



● *The environment
is our heritage.*

SINGCO *recognises the importance to preserve
and protect our natural environment
for our future generations.
We are committed to the sustainable
use of natural resources.*



Fire Doors & Building Products Specialist

Interview

Environmental Extraordinaire :

Ashish Kothari

Ashish Kothari in Dalma Sanctuary.

Kalpavriksh is one of India's most respected environmental and conservation groups. WE met up with its founder-member, Mr Ashish Kotari.

Text : Jose Raymond

Photographs: Ashish Kothari, Mahendra Vyas, Miloon Kothari, K.Christopher

Within 20 years of its existence, Kalpavriksh has risen from a non-descript movement to an organisation respected by other conservation groups. It is considered a major voice in conservation and environmental efforts in the Indian sub-continent and has also received the Sanskriti Award for outstanding social achievement in India. WE discuss Kalpavriksh and other issues with the founder-member and environmental extraordinaire of the group, Ashish Kotari.

Tell me more about Kalpavriksh, apart from it being a New Delhi-based voluntary organization involved with environmental and development issues.

current model of development and the environment, and learning to respect the fundamental wisdom of rural (especially tribal) people.

Who started the organization?

Three or four of us who were students in school or college, and 1 to 2 professionals, all based in New Delhi.

What are the events which led to Kalpavriksh becoming as well regarded as it is today?

I suppose that we have become somewhat better known because of our association with some of the most exciting and ground-breaking



Kalpavriksh members participating in meeting of Beej Bachao Andolan (Save the Seeds Movement) and the Chipko Movement.



Kalpavriksh has helped movements like Beej Bachao Andolan (Save the Seeds Movement) to educate the urban elite of New Delhi.

Kalpavriksh began in 1979 as a youth environmental action group, as a response to the growing crisis of urban decay, loss of wildlife, and deforestation that was rampant in India at that time. Those of us who started it were either in school or college, and were tired of hearing our elders talk and talk about the environment, but not do anything serious about it. One of our first actions was to demonstrate against the destruction of a large city forest in New Delhi, in 1979 and 1980. Over the next few years we traveled to various parts of India, learning from grassroots movements like Chipko, understanding the contradictions between the

movements of our time, including Chipko (the save the forests campaign in the Himalayas) and the Narmada Bachao Andolan (the anti-Narmada Dams movement in central India).

Our involvement with other activities and events would also have given Kalpavriksh the appropriate regards and attention. Perhaps, one of the most important activity would be the investigation we carried out along Narmada river and its surrounding valley. That was done in 1983. We assessed the environmental and social impacts of the major dams coming up there. Ours was the first of such detailed assessment in this country, I think.



A Kalpavriksh field outing to Biligiri Sanctuary, Southern India.

A little before that we had also investigated police firing on villagers in the Bharatpur bird reserve in western India, and raised issues of whether wildlife conservation can take place by ignoring the needs of resident human populations.

A couple of legal actions also became well-known, including one in support of a village fighting against mining in the Himalayas.

Through this entire period, our focus on environmental education never wavered. So far, we have produced around 20 different publications and a bimonthly newsletter, the "Protected Area Update". Our efforts in this area may have assisted in establishing Kalpavriksh as a reputable conservation movement.

Over the last few years, we have been leading the move towards a more integrated model of conservation, in which the livelihoods of traditional communities and wildlife protection objectives can be made complementary. We now coordinate a national forum called the "Conservation and Livelihoods Network." Since the mid-1990s, the issue of community based natural resource

management has also become part of our focus.

Perhaps because of these and other efforts, we have recently been asked to coordinate the Technical and Policy Core Group that is coordinating the making of India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, on behalf of Government of India's Ministry of Environment and Forests. This is perhaps the first time that a major national planning project has been given out to an NGO to execute. I am in charge of this process on behalf of Kalpavriksh.

Finally, our members have been very active in the popular media; writing articles, doing radio and television programmes and so on. This has helped to raise our profile.

What are your views to the other problems which plague the earth today, like global warming and deforestation?

To me, these are the most serious problems facing humanity, greater than even war and poverty. Indeed, environmental destruction directly lead to a lot of other things that we tend to focus more on, such as real poverty, loss of livelihoods and employment. What is



Ashish Kothari, learning against tree on extreme left, with Kalpavriksh members investigating Narmada dams.

critical is to link environmental issues, even as broad as global warming, to the basic issues of survival for the majority of the earth's poor people. Unless this is done, unless innovative mechanisms of linking such survival with the conservation of natural resources can be found, we will only be making a small dent in tackling these problems.

It is vital that issues of social and political justice, of fundamental human rights, are linked to environment. Conservationists, who fight for wildlife conservation without acknowledging the rights of forest-dwellers, are short-sighted and unjust. Conversely, social activists who fight for rights without any sensitivity towards the well-being of nature in itself, the sustainability of the earth's resources, are equally short-sighted. The two must communicate, and be able to strengthen each other against the more powerful and common adversary: the urban-industrial juggernaut that potentially threatens to turn the whole earth into raw materials and all poor people into labourers. This is why Kalpavriksh firmly believes that social justice, environmental sustainability, and ethical values have to go together.

What have you and your organisation been currently doing to make these problems known and understood?

We carry out quite a bit of environmental education work, in schools, colleges, and in the general public. We also carry out networking activities, and "bridge-building" exercises such as an annual dialogue between wildlife conservationists and social activists. One such innovative programme we initiated since last year or so, is a series of public presentations called "Signs of Hope" in which we call in people who are doing constructive, positive work to protect or regenerate the environment, to develop alternative models of development and livelihoods, to generate mass movements against destructive projects and so on.

Many believe Kalpavriksh is the Indian answer to Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund. What do you have to say about that?

That's a surprise! Kalpavriksh is a small organisation, and has no pretense of matching the scope and power of groups like Greenpeace and WWF! We have deliberately kept ourselves small and informal,



Participants of a meeting to bridge the gap between wildlife conservationists and social activists, Southern India.

as we would like to avoid the bureaucracy that often overtakes big institutionalised organisations. Without a doubt, they are often more effective in many ways, but our philosophy is to remain human-scale, informal and flexible. I guess all kinds of organisations are needed!

What do you hope to achieve by the time you are prepared to finish your work with Kalpavriksh?

I'm not sure my work with Kalpavriksh will ever finish! This is not a project for me, it is a life-long association with the environment, and so long as Kalpavriksh provides me the possibility of pursuing this commitment, I hope I can continue...

My dream is that by the time I will have to call it quits (that is, my deathbed!), our society will have graduated into a much more ecologically and socially sensitive one, and that we will in fact have more forest cover than now, much cleaner cities and rivers,

and villages that are self-sufficient in basic needs. In fact, I have a bet with my wife that we will come back to Pune and Delhi after 20 years, and be able to go through the main streets without having to hold a handkerchief to our noses and wipe stinging tears streaming down our eyes!

Kalpavriksh members investigating a toxic gas leak in New Delhi, 1985



Kalpavriksh: A Microcosm of India's Environmental Movement



A series of low-priced publications have been brought about by Kalpavriksh.

Seed diversity display by Deccan Development Society, at one of Kalpavriksh's 'Signs of Hope' presentation series.



1979-onwards Campaign to save the 7770 hectare Delhi Ridge Forest from roads, construction, garbage-dumping. Later joined by other NGOs in a joint action forum. Expanded into saving green areas in various parts of Delhi and against indiscriminate tiling as part of the Free the Trees campaign. Saving Delhi's Green Areas: A Citizens' Guide, released in 1994. Also concentrated on natural history work, including bird counts in Delhi, nature camps in protected areas, publications on urban forests and wildlife (e.g. birds and butterflies of Delhi, birds of Pune). Got Involved in schools, colleges, and other institutions to spread environmental awareness. Initially restricted to Delhi, later spread to Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep, Uttara Kannada, Pune, and other areas.

1982 Investigation into the death of six villagers in a police firing within Bharatpur National Park.

1983 A 50-day trek and journey along the Narmada river to assess the possible impacts of the proposed large dams. Detailed critique of Narmada Project published in 1984 in Economic and Political Weekly and The Ecologist.



Kalpavriksh was the first group to comprehensively highlight the threats posed by the Narmada dams in central India, after a long investigation in 1983.

1985-onwards Central involvement in the anti-Narmada project movement and in issues relating to other big dams. Publication of three booklets on Narmada (Narmada Project: A Critique; Muddy Waters; and Environmental Aspects of SSP), several reports on dams, and a regular newsletter on big dams (Narmada) for some years.

1989-onwards Detailed study of environmental problems and its ecological and cultural impact within Andaman and Nicobar Islands. There is an ongoing case to protect the Onge tribe from destruction.

1992-onwards Participation in issues relating to the Convention on Biological Diversity, including international networking and national follow-up. Members involved in formulating plans on a national level proposed the Biodiversity Act. Publication of Conserving Life: Implications of the Biodiversity Convention for India. Participation in Intergovernmental Panel on Forests, and in related study on Underlying Causes of Deforestation.

1994-onwards Publication of Protected Area Update, a bi-monthly newsletter on conservation and livelihood issues. Now in its 26th issue.

1995 Jungle Jeevan Bachao Yatra (Save Forest Life Rally), in association with Tarun

Bharat Sangh, Ekta Parishad, Sanctuary Asia, Centre for Environment Education, IIPA, Maharashtra Arogya Mandal, Vikalp, and others.

1997-99 Organising annual National Consultations on Wildlife Conservation and People's Livelihood Rights, in association with several wildlife and social activist groups.

1997-onwards Research and involvement in community-based conservation (CBC) and natural resource governance initiatives. Members coordinated a South Asian survey on this topic.

1999 Chosen coordinator of Conservation and Livelihoods Network, aiming to bridge the gap between conservationists, wildlife officials, social activists, and villagers. Also involved in national study and campaign on mining in protected areas. Assessment of links between environment and tribal self-rule initiatives, including panchayat legislation, in association with Lokayan. Study of natural resource conflicts and their resolution across India, in association with Lokayan.

2000-onwards Coordination of Technical and Policy Core Group, formulating India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, on behalf of Ministry of Environment and Forests. **WE**

Contact addresses:

Delhi: B25 Defence Colony
New Delhi 110024, India

Email: harmony1@ndb.vsnl.net.in

Pune:

Aptmt. 5 Shree Dutta Krupa
908 Deccan Gymkhana
Pune 411004, India

Tel/fax: 91-20-5454239

Email: kvriksh@vsnl.com