Greening or greenwash?

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ENVIRONMENTALISTS are often seen as anti-state, or at least deeply suspicious of those wielding the levers of power in the country. For good reason. Decision-makers and those who influence them, have hardly served the cause of the environment. A distorted notion of 'development' that is patently unsustainable and deeply inequitous, highly centralised power structures coupled with sheer inefficiency and corruption, an increasingly 'liberal' view of private corporations, and a host of other characteristics of the Indian state have brought the country's natural resources, and those most dependent on them, close to the stage of collapse.

In such a situation, is it warranted to attempt working with the state? At a time when mass movements are struggling against political and bureaucratic structures that perpetuate unsustainability and inequity, any NGO that builds a partnership with governmental agencies risks being viewed as having been co-opted. Even more so if foreign funding is involved.

I would like to argue that given the nature of the Indian state, environmentalists (and activists of all kinds) need to find a fine balance between confrontation on the one hand, and engaging constructively with it on the other. This could be difficult and fraught with the risk of being 'labelled' by both as having 'sold out'. But the current situation demands that this path be walked. I will illustrate this with examples of two processes that both I and the NGO with which I am associated, are presently in the midst of.

Kalpavriksh is a small, 22-year old NGO that works on environmental awareness, campaigns, litigation, research, and other areas. It has taken a position on a number of environment-development issues, more often than not confronting the state through measures ranging from protest letters to street demonstrations. Many of its members have been through an intense and diverse learning process: initiating local protests against the destruction of Delhi's largest green area (the Ridge), treks through the Himalayan region with the Chipko Andolan, the first detailed study of the impacts of the Narmada projects, investigations into police firing in Bharatpur bird reserve, and all this while continuing nature walks and lobbying for wildlife conservation and animal rights. With such a background, it is not surprising that the NGO has continued to participate in mass movements challenging the state

and its policies, while episodically supporting elements of the state that have moved progressively on environmental and development fronts.

Two ongoing processes of the group are illustrative. One is to do with wildlife and natural resource conservation and the issue of the rights of people who live in areas that are specially targeted for such conservation; the other with the currently ongoing National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan.

Most of Kalpavriksh's initial members were enthusiastic nature-lovers, and many remain ardently so. But perhaps our simultaneous involvement with people's movements has made us equally sensitive to the fact that 'wilderness' habitats are also critical survival habitats for some of India's most vulnerable human communities. The attempt to integrate these two issues, of conservation and livelihoods, has been a major preoccupation of many NGOs.

Not surprisingly, this is also an issue that the state has been forced to respond to, since its major plank for conservation – protected areas – is increasingly under attack for serious human rights violations. On the 'other side' are social action groups and communities themselves, who have taken strident views that are often perceived as anti-conservation.

Recognising the merit in both the struggle to protect basic human rights, and the need for a formal system of conservation, Kalpavriksh has attempted to 'build bridges'. Not being an on-the-ground practitioner itself, the group has carried out investigations, acted as an information dissemination agent, supported the struggles of those on the ground, helped organise *yatras* and exchange programmes involving diverse stakeholders, and organised a series of national consultations on the subject. In doing so it has accepted that there is no black-and-white situation out there.

Wildlife officials and NGOs have a valid viewpoint in wanting to zealously protect 'wildernesses' from destructive influences, but may be blind to the human implications of the strategies they champion to reach this goal. On the other hand, human rights activists are obviously correct in pointing to the rights of traditional communities and their potential to be allies in conservation, but are often under-informed or insensitive to the many special needs of wildlife species. For too long have the two 'sides' viewed each other with suspicion. It has been Kalpavriksh's attempt to break down the barriers and get them to recognise that the true enemy, of both wildlife and livelihoods, is the commercial-industrial juggernaut that goes by the name of 'development'.

The disadvantage of taking such a position is that both government officials and mass movements wonder if we are 'running with the hare and hunting with the hounds'. The principal chief conservator of Forests, Madhya Pradesh, recently accused us of uncritically aligning ourselves with 'so-called mass tribal organisations', because we had declined to act as a moderator at a meeting of the proposed World Bank aided state forestry project.

It was our view that some of the fundamental issues related to forestry, including land and resource rights, needed to be first dealt with before getting into a Bank funded project, which has its own dynamics and trajectories. Nowhere did we reject the role of the state in this, but for some reason the PCCF took umbrage and pointed fingers. On the other hand, at least a couple of social action groups have accused Kalpavriksh of being soft on the state.

In one classic case, a prominent Delhi-based NGO accused us of 'collaborating' (using the pejorative connotation of the word) with the state when we undertook the jungle jeevan bachao yatra through 16 protected areas, along with other NGOs and local community representatives, simply because on a couple of occasions we stayed in the forest department rest house and attempted to meet with officials along the way. Never mind that the same organisation prominently carries in its magazine advertisements of a state government known to be highly repressive towards people's movements against big dams and for forest based rights.

Kalpavriksh has also increasingly moved into community based conservation, documenting the many and diverse initiatives by villagers themselves to protect, regenerate and sustainably use natural ecosystems around them. In so doing, it has sought space within existing legal and administrative regimes that can facilitate participatory conservation, but also lobby for new arrangements that would provide communities a much greater decision making role. It has been instrumental in getting community conserved areas into the National Wildlife Action Plan, and into the proposed amendments to the Wildlife (Protection) Act.

But it has also argued that community management needs a much more solid thrust towards political and economic decentralisation, including through linking up with the exciting new developments in panchayati raj, especially as extended to scheduled (tribal) areas. Once again, the attempt is to go beyond the black and white image of the state.

The second process I will use to illustrate this is Kalpavriksh's biggest ever collaborative exercise with the government: the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). The NBSAP is a two-and-a-half year project of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (Government of India), funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It aims to produce a series of action plans on various aspects of biodiversity: conservation, sustainable use, and equity in such conservation and use.

Starting in early 2000, the process has so far involved several tens of thousands of people from government and civil society. Its final outputs are expected to be upto 75 action plans at local, state, inter-state (ecoregional) and thematic levels, in addition to about 25 thematic papers on a range of topics related to biodiversity. Within its scope is a vast array of issues: threatened ecosystems and species, indigenous seed and livestock diversity, the economics and valuation of biological resources, ethical and spiritual links of humans and nature, the livelihood rights of fisherfolk, farmers, adivasis, and pastoralists, land and resource tenure patterns, development and governance patterns affecting natural resources, and much else.

For perhaps the first time in India, a national planning exercise is being attempted with a tri-sector coordination set-up: MoEF as overall in-charge, an NGO (Kalpavriksh) as the technical coordinator, and a corporate body (Biotech Consortium India Ltd) as the administrative coordinator. Kalpavriksh has in turn set up a technical and policy core group, consisting of 15 persons with varying expertise and experience, ranging from adivasi activists to government officials, from various parts of India.

The NBSAP process takes as its bottom lines two imperatives: that of the *ecological security* of the country (the need to respect the right to survival of each of nature's species, to safeguard the biological and genetic base of our food systems, and to secure the ecological base of our water and soil systems); and that of the *livelihood security* of those people who depend most on the biological resource base. It is a much-ignored reality that tens of millions of people in India still survive on the biodiversity of forests, seas, wetlands, grasslands, mountains and coasts. It is also a telling commentary on the ignorance of our decision makers and planners that the true value of these ecosystems and the species of plants and animals they contain is not reflected anywhere in parameters of development like Gross National Product.

To give just one startling fact: the East Kolkata wetlands provide *free* recycling of a large share of Kolkata's sewage and fish and vegetable production worth hundreds of crores of rupees. Yet the city's wise planners continue to view them as 'wastelands' on which real estate deals are being made. Agriculture production worth thousands of crores has been saved, or actually created, by genetic characteristics taken from wild relatives of crops or from indigenous crop varieties developed by our so-called 'illiterate' farmers, yet modern-day agricultural planners will not bat an eyelid before displacing local crop diversity and replacing it with a handful of hybrids for what is usually a very short-lived increase in production. Suicidal, one would think, but that is an apt term for the 'development' process as a whole.

NBSAP's challenge is therefore great: to promote greater understanding of the crucial role of biodiversity in our lives, to point to the ways in which our activities threaten this diversity, to identify initiatives within and outside the government that are already being taken to counter these threats, and to recommend concrete, implementable action points that would further strengthen such efforts.

To do so, it has to point not only to new and alternative paths of development, but also to innovative paths of governance. A centralised system of governance, imposed upon us by the colonial powers and unfortunately continued after independence, has failed us. It has alienated people from their own resource base, and made us all dependent on government for the smallest of our needs. Even more unfortunately, the 1990s have seen the rapid emergence of an alternative that could be equally problematic, that of privatisation. Corporate takeover of the essential functions of the state is hardly an answer, for there is no guarantee that people with quick profits on their mind are going to care much about long term ecological security and the livelihood security of the poorest people in India.

A third alternative, that of community based resource management, is increasingly being advocated, as more and more evidence piles up that decentralised water harvesting, participatory forest management, people-based R&D, community led development programmes, and so on are much more robust and effective than either solely government run or private sector run programmes. But this sector too should not be unnecessarily romanticized –

communities across the country are changing, fragmenting, their traditional knowledge and institutions breaking down, and their power to withstand outside forces weakening.

The greatest challenge is therefore to try new forms and models of collaboration between the state, communities, and perhaps even the private sector. NBSAP is one such experiment. At about 18 local sites (districts, watersheds, villages), local communities, NGOs, local officials, academics, and/or corporate bodies have worked together to forge a common vision and action plan to link together conservation, livelihoods, and development. In many of the country's 33 states and union territories, the same linkages are being attempted at a somewhat larger scale.

These and other plan processes will be brought together into the making of the national action plan, which will hopefully point to new ways of working together. They have made people realise that the sole custodian and saviour of India's biodiversity is not the forest department, but rather a multitude of agencies and organisations from the village to the national level.

In these two years, the NBSAP process has involved at least 50,000 people, including about 2000 centrally, in drafting the action plans. Virtually all sectors have been involved, including fisherfolk, adivasis, farmers, pastoralists, government officials, corporate houses, academics and scientists, politicians, armed forces, students, artists. Over 20 different languages have been used in issuing a *Call for Participation,* and several more in the various local level activities. Several hundred villages have been reached out to, and at least a hundred public hearings and consultations held. Several dozen articles in regional and national media, and programmes on radio and television, have been produced. And in many places, biodiversity festivals that bring together cultural and ecological traditions, have been organised.

The NBSAP process is now in its last phase (to end by December 2002). It is consolidating the dozens of action plans that have emerged, and initiated the framing of the national plan. It is, already, grappling with the challenge of generating a common vision from the hundreds and thousands of different voices that it has helped arouse.

Will all this have been worth it? Has Kalpavriksh compromised its basic stands in order to have worked with the state and elements of the corporate sector and foreign donors? Did it help the cause of biodiversity conservation and people's livelihood rights in engaging with this process? Or did it legitimise a major exercise in 'greenwash'?

Perhaps it is too early to answer these questions. The NBSAP process has already generated considerable networking among groups and people working on the issue, facilitated a greater understanding of the complex interplay between society and nature, and promoted concrete actions by participants even before the plans are ready. It has fostered greater mutual respect among sectors that would earlier not have worked together because of false or generalised caricatures of each other.

It has taken forest officers trekking up to villages at 12,000 feet in the Himalayas to hold public hearings about their perceptions and knowledge on biodiversity and development, and enabled villagers from 'remote' areas to directly interact with once-feared government officials. As villagers in Bilaspur and other places have stated, it has 'empowered' them just to know that they are, finally, part of a nation-wide planning exercise, that their voice is considered important enough to be recorded and used at a national level. It has brought on board human rights activists of mass movements, staunch wildlife rights advocates, hard-core scientists, bureaucrats of all hues, students still innocent of the politics of the adult world, and villagers who speak only local dialects far removed from any of the country's 16 'national' languages.

Of course it has not generated revolutions, and has in fact failed on a number of fronts, e.g., despite continuous stress on gender sensitivity in the process, only about 10 to 15% of the core participants appear to have been women, and despite repeated attempts, the corporate sector has largely stayed away. Many state governments have remained unconvinced about the necessity of a widespread consultative process. Mid-course correctives are being tried to address these weaknesses, but many will undoubtedly remain.

Most important is the hope that the networking, the mass of people involved, and the strength of the arguments advanced, will ensure the *implementation* of the action plans, unlike many previous plans that have rotted in government godowns because there has been no major group with a stake and ownership to push their follow-up.

It is by no means easy to work with the state. There are pitfalls of all kinds. Because the state will never be totally (or even sufficiently) self-critical, there is pressure to compromise on the frankness of the document that will be jointly produced or the results that will emerge. Officials who are sympathetic to a radical interpretation of reality may suddenly be transferred, and their successors may not look as kindly upon civil society groups. One wing of the government may consider the process crucial, another may think it is not worth a glance.

Indeed, it has been difficult to ensure the cooperation of various ministries of the Government of India in the NBSAP process, even though six of them (other than environment and forests) are on the national steering committee. One can even get sucked into the vortex of being on one expert committee after another, offered plum consultancies, and get 'co-opted'.

It is important to be mindful of these pitfalls, so as to avoid them while creatively using the spaces available within the system. The state is not monolith – there is always the wonderfully radical and open official, the occasional great provision in law and policy, an institutional structure that allows the space for dissent and the airing of people's voices. The NBSAP process is trying to optimise the use of these spaces, while recognising that in the current context one has to engage with the state to maximise the positive and constructive use of the enormous power, infrastructure and resources it has at its command.

It is critical is to maintain one's independence. So while UNDP is the funding agency for the NBSAP process, this has not stopped Kalpavriksh from taking a harshly critical view of this agency's *Human Development Report 2001* (for being unabashedly pro-biotech and ignoring the down-to-earth technological and social alternatives that are within the reach of the poorest sections of society). Nor has it stopped us from opposing destructive development projects, or criticizing sections of the government, when necessary.

For Kalpavriksh itself, the NBSAP process marks a major milestone, but one that is part of its evolution. As stated above, its early years were spent learning the hard way about the complexities of ecological issues, realising that there were many grey areas to contend with. NBSAP continues to trod the increasingly 'middle-path' position that it has advocated, with the understanding that there is a time and legitimacy for both struggle against the state, as also constructive engagement. As a result it has been looked at with

skepticism by both die-hard conservationists and hard-core human rights activists.

In the process it also gained a certain credibility because it did not hesitate to take radical stands when required, nor to side with elements of the state when it felt that they were doing the right thing. Above all, it did not try to become an empire, to expand into colossal size, and to plunge its fingers into every possible pie. Perhaps this credibility has allowed it to bring together so many disparate people and groups on the NBSAP platform. So what the NBSAP process may signify is a recognition, among large sections of opposing 'camps', among both government and people's groups, that collaborative processes *also* (but by no means exclusively) have their strength and legitimacy.

Another example of the attempt to look for positive trends within all sectors is Kalpavriksh's lecture series, Signs of Hope. Started on its 20th anniversary in 1999, this series brings to Pune (and for some time, Delhi), people who are doing innovative, constructive work on alternatives. The range of subjects covered is vast – from forests to education, from film-making to organic farming – but all with the same message: hope. In this, Kalpavriksh has not restricted itself to NGOs and village workers, but also invited government officials who are, despite the system they are entrenched in, doing path-breaking work. This does not imply a legitimisation of the state in its exploitative and unsustainable character, but more a recognition of the fact that all sectors have elements of hope.

Which brings me to one final point. Having worked in the so-called voluntary sector for over two decades, there is a painful realisation that many of the ills that we point to within the state, are in us too. When we started our activism back in the late 1970s, we were led to believe that the state was all destructive and evil, the NGO sector was where the hope lay. But we now know through much bitter experience that the so-called 'voluntary' sector is by no means a paragon of virtue.

Within and outside the NBSAP process, it has become painfully clear that 'voluntary' is no longer an ideal, that the sector has increasingly become corporatised, more and more selfish, that access to information within NGOs is sometimes as difficult as within government, and that inter-NGO clashes and lack of

coordination can be as intense as between two government departments and officials. The same holds for community organisations which have under the influence of politics and the market, become increasingly fragmented and individualistic. So while we would still pin our hopes on civil society, we are definitely not starry-eyed about it!

Collaboration of people and groups within all sectors, with the recognition that there is no one individual or group that has all the answers, would therefore seem to be a legitimate path. This does not entail giving up the struggle against the state in its exploitative and repressive forms, nor does it mean that we live with some romantic vision of a harmonious world in which all conflicts have ended and all egos moderated. It simply means recognising that there are people in all sectors who believe in basic principles, who are willing to stand up for these principles, and who would be considerably strengthened if they were able to connect with each other.