

Speaking Truth to Power

An Open Letter to Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India

From

Amit Chaudhery

(one among 1.2 + billion Indians)

Dear Prime Minister Modi,

You are an eloquent man and very erudite. And the prime minister of this, the world's largest democracy. I am a faceless man of great anonymity and greater insignificance. I am among the teeming masses who define India, both its good and its bad. I do not care for politics or politicians with attendant trappings of ceremony. Beyond broad parameters of government and governance, that is. Within this, I am exercised only by the destructiveness they bring to bear. Whilst for the most part my reaction is secretly dipped in schadenfreude, I cannot be bystander when pillage of this country's natural capital rises exponentially. Therefore, this letter. I must also tell you that I have no affiliations to you or any rival. And, therefore neither desire nor delusion. I am not subversive, neither am I an anarchist. This, even though I believe democracy rests on the fundamental flaw that the majority of people are always right and must prevail. A five minute conversation with a specimen of this majority can cure anyone of misconception. But that's another matter and an unpopular point of view. You regularly share your '*Man ki Baat*' with all Indians across the vast swathe of this once great country. I want to share '*Atma ki Baat*' with you. Perhaps '*Atma ki Baat*' will articulate '*Man ki Baat*' and just maybe, translate into '*Karm ki Baat*'. Any meaningful *Baat*, especially like the ones in context, must be clear and must be audible. Therefore, this open letter. In an age when countries increasingly seek expression and articulation through vicarious projections of strongmen, the cadence of this raucous note rises to crescendo. You, sir, are India's strongman just as your peers from China to Turkey to Russia to America. A constellation of alphas who must prove and out-prove themselves constantly. That's all right. It is yearning and desire, therefore, the performance of our time. But every desire, no matter how intense, is subservient and slave to limitation. Natural caps which contain us all. Within the parameters of limitation, desire and its realization is tied to the concept of *Karma*. Of Cause and Effect. Simply put, Sir Issac Newton's Third Law of Physics. **The point is, there are consequences, just as there is free will.** Common sense tells us to exercise free will to create the consequences we want, so that these consequences create the conditions we want. A state of altered reality. All and everything we do, rests on this fulcrum. Exceedingly simple, seldom remembered. The present state-of-affairs is Orwellian. You have been told that. It is only appropriate that I base the thesis of this unsolicited (not unwarranted) letter on George Orwell. What he had said, rings true today. Exceptionally so. "***We have now sunk to a depth at which re-statement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.***" Since I consider myself acceptably intelligent, I decided to say it like it is.

Speaking Truth to Power are four little words strung together; but they are a tall order. They must comfort the afflicted and they must afflict the comfortable. My use of the phrase is neither new nor unique. The Quakers in America coined it in the 1950s. Plain, bland and unsparing. In our Indian tradition, truth has been spoken to power countless times. Across history and legend, beyond time and circumstance, there have been those who have said it like it is. In our contemporary milieu, as you admittedly work hard to make India great, the emblem of this country resonates that ancient Mauryan credo, *Satyamev Jayate* (Truth Alone Triumphs). Truth must be shorn of sophistry. To re-employ the Late Baron John Dennis Profumo's turn-of-phrase, it does not serve to be "economical with the truth".

Truth, therefore, must be told in all its unabashedly naked, shameful glory. Here it is, Mr. Prime Minister. Not all of the truth, because collective lists of sins stretch far too long and run far too fast. I can neither encapsulate them cogently and wholly, nor can I keep pace in the death race, your government, especially, has gained such velocity on. **What I can and shall do, sir, is to offer you a helicopter view without hovering too long atop any one of the developmental minefields so elaborately laid out. This is only appropriate. Potentates sway banners; the knitting and the knotting is left to underlings.** Underlings are usually indifferent, largely incompetent and in the Indian context, entirely indolent; mentally and physically. Bereft of informed and considered world-views, devoid of long-term perspectives, alienated from concepts of sustainability and absolutely, completely, almost totally, lacking in measures of ethical or moral integrity. They often suffer from that commonly encountered debilitating condition called lost scruples. Such blighted cadres translate grand illusions, cloaked as vision, on ground. **Stewards of countries have neither time nor interest to dwell on anything long enough. Even if it be prelude to perdition. They are exceptionally occupied by hubris (an unavoidable affliction of all rulers) overlaid by being constantly, consistently feted by all and everyone.**

Dear Prime Minister, I am hardly capable of holding a candle to the sun. That's not the intent, certainly not. Besides, superior minds surround you. Experts in their fields, buzzing with concepts and plans to translate idea to reality. They are armed with equally elaborate metrics of returns on investment, development indexes, global rankings, *et al.* **Recent events reveal, however, that these hallowed captains of your many teams are infected with a certain hollowness of mind and impoverishment of heart. They can see neither the forest nor the trees.** Just last month they decreed to kill 16,500 trees right under your nose in the heart of New Delhi, to build new houses for themselves. This, in a city which is amongst the world's most polluted. Beset with breathing disorders, lung cancers, ocular problems and whatever else suspended particulate matter can trigger. Your health minister was unconcerned. Your environment minister who has not questioned any ecological destruction, was smug in incompetency. And your urban development minister, a suave, urbane, educated man who ought to have operated from a higher threshold, actually sanctioned this gross, vile project. For a change idiocracy was challenged after 1200 mature old trees were killed off. The urbane urban minister mouthed senseless post facto platitudes and the situation is in abeyance. **Science has brought us face to face with that latter day Faustian expression, "be careful of what you wish for." The adage warns that present aspirations when fulfilled in the future, may bring ambiguous, unwanted fruits. Fame brings accolades, but also demands; discoveries bring excitement, but also responsibility. You are prisoner to your promises sir. All merchants of hope are. The question is, will you choose Truth, or will you pursue red herrings, diverting attention from the reality of Nature's destruction in your reign, and by default, continue to choose the deadly consequences that arrogant indifference brings?**

When savants of our shared tradition set out to carve Indraprastha from Khandav Van on the left bank of the Yamuna, Agni the Fire-principle burnt the lush forest. Indra tried hard to save it, to douse the terribly hungry flames, but it is said that Arjuna intervened with potent arrows to drive away the rain god. Meanwhile, the god of fire consumed the forest merrily and with great appetite. He swallowed everything. His thousand red tongues raised a huge conflagration, leaving behind only ash. The birds and the beasts tried in vain to escape. They were prevented. All died horribly. There was only one survivor – Takshak, the snake king. He escaped to Kurukshetra. The great war which followed, I believe, was not as simplistic as made out to be. Compounded layers of conflict, of the just and the unjust and of retribution were many. Takshak later played his part to avenge the carnage. And as we all know, Indraprastha, built atop the horrific, excruciating shrieks and screams of Khandav Van, was laid to waste. It too became a necropolis. Even the river ran away further afield. The only ruminating remainder was a tiny village called Indrapat which existed until 1913

within the walls of the dead fort built aeons later. **You, clearly, are building a post modern Indraprastha. Only, that it is vaster, more ruthless, more violent. Hinduism, bedrock of Indic civilization you draw strength and pride from, was founded on what was a profoundly ecological vision. The human-nature relationship was at its core. Permeating biological, physical and spiritual dimensions of life.** The sage Kapila Vatsyayan summarizes this ancient wisdom: *Man's life depends upon and is conditioned by all that surrounds him and sustains him, namely, inanimate, mineral and animate, aquatic, vegetative, animal and gaseous life. It is, therefore, Man's duty to constantly remind himself – in individual and collective life – of the environment and the ecology* (Vatsyayan, 1992: 160). Messages of environmental conservation contained in the Vedic and Puranic literatures, in the Upanishads, Arthashastra, Charak Samhita, Ramayana and Mahabharata are all based on non-violence, non-injury to both the living as well the non-living creations of nature such as plants, animals, air, water, land (earth), hill and forest. This is the core of Hindu religious philosophy which extended up to Jainism and Buddhism. We extended the relationship with Nature, to treat rivers as mother goddess, forests as gods, totemic animals as brethren. We believed that trees bring peace, prosperity and consolation to mankind. Killing a green tree was considered to be a sin and sacrilege which could spell disaster for the family and even for the entire community. They were repositories for posterity. Unless ofcourse, your Nelson Eyed Bullet Train and the highways of death driven by your zealous minister completely destroy them. He has already shredded them and lords over several wild animal deaths daily while gloating over the rate and pace of the highways he curses forests and animals with. **Not a single one of your highways care, even consider alternative routes to preserve our forests or migration routes or underpasses or overpasses. These are linear stabs into the heart of Bharat drawn in air-conditioned rooms by de-natured, insensate men who have neither sense nor sensibility for anything other than targets.** Ironical, that as your corpulent minister gobbles up natural worlds, killing natural air-conditioning and carbon sumps, his vociferous counterpart in the power ministry wants to set temperatures of air-conditioners at 24 degrees. And your effete environment minister stamps approval on unaccounted destruction of our natural quotient. **These men, who are more loyal than the king, should read the Rig-Veda. Especially its repeated mention of the environment.** One stray verse says *"the sky is like father, the earth like mother and the space as their son. The universe consisting of the three is like a family and any kind of damage done to any one of the three throws the universe out of balance"*. Vedic culture and Vedic scriptures (you swear on these) reveal a clear concept about the earth's ecosystems and the necessity for maintaining their balance. Another verse from Rig-Veda says *"Thousands and Hundreds of years if you want to enjoy the fruits and happiness of life, then take up systematic planting of trees"* **The obsequious and completely compromised machine you drive, does plant trees, but exotic ones. Of benefit to neither man nor beast. Unsustainable ones which die weeks after plantation. Most importantly, they do not understand that old, primeval trees are irreplaceable, priceless. Can never be compensated. Our scriptures, sir, the ones you espouse as ideology, carry a message to desist from inflicting any injury to the earth and embark upon constant afforestation for survival or else the ecological balance of the earth would be jeopardized.** The Athravana Veda speaks of the importance of air, water and green plants essential for human existence. Although there was as such no concept of the word "Pollution" until India reared its ugly face to supplant Bharat, it was understood. And referred in terms of "poisoning" of environment. The Atharvana Veda recalls that three things cover the universe -- air, water and the plants and they are essential for all lives on earth to exist. *"Plants and herbs destroy poisons (pollutants)"* (A.V. 8.7.10). Another veda, the Yajur Veda says *"No persons should kill animals"* (Y.V. 13.37). *"O King you should never kill animals and must punish those who kill or do harm to such animals"* (Y.V. 13.49). *The oceans are treasure of wealth, protect them"* (Y.V. 38.22); *"Do not poison (pollute) water and do not harm or cut the trees"* (Y.V. 6.33); *"Do not disturb the sky and do not poison the atmosphere"* (Y.V. 5.43). About the flow of energy in the global ecosystem the Yajur Veda says *"the whole universe is full of energy in which the sun is at the centre and the ultimate source of energy for all living organisms on earth. The net energy flows from the point of production to the*

point of consumption through the plants, animals, human beings, the air, water and land, and is completely under the control of Almighty. (A.V. 5.28.5) Upanishads perceived the existence of God in trees and other plants and those they were gifted to man as a companion for mutual survival. "The God who exists in the universe, lives in air, water, in fire and also in trees and herbs, men should have reverence for them". The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (3.9.28) equate trees with human beings as follows: "Just like a tree, the prince of the forest, so the man is, in truth". The Iso-Upanishad has revealed the secrets of existence of life on earth and the importance of every organism for mutual survival. "The universe along with its creatures belongs to the Lord. No creation is superior to any other. Human beings should not be above nature. Let no one species encroach into the rights and privileges of other species." Finally, sir the Puranas. In the Narasimhapuran killing of birds for eating was prohibited. "O, wicked men if you kill a bird then you are bathing in a river, pilgrimage, worship and yagnas are all useless". "God Keshava is pleased with a person who does not harm or destroy other creatures or animals" (Vishnu Puran). The Puranas also recall the virtues of plants and trees and stress on the need for tree plantations. In Padma Puran (56.40-41) the cutting of a green tree is an offence punishable in Hell. The practice of "Vanmahotsava" (Tree Plantation Ceremony) is over 1500 years old in India. I noticed that you that you skip it. At least there is honesty in action. *Saaf Niyat* if not *Sahi Vikas*. Indian tradition has always been an environmentally sensitive philosophy. No religion, perhaps, lays as much emphasis on environmental ethics as Hinduism. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas and Smriti contain the earliest messages for preservation of environment and ecological balance. **Nature, or Earth, has never been considered a hostile element to be conquered or dominated. In fact, man is forbidden from exploiting nature. He is taught to live in harmony with nature and recognize that divinity prevails in all elements, including plants and animals. The rishis of the past have always had a great respect for nature. Theirs was not a superstitious primitive theology. They perceived that all material manifestations are a shadow of the spiritual. Ecology is an inherent part of a spiritual world view in Hinduism. I allude to and draw from religion repeatedly because that is the central theme and thesis of your ideology.** You are projected as harbinger of a new age hinged on *Saath* and *Vikas*. **What will we achieve sir when we will be gasping for air, thirsting for water and fighting for food? When no forests will be left, no animals? When all rivers have been dammed? Oratory, attendant train of electoral wins and eager to please blighted ignorant ministers propped by venal officialdom cannot fetch anything of value. All they offer is chimeras.** One of your eminent ministers once told me in the passing that you do not care for animals and that you'd rather that they all be reduced to taxons in zoos. That the forests fall silent. That rivers be damned (the inflection is intentional). The *mantri* was telling the truth.

A partial, very limited list of misdeeds:

- Of the 14,000 sq km of forests cleared over the past three decades in India, the largest area was given to mining (4,947 sq km), followed by defence projects (1,549 sq km) and hydroelectric projects (1,351 sq km).
- Over the last 30 years, forests nearly two-thirds the size of Haryana have been lost to encroachments (15,000 sq km) and 23,716 industrial projects (14,000 sq km).
- The government's auditor has said conditions under which these projects are given forest land are widely violated, and experts said government data are under-estimates.
- Dense forest areas in northern, central and southern Western Ghats have decreased by 2.84%, 4.38% and 5.77% respectively over the last decade. Percentiles hide vast areas.

- Currently, up to 25,000 hectares of forests – 250 sq km, or more than twice Chandigarh’s area – are handed over every year for “non-forestry activities”, including defence projects, dams, mining, power plants, industries and roads, the government recently said in Parliament. The rate of “diversion”, as the process is called, varies across states. It is accelerating.
- Punjab diverted about half its forest land since 1980, compared to Maharashtra, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, which diverted less than 1% of their area
- Of the 14,000 sq km of forests cleared over three decades, the largest area was given over to mining (4,947 sq km), followed by defence projects (1,549 sq km) and hydroelectric projects (1,351 sq km).
- India’s forests now cover 701,673 sq km, or 21.34% of the country, compared to 640,819 sq km 29 years ago, according to the India State of Forest Report, 2015, the latest available. The rise is explained by planted trees, particularly as monocultures, which do not replace the diverse, natural forests that are permanently lost. Precisely what the urbane minister was trying to juggle as face saver in New Delhi’s government colonies. The truth is, forests are being decimated. Lies is being propagated. **Your compensatory afforestation is a sham and a spoof. Unscientific and flawed as a concept. Loss of forests is not mere loss of trees but the collapse of an ecosystem, a forest has thousands – even millions – of species of flora and fauna living in a complex ecological mix, with natural nutrient cycling processes that cannot be restored. Besides, a forest in its inter-connectedness, takes decades, even centuries to form. Primeval, old trees cannot be restored. And most certainly not by silly afforestation schemes which are mindlessly fobbed off as green cover. Natural capital, sir, is the most priceless. It is irreplaceable. And it is also found over-ground.** A fact neither governments nor people seem to understand. Primarily because the Indian mind no longer applies itself to reflection and analysis. It lacks intellectual vigour and rigour, both. Secondarily, because it is consumed by pedants and blighted by immediacy.

Enlightened self-interest is the only dormant vector which can possibly slap awake the land of inverse Lotus Eaters. But who will do it? **What can save a country, a government, a people passionately, energetically buying for their own doom?** The International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red Data Book says **47 species of plants and animals in India are critically endangered. Loss of habitat and decimation of ecology have led to many indigenous species facing extinction. Many of these are plants which are legacy flora for Ayurveda. You are a votary of this ancient Indian system of medicine. Besides innumerable charlatans, it is also touted by a great juggler, gymnast and master of calisthenics, whose perpetual wink deludes the gullible. Contortions of body and mind are all very well sir, but without substance or purpose, internal combustion cannot propel anything indefinitely. With the plants, your government is accelerating the destruction of our coasts. Sagarmala ; nicely worded, but frighteningly implied. No less than 14 coastal economic zones, and coastal economic units (whatever these semantics mean). 14,500 km of potentially navigable waterways. You may / may not realize that shipping and ports have an environmental impact:** exhausts of particles from engines of ships, dust from substance handling, road and rail traffic which feeds these ports. Construction work and dredging will disturb bottom sediments and induce re-suspension, dispersal and settlement of such sediments. Dumping of dredged material directly will alter bottom configuration and biota and disperse toxic or harmful chemicals around the disposal site. Dredging will remove bottom habitat and lead to a loss of fishery resources. Settlement of re-suspended sediments on fragile marine fauna and flora will damage the ecosystem particularly coral reefs, which are formed by the extracellular product of symbiotic plants. The great number of coral polyps attached need dissolved oxygen for respiration and the plants need sunlight for

photosynthesis. Piles, concrete surfaces, rubble mounds and other similar structures in water form new habitats, which introduce undesirable species. If toxic substances and other contaminants are re-suspended through dredging or dumping, they lead to contamination of fishery and shellfishery resources. Nature in coastal areas is fragile marine and coastal ecology. **Similarly your Inland Waterways Authority of India, vies to kill off our rivers as the National Highways Authority of India decided to kill our forests and wildlife. As many as 111 river stretches are set to feed this new monster (the National Waterway Act, 2016).** The National Waterways Bill (NWB, Bill No. 122 of 2015) This Bill plans to convert 106 rivers and creeks across India into waterway canals, purportedly for 'eco-friendly transport' of cargo, coal, industrial raw materials, and for tourism purposes. **The Act and the Bill are a fool's charter. Inherent contradictions, poor comprehension and a recipe for disaster.** It is beyond my ken to detail what's so grossly dangerous with this, except to point at the impact of noise, dredging, mechanized movement, construction, encroachment, loss of habitat, alteration of waterscapes etc. **You want to give a National Projects tag to the other great disaster your government is unleashing on this country – river linking. No less than 60 of our rivers. The first on your list is the Ken-Betwa link. The 425-km (265-mile) Ken flows through a tiger reserve nestled in a verdant valley. You will clear out the forest reserve to build the dam, killing unaccounted forests, ecosystems, microsystems of nature, scores of animals and birds, dislocating nearly 2,000 families from ten remote villages. Not content with killing off the mainland, you have appointed a controversial general as minister of the north east. And that pristine state, Arunachal Pradesh, has killed the most forests over 30 years (3,338 sq km) than any other state. Under the radar, many projects are allowed within forest land, and that is a process disruptive of both human and animal lives.**

Allow me to show you the trees for the forest: rampant deforestation has threatened the survival of 13 native trees. These are now 'endangered' and 'critically endangered'. The Indian bdellium tree, found along the western parts of the country, is now under the 'critically endangered' status. Similarly, the number of endangered White Cedar found along the Western Ghats. Three tree species of the Magnolia family (evergreen and deciduous tree species bearing flowers), endemic to Assam, are under threat. **There has been a 40% decline in natural vegetation of the Western Ghats between and an 83% reduction in size of surviving forest patches. In the southern parts of the Western Ghats, a 25.6% loss in forest cover was detected between 1973 and 1995. The Western Ghats are under severe threats because of anthropogenic disturbances due to deforestation, developmental activities, conversion of forests to plantations and habitat fragmentation. Congratulations, sir. A case for more cities. The could be SMART, like Lavasa, perhaps. We are now losing our rare tree species. All fading away as you obsess over development while gloating over destruction. And your government serves fodder for fools.**

Contrary to popular perception, development and wildlife conservation need not be mutually exclusive. India has enough land and resources to develop and grow its economy without destroying our last forest fragments. Development projects that pay no heed to environmental consequences will only impoverish the nation in the long run and create more hardship than good. However, development projects that do not destroy forests can help create employment opportunities for poor people who would otherwise be forced to degrade forests for their everyday survival. **With a wise land use policy, one can decide where to develop and where to conserve.** Presently, India's forest cover is only 21 per cent against a national goal of 33 per cent. And even this 21 per cent is not all pristine forest. The satellite mapping resolution currently used for estimation of forest cover in India is not good enough to distinguish between biodiversity-rich natural forests and ecologically sterile artificial plantations; so the term forest cover can be quite deceptive

Sir, specifying the ethical principles that you may believe should guide policy, gives a prominent place to increasing notional human wealth, while recognition of the right of other species to continue to flourish, is nowhere to be found. In fact, your government's rhetoric serves to normalize extinctions and make us comfortable with them. This implies that people need not keep other species on the landscape when their continued presence is incompatible with economic goals. Unfortunately this position does not appear to be an aberration in one instance, but rather an essential part of your view that conservationists should accommodate themselves to the new realities of the Anthropocene Epoch. Government sponsored relentless terrorism against Nature does not appear to count morally for the present dispensation. This is short-sighted. An ethical blindness that is even more troubling. Mr. Prime Minister, extinction of Nature and non-humans is a GREAT MORAL WRONG. Extinguishing species through the continued expansion of human economic activities appears to be morally acceptable to Anthropocene proponents, as long as this destruction does not harm people themselves. But this view is selfish and unjust. Human beings already control more than our fair share of Earth's resources. If increased human population and economic demands threaten to extinguish other species, then we need to *limit* our population and economic demands, not make excuses that will just lead to greater ecological damage.

It is a grave mistake to reduce conservation *solely* to concern for our own well-being, or to assume that it is acceptable to extinguish species that do not benefit humans. Such an overly economic approach to conservation leads us astray morally. It makes us selfish, which is the last thing we want when the very existence of so many other life forms is at stake. Fairly sharing the lands and waters of Earth with other species is primarily a matter of justice, not economic convenience. **Natural species are the primary expressions and repositories of organic nature's order, creativity and diversity. They represent thousands of millions of years of evolution and achievement. They show incredible functional, organizational and behavioral complexity. Every species, like every person, is unique, with its own history and destiny. When humans take so many resources or degrade so much habitat that another species is driven extinct, we have taken or damaged too much and have brought a meaningful story to an untimely end. The prime motive of science is not to control the Universe but to appreciate it more fully. It is a huge privilege to live on Earth and to share it with so many goodly and fantastical creatures. From this perspective, human career on Earth depends as much on how well we appreciate and get along with other species, as on how well we do so with other people.**

Prime Minister, none of us has a monopoly on truth. There is the truth, and there is the way to the truth. We must be humble enough to accept that we only know the truth that we know, at any given point on our life's journey. But the truth that we do know, we must speak it. We must have the courage to say what we see. The trick about speaking truth to power is to do it from your inner conviction of moral truth and not for a desire for approbation — and not to be deterred by condemnation either - and to let your sense of the rightness of things overcome the fear of not speaking. It is with this sentiment and this belief that I write this open letter. You may take offence or you may pause to think or you may never read it. None of these matter to me. I will evangelize it. No leader, no government, no system is more important than *Dharma*. We are many without punishment, but none without sin. I will choose to mitigate my sins in standing up for what is right, beyond mere letters. I will do this because no man is clever enough to know the evil he does; I have my share. And because Bharat is far more seminal than a raucous gaggle of Government which time and space will gargle out.

You are a demonstrative Hindu, Mr. Modi. There must be a Ganesha on your desk somewhere. Please see the baby elephant set on fire by your fellow countrymen in Bengal, even as he runs screaming after his mother. I can never forget that image. Can you hear the enormous, infinite scream of Nature? Nature screams in your blood as surely as it does in mine. What will you say to

the elephant mother or to the elephant child? A King's duties are greater than a citizen's. And *Dharma* is a balance of one's duties and another's rights. What will you say to the God of Death? Not Today??



Is THIS is your idea of India? It must be, because this and much worse, is what you reign over. Remember that ancient dictum *Yatha Raja, Tatha Praja* ? Even if you do not subscribe to this Hell, you cannot escape moral responsibility. YOU are India's ruler. People follow the example of leaders. The Indian concept of the universe is fractal. And fractals repeat themselves. Since you assumed power 36 elephants died on your highways and railway tracks. Entire herds have been killed and trains now kill at an increasing rate: 133% from 2015 to 2017. It is bad enough that our constructed, manipulated, domesticated world is layered atop the homes of wild animals resulting in ever increasing loss of habitat. But then, we throw insurmountable odds at them. The constellation of worthies which revolves around you will dismiss this and much else as man-animal conflict. I will ask you to recall the case of the people of Saurasthra and the lions. You had exploited the translocation issue from Gir to Kunho, for votes. The lions stayed back. After electoral wins, you forgot about it. Over the years, rampant illegal sand and limestone mining have dried the region's rivers. Lions have been migrating 300 kilometers (186 miles) to coastal areas, villages, towns. The bulk of Gujarat's wildlife budget is now spent on compensating farmers. Wildlife management has now become human management. Everywhere in your reign Nature recoils in horror. Elephants so terribly persecuted in this country are one among all others. I picked them up, and only partially, because they are larger than life, magnificent creatures. Therefore, may be easy to see.

It is both hope and affirmation that you, a remarkable man in many respects, will exercise and employ your conscience to root in mindfulness. Will consider and will calibrate action. Will not abandon your spiritual duty as a custodian, leader and protector of all cognate and in-cognate residents of this ancient land. Human as well as non-human. I am no fan or follower of Gandhi, but

his words ring through: *“There is enough for everyone’s need; not for greed”*. Blind greed is steering us to self-destruction. Your honourable ministers will not exert themselves beyond your bidding. Your eminent bureaucrats will not offer full perspective. Your supporters will never question you. Everyone will offer what you want to see and hear. When you assumed power with a formidable majority. When you signalled that yours was not mere regime change, but a system change. I knew we had entered a nebula of uncertainty. I had hoped that you would attempt the new persona of India drawing upon our civilizational resources. That you would satisfy the condition of being both modern and native. At least that was the hope from rhetoric and realism. Among all the routes still at your disposal none has greater relevance than *Dharma*. It has universal reach and it has context specificity. **You are India’s ruler. Per our civilizational credo, upholder, sustainer, protector. Capacious words, and incredibly heavy. Per our shared tradition and faith both, a ruler is also the aggregator of merit acquired by observing *Dharma*. It is intrinsic to your *Dharma*, sir, to be all of this first to the most vulnerable among your subjects. Remember King Shibi ? Are you not the prime minister of the forests and the animals of India? Of the rivers and the seas? Do they not merit your protection?**

It is no anthropomorphic illusion that our pulse quickens in recognition, when looking into the eyes of an orphaned animal, or sadden when we see eyes, grown dull and flat, of a battered soul swaying ceaselessly in the confines of a concrete cell. Despite difference in form, our mirror neurons and those of non-humans spark in kinship. Because even by the most Cartesian accounts non-humans possess the intellectual and emotional nuances that garner prizes and protection for humans: cognition, grief, love, culture, awareness, memory, consciousness, psychological vulnerability to violence and betrayal. Now that science concurs with sensibility, will you act on what we know? Will you exercise your humanity and cede non-human animals the right to live in the dignity and freedom and safety? **Will you summon a partnership of *Raj Dharma and Buddhi Dharma*?**

The state is not God, Mr. Modi. Even though it confuses itself so. It does not have the right to take away what it cannot restore. The witches in Macbeth screamed *“Fair is Foul and Foul is Fair”*. Swan song of post-Independence India. But since the antidote to despair is hope, I hope you will do your duty to all your subjects. Not merely those who vote.

Yours Respectfully,

Amit Chaudhery

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