

INTERVIEW BY ANUPENDRA SHARMA ('87)

SEPT/OCT PERSON OF THE MONTH: DILIP D'SOUZA ('76) (AWARD WINNING AUTHOR OF TWO BOOKS, REDIFF COLUMNIST, ENGINEER & PROMOTER OF SOCIAL CAUSES)

When I met Dilip in New York in Mid October, it was to meet him for the first time face to face, and to make a decision on which of our deserving candidates would we choose for the Person of the Month. Halfway through our conversation I realized that Dilip should be that deserving person. Here follows an interview with Dilip, conducted through conversations, phonecalls and emails.

Tell us about your experience at BITS. Do you have any fond memories you'd like to share with us?

The first lesson I learned, and very quickly, was that my city boy pretensions were just those: pretensions. At BITS I met guys from every corner of the country, many of whom were not fluent in English, but who proceeded to beat the pants off me in our courses nevertheless. A sobering, but necessary lesson for me. It was from them that I learned the true meaning of the word "cosmopolitan" -- for this was a cosmopolitan place in the best sense. BITS was probably the first time I truly understood what my country was about, and it's something I haven't forgotten.

There are all kinds of fond memories! The joy of friendships, the aching tenderness of first love, the untouchable thrill of finding what you're good at (and bad at, for that matter) and doing well at it ... and then I ran for President of the Union. Promised helipads in each Bhavan, promised to move the clock tower to the Main lawns so the time would be better visible from all over the campus, and collected all of 17 votes. I'm still trying to find out who the other 16 dodos were.

You have written two great books about two great causes. Tell us about these books.

"Great" is a word I quail from! But thank you nevertheless. I put a lot into them and I think they are good books. I'm dejected that they haven't

been more widely read. But I suppose that's the way it goes. Anyway.

My first book, "Branded by Law", is about our "denotified", or ex-criminal tribes. There are about 150 of these communities spread around the country. In 1872, the British passed the Criminal Tribes Act which actually listed ("notified") these tribes and therefore defined them as criminal. That is, if you were born into one of these tribes, you were automatically considered criminal. In 1952, independent India repealed the Act and thus they were "denotified". But in real life, little has changed for these people. They are still seen as criminal, and treated that way every day.

When I was done with writing that book, someone from Penguin approached me to write about the Narmada, an issue I've been writing about for many years. It's an issue close to my heart, and I had a lot of material anyway, so I said yes. Thus "The Narmada Dammed", in 2002. Of course it's a book against the dams projects on the Narmada, but I consciously tried to keep the Narmada Bachao Andolan out of it (even though I believe their argument). The case I tried to make in the book was simple: even if you believe in dams, you should be alarmed at the way this one, Sardar Sarovar, is being built. In other words, the strongest case against Sardar Sarovar is not made by the NBA or other dam critics, but by those who are building the dam -- because they are doing such a shoddy, haphazard and half-hearted

job of it. The basic problem with the dam is that it will not deliver what it promises, especially to thirsty Kutch and Saurashtra.



Denotified Tribes

I'd like to hear about your most cherished moment from both projects.

This happened in 1998, when I visited a tiny town called Santrampur, in Panchmahals Dist in Gujarat (an area that saw some horrible violence last year). I was at a meeting of denotified tribes -- Vagharis, Nats, and others. I got talking to one young man, Deepak, and he told me: "These speeches are OK, but if you really want to get an idea of our situation, come with me to our homes." I said fine. We walked through the whole messy town to the other end in about 10-15 minutes.

There, beyond a strip of black stinking ooze from a broken drain,

beyond a huge pile of garbage and set in some thorny bushes, were a few thatched huts. I went with Deepak to his hut, said namaste to his wife and daughter, bent down to look in and commented involuntarily on how neat his hut was. That was all I did.

Then we started walking back to the meeting, because I had to meet my colleagues and return to Baroda. On the way back, Deepak stopped suddenly and told me this: "Aap ke dil mein garibon ke liye jo bhavna maine dekhi hai, use kabhi khona nahin." ("Don't ever lose the feeling for the poor I can see you have in your heart.")

This is what I wrote in my book about this moment: *"I was speechless. Astonished, too, at how close to tears I suddenly was. It was both a compliment I will always treasure, and the saddest thing I have ever heard. All I had done was spend a few minutes with Deepak, as I might have with anyone else. Yet his few words told me just how novel an experience even that much was for him."*

As for the Narmada: perhaps the experience I cherish most was visiting a small village, Bilgaon, on the banks of one of its tributaries. Two young engineers from Kerala gathered the villagers, built a small dam -- small in comparison to Sardar Sarovar, but still some 50-60 m long -- there and blasted a channel through rock to take water to a tank from where it powered a turbine. So in a matter of 6 months or so, 300 families and a tribal school that had NEVER had electricity now had the stuff. Without any displacement, without any submergence of fields (both of which the Sardar Sarovar is threatening Bilgaon with). Can you imagine that? After half a century of listening to government promises about providing electricity and so forth, they produced these things for themselves.

It was a truly inspiring moment on many levels. I found myself wishing that more of us from BITS -- me, for one -- would choose to go do things like this pair from Kerala had. I can't think of a better use of the education we were privileged to get there.



Name: Dilip D'Souza

Books: The Narmada Dammed (2002) and Denotified Tribes:

Regular Columnist: Rediff

Education: MS Computer Science, Brown University (1984), BE (Hons) EEE (1981)

You once wrote about 10 great reasons why you want to live in India. You have worked hard on about ills and injustices of the government. Do you think anyone is really listening ?

Listening to the 10 reasons or to the ills and injustices?

More seriously. Yes, I suppose some people are listening, but not enough, and not enough who are in positions of power. But that's the challenge every writer faces: to write effectively so that people will listen. It's my challenge too, and it's what drives my writing. There are times I fail, sure, but that only means I need to try harder next time.

Your next project concerns Kashmir. What motivates you to do this. Hasn't enough been written already ?

The next project I want to work on concerns patriotism, war and

dissent. Kashmir is a sort of natural, convenient place to examine those issues, because what is happening there puts them in such sharp light. But my real intent is to examine what these things are doing to India as a whole, and to articulate something (I don't yet know what!) that will move us away from the steady bloodshed of war -- to make peace a patriotic pursuit, if you will. I think peace is much the harder thing to achieve than fighting a war (war is the soft option), and I think it's time we started doing that hard work.

So I am interested too in the tragedy of Gujarat last year, or in Bombay in 1992-93, or the Northeast, or even of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984. Because all these have links to our notions of patriotism and nationhood, to our hostility with Pakistan in Kashmir. Whether we like it or not, our sense of who we are as Indians is now so intimately linked to Kashmir that it has some kind of bearing on much of what happens around us.

Tell me something about your family. Is your wife your biggest critic ?

I met Vibha Kamat in 1992, about 6 months after my move back from the States. (Meeting her is, of course, the best thing I've ever done in my life...). We were married in December 1993. Our son Sahir was born in June 1999. We are getting ready to submit our application to adopt a second child. Vibha grew up in Bombay, teaches French at the Alliance Francaise. Sahir is in KG.

On the face of it, I suppose I would have to say no when you ask if Vibha is my "biggest critic". My mother is often far more critical. But over the years I've learned to interpret Vibha's remarks about my writing. So when she's sort of non-committal about something, I know she thinks it is pretty hopeless and I had better get down to rewriting it!