

[Raising Millions for Nature, People and Planet Earth](#)

Category : [June 1992](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jun. 02, 1992

Raising Millions for Nature, People and Planet Earth

Melwani, Lavina

Master Fund-raiser Migrates from Greenpeace to TransAfrica in Search of Good Causes

Over the past seven years Krishna Roy, in her capacity as fund-raiser, has coaxed, cajoled and wrangled millions of dollars from individuals, foundations and corporations. In her private life, like the rest of us, she may economize and pinch pennies, but in her public life, millions have passed through her hands for worthy causes such as the environment, minority rights and human rights. Says Roy, "Giving money away is usually a leisure activity for most people, but for me it's my job. It's a full-time occupation, and you really have to like people, have faith and be willing to work night and day. In nonprofit organizations, you don't make a log of money. You really have to believe in what you do."

Last October, she was appointed Director of Development for TransAfrica, which is the leading foreign policy organization on issues about Africa, the Caribbean, human rights, democracy and social concerns of developing and underdeveloped countries. TransAfrica is the lobbying organization, and TransAfrica Forum is its educational sister organization with a mandate to increase its teaching programs, conduct an annual foreign policy conference and publish a quarterly journal, one of only two such journals in the entire country.

Before joining Trans-Africa, Krishna Roy was Associate of Development at Green-peace, the renewed environmental group where she managed a US \$4 million budget. Asked why she left, she says: "I had been working in the environmental movement for some time and had always been interested in working for something which involved minorities. I had been very impressed with

the work of Randall Robinson, and TransAfrica is really his creation. He is one of the premier civil rights Afro-American voices in this country, certainly on foreign policy. His work in civil rights and equal opportunities for everybody is something I agree with tremendously, and I thought this work gave me an opportunity to try to see what I could do."

Beside, she points out, "I have a very particular belief about fund-raising, and my belief is that the overhead should be really low, 3 or 4 percent, and all non-profit organizations should be as lean and mean as they can be. I wasn't absolutely certain that that was the case with Greenpeace. At TransAfrica, it is very lean and very mean, so lean and mean we don't even have a flashy brochure yet!" She feels that what makes the job so challenging is that just 11 or 12 people make up the staff of the only organized non-profit voice for influencing US policy in Africa and the entire Caribbean region. "It's really incredible as to what's been achieved, and that's what makes it so exciting for me - to be part of it."

At TransAfrica, Krishna Roy's primary responsibility is raising all the money that the organization needs from members, foundations and various corporations. She's also involved in shaping the programs because it's all integral to what the organization is. How did Roy get into a field like fund-raising, when most Indians seem to be headed towards science, engineering or medicine? Laughs Roy, "I believe that the big plan has already been decided and our responsibility is to fill in the details."

Roy, a native of Calcutta, got into the field of fund-raising by pure serendipity. While studying for her Masters in History at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, she was already deeply interested in video production, and was assistant director and camera person at The Michigan Media where she oversaw the production of educational television programs. She got an offer to be the manager of public affairs at the headquarters of the Nature Conservancy in Arlington, Virginia. Here she developed and coordinated communication activities for the 415,000 member organization.

To be closer to the man she is now married to, independent video producer George Dwyer, she moved to New York as the Director of Development for the Nature Conservancy in Long Island, New York, and developed and directed a US \$4.8 million campaign.

After seven years at the Conservancy, Roy went on to New York University as Director of Development for the School of Education, Health, Nursing and Arts Professions. Here, too, she raised over US \$3.5 million in donations in 12 months, turning around a decade old deficit, and breaking school fund-raising records.

Explains Roy, "The reason why I like fund-raising is because I think I could only do it for causes I really believe in, and if the money is used well. In every situation where I have been doing it, it has been to promote something which is very important in our lives, whether it's the environment, education, nursing, US foreign policy towards Africa and the Caribbean, minority rights or equal opportunity for all. I've always worked in non-profit organizations where I think they need it, and where it's difficult. And I'd like to keep doing it for the causes I believe in, for as long as I can."

SINGING GANGA

Krishna Roy was 21 when she left Calcutta, and as she recalls, it was almost unwillingly that she came to the US, since Minati, her mother, was already a teacher of Bengali at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington, and Broto, her brother, was pursuing his bachelor's at William and Mary. Soon, Hitabrata Roy, her father, who had been a political analyst for the American Consulate in Calcutta and had retired, followed the family to the US. An ardent lover of Bengali culture, he founded the Tagore Society in Washington. The family still retains strong ties to India, spending several months a year in their home in Shantiniketan or in Calcutta.

Both sides of the family are highly musical, and indeed Hitabrata Roy brings village musicians to Calcutta, and makes Calcuttan's aware of their music. In the 70's, the family formed a folk music ensemble called Ganga, and the group continues to give concerts in the U.S. and Europe. The music presented by Ganga reflects the history and continuity of the hundreds of regional folk traditions and make up India's extraordinary oral traditions, one which has been preserved for several thousand years. Ganga has won many honors and has given 20 concerts for the Festival of India, arranged by the Smithsonian Institute, and has also represented India at the Greater Washington Folk Festival nine years running. It's musical repertory includes allegorical songs by peasants and boatmen about the search for the true path to the next life. What is unique about this group is that it celebrates the rhythms or rural Bengal, and employs village instruments.

Hitabrata is the lead singer and plays the dotara, a fret-less, four-stringed lute with a gourd sound box. Minati is the lead female singer and plays percussion instruments including the khamak, ramchaki and mandira. Broto plays the tabla and Sanjay Mishra, a family friend, plays the sitar. Krishna sings and plays the gungur, ankle bells of various sizes and metals. Music is indeed an integral part of their family togetherness, and if she were not involved, jokes Krishna, her family would probably disown her.

Having grown up in India, Roy believes her values and perceptions were pretty well formed by the time she left, and she remains basically the same person, with a solid center. She says, "One of the most important things for me is to get the best of where ever I am. If I am in the US, I want to really participate in what's happening here. If I am in India, which is often, it's still home, and it's very simple moving back into the circuit."

Yet through all her activities, public and private, there runs a strong invisible undercurrent of religion. She mentions, "There is a strong streak of religion in my family, but it's really more like the religion in Shantiniketan, which is Brahma Samaj. As you know, all Hindus are born Hindus, and I like Hinduism because it is really a religion within yourself - to me it is. It's very elastic, and you can take what you want of it."

Does she draw any special comfort from Hindu philosophy? Says Roy, "My God really has no name, and I think Hinduism allows me to be that way, too. Hinduism is always expanding and changing, and its flexibility allowed religions like Jainism and Buddhism to emerge. The kind of comfort I get is really in the atmosphere of Hinduism, in its relationship to nature. I think it's had a huge play in my work with the environment. I think what I bring to my work is an understood relationship between humans and nature, which is very different from the Western ethic in which nature is something to be conquered and subdued. In India we grow up with the idea that you co-exist with nature, and that's a part of your world in a very real way."

Roy believes in animal rights, but is not radical about it. Asked about the plight of elephants in Africa, she emphasizes that she is much more concerned about the plight of people: "Do you know that blacks in South Africa cannot Vote, cannot live where they want to? I think having grown up in India and having some idea of colonialism, it's really shaken my conscience of that it's still going on, even as we

speaking, today. The amazing thing is that while Africa probably needs the US attention the most. It's the continent which is being abandoned for what is now Russia. Aid that has been already appropriated is not being spent, which is unheard of. Regarding my work with TransAfrica, I look at it this way: I worked for nature, and now I'm working for human beings."

Although her work occupies so much of her time and energy, Roy's first love remains video production. In fact, one of the short films she had assisted on in 1984. "The Garden of Eden," was nominated for an Academy Award and won awards at a dozen film festivals. Having worked on several video and television films in the 1980's Krishna Roy hopes to work with her husband, George - with ABC TV for 15 years - on a video production about the crows of India. George has an affinity for India. She says "He is more Indian than I am."

India and Hinduism are an integral part of her and touch much of what she does in an invisible way. She says, "There's just a lack of social and moral fabric here. One person in three carries a gun in the US. How can people be so attached to weapons of violence, when there's so much suffering and so much people can do for each other? The spiritual element is missing here, and that's the real problems. I think my religion is really expressed in the way I live my life. In everything I do, I try and live as well as I possibly can in terms of thinking and trying to do good things, not being an overly consumptive individual, occupying as little space as I can and trying to do as much as I can with my time. I try to get as much as I can done because there isn't enough time. I think our lives are really short. We must fill them with worthwhile causes, make good things happen."

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.