood, if at all!

Thanks, Rishi. The torch is not extinguished; it will be rekindled again. This book may well provide an impetus.

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