

DILEMMA 3 THE MYTH OF IMPARTIALITY, OR HOW I (ALMOST) BECAME AN ACTIVIST

Rakesh was an associate of Sunderlal Bahuguna, the renowned environmentalist behind the Chipko movement, and had worked with one of my filmmaker friends in India. I was looking for an “in” into the activist world of Uttarakhand, and the mutual friend introduced us. Our first meeting, in a bustling café near Delhi’s Connaught Place, is etched in my memory. A tall, gregarious, gray-haired, kurta-wearing man with thick glasses, Rakesh reminded me of many of the intellectuals I had met during my years living in South Asia. But there was also something different, something very non-middle-class about him. “He’s a Gandhian,” my friend told me before the meeting. His self-discipline was palpable, and the way he talked and moved betrayed a spartan lifestyle. Yet, I soon realized he also had a strong desire for recognition. Unlike Medha Patkar or his mentor Sunderlal Bahuguna, who were revered by Western journalists and academics, Rakesh’s obscurity beyond Indian activist circles was clearly a sore point. Of Kailash Satyarthi, the anti-child-labor activist who had shared the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize with Malala, he said, “If he got the prize, I should get it, too.”

A week later, we were sitting in the principal’s office of a school in Pashulok. Rakesh had related the history of recent local protests and sold me on the idea that this was the most suitable site for my research. Two days into my fieldwork he was effectively making key decisions on my behalf, and I felt deeply vulnerable. My ethnography was not supposed to be a treatise on Rakesh’s worldview, but I felt it was sliding in that direction. Nevertheless,

his rhetorical abilities and his charm were massive assets in gaining access to hard-to-reach spaces. The school principal had firmly said “no” to us at first, but Rakesh convinced one of the teachers, Pranay, whom he had never met before, to vouch for me and sign a letter taking full responsibility for whatever happened. I was impressed, even more so after learning that this teacher was in fact a supporter of the Tehri Dam and did not share Rakesh’s views at all. But there was something about Rakesh—my friend refers to him as a moral compass—that enables him to bend others to his will. I was glad to have him on my side.

Whose side was he really on, though? I have no doubt that, in his mind, he was on the side of “the truth,” which became a point of contention between us. I was not so much interested in a singular truth as I was curious about the subjective experiences of those ousted by the dam project, the many individual truths forming the painful mosaic of displacement. Rakesh kept asking me why I needed to interview individuals rather than groups of oustees and why the interviews needed to be so long and personal. When translating, he often altered both my questions and the participants’ answers, something I noticed even with my very basic Hindi, and at times we argued about this in the middle of interviews. In the end, due to Rakesh’s “translations,” I had to hire professional translators to go over all the interview recordings and identify discrepancies. Rather than phenomenology and hermeneutics, Rakesh was concerned with justice, which, it seemed to me, was a black-and-white affair to him. The whole process felt like a performance in which I was to play the judge, Rakesh the prosecutor of the corrupt Indian state, and the Pashulok oustees the witnesses he called to testify in support of his case.

From the beginning, I was aware of the performativity (cf. M. Z. Rosaldo, 1982) shaping our interactions. I could see that Rakesh wanted to impress me. I suspected this had something to do with my gender, the color of my skin, the fluency of my English, and the Cambridge University logo on my business card, and this made me uncomfortable. Rakesh felt the tension, too. I remember sitting in his rented room in Rishikesh on a cold February evening, debriefing after a long day of interviews, when he offered

me his hat. When I declined, he said, “You don’t want it because you think my head is dirty.” I could sense the discomfort in his voice.

And then there was the money. I was paying Rakesh a daily wage for his assistance with the project. This made for a power dynamic even more fraught with inequality, and it motivated Rakesh to show “results” for his work. For example, he aimed to conclude the process of finding a school willing to have me within hours, or at most days, while I was open to a longer exploration in an effort to get the site selection “right” (even though I was not sure exactly what that meant). Matters got further complicated after Rakesh asked me to tell him how much my doctoral degree had cost; when I told him, he took it as evidence that I was wealthy, despite my attempts to explain that my degree was paid for by a scholarship. This prompted him to ask me to pay him more, even though the request was not framed as such: rather, my payment was to be a contribution to the “cause” he was fighting. There was no escaping it: by choosing Rakesh as my key informant and translator, I entered a highly polarized field. In his eyes (and gradually in mine, too) I entered it more as a fellow activist than a researcher.

Rakesh left after a week, as we had agreed, because of his busy schedule, and for the rest of my fieldwork I worked with local translators. It soon became clear that the people he introduced me to, who all shared his views about the dam, the Indian state, and development, were far from representing the only voice in Pashulok. I later encountered people who applauded the dam and whom I suspect Rakesh would not have wanted me to meet, and people with other opinions he likely did not know about (cf. Drew, 2017). But that first week with Rakesh left a lasting legacy on my understanding of the conflict and on the way the local community perceived me. It also planted a dilemma in my mind: Should I take sides in this conflict to potentially gain depth at the expense of breadth, as some people would likely open up to me while others would refuse to talk to me? Or do I try to stay neutral? Given that I was seen to be associated with Rakesh, did I even have a choice? And what about the ethics beyond research ethics: if I believed the treatment of the oustees was not just, was I not obligated to do what was in my power to help?

Working with Rakesh was simultaneously fascinating, rewarding, and frustrating. It took away any pretense of my being an impartial observer and forced me to confront my own politics and the politics of the field. His fast research felt anti-ethnographic while simultaneously being one of the most significant ethnographic encounters of my fieldwork that gave me a window into the politics and psychology of activism in 2017 India. For all the ways Rakesh's presence complicated my research, he increased the "available light" (Geertz, 2001) in the room.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/14193.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14193.001.0001)

Educating for the Anthropocene

Schooling and Activism in the Face of Slow Violence

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Citation:

Educating for the Anthropocene: Schooling and Activism in the Face of Slow Violence

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DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/14193.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262370721

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2022

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from The MIT Press Frank Urbanowski Memorial Fund



The MIT Press

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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Adobe Garamond and Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sutoris, Peter, author.

Title: Educating for the anthropocene : schooling and activism in the face of slow violence / Peter Sutoris.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021057614 | ISBN 9780262544177 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Education—Social aspects—India. | Education—Social aspects—South Africa. | Poor—Education—India. | Poor—Education—South Africa. | Marginality, Social—India. | Marginality, Social—South Africa. | India—Environmental conditions. | South Africa—Environmental conditions.

Classification: LCC LC191.8.I4 S87 2022 | DDC 370.954—dc23/eng/20220302

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021057614>