

# 'Huge projects result in huge eco damage'

— Ashish Kothari, Member, Kalpavriksh Environment Action Group



Kalpavriksh is an NGO for environment and development, conservation and communities, biodiversity, and eco-sensitive alternatives. The group, set up in 1979, believes that a country can develop only if ecological sustainability and social equity are guaranteed. **Ashish Kothari** tells **Poonam Singh** how. Excerpts:

Tell us your experience in the river valley project committee. This is almost 10 years back. I was member of an expert committee for the river valley project,

MoEF, for a year-and-half. The functioning of the committee was ad hoc. The guidelines for impact assessment were about 10 year old and needed revision. The

impact assessment documents were of poor quality and we had to go back and forth for further information to the concerned project authorities. We did carry out the revision, but the ministry did not consider.

There were some projects which got clearance on condition of compensatory forestation or rehabilitation. When we tracked these project, we found that about 90 per cent of the dams were violating the condition



The beauty of Andaman Islands.

under which they were cleared. What's more, the MoEF had not taken action against them. We had listed 8 to 10 projects which

were worst of the lot and recommend immediate suspension of work. These were the Beas-Sutlej project (Himachal Pradesh) where construction waste was dumped into the river, Maan dam (Madhya Pradesh) and Idukki hydroelectric project (Kerala) which was blocking the Greater Moyal Elephant Corridor.

Apart from that we had recommended the ministry not to clear future project for states which were defaulting on compliance to conditions, until appropriate action was taken. The ministry did not follow it up and our committee was abruptly terminated. Is the eco policy strong enough to protect environment?

The new policy is in the draft stage. I don't know what the current draft comprises. Apparently this draft is gone to the cabinet and is graded as a secret document. But we had opposed the previous draft which was made in 2004. For two reasons - first, the fundamental policy's whole orientation was that there should be an economic growth and second, environmental issues have to be oriented towards the growth.

The policy was also justifying changes in the EIA and clearance producers, which would dilute the standards. About 90-odd organisations had signed an objection letter against it. We also raised objection on the second draft that came out in 2005, as it had the same contention. We have suggested a number of things; the basic right to environment needs to be established as citizens have the right to a clean environment. The draft of the policy should be circulated in all the major Indian languages and comments should be sought from the public before being finalised.

Many development activities are expected to take place, some which may harm environment. What steps should be taken to guard environment?

We need a land use policy that specifies an ecologically important region, so that it would not be exposed to development. If there is a water source or a biodiversity areas, those areas should not be used for developing dams, mining, expressways, etc.

Secondly, where development projects are proposed a strong and independent impact assessment report, which shows environmental and social impact, should be prepared.

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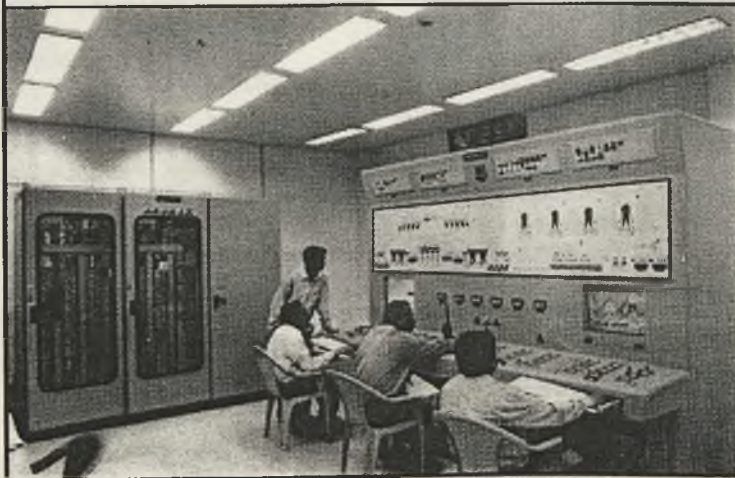
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[Continued from page 56] **How come big industrial houses do not face any objections while implementing mega projects?** That's not true in case of environmentalists. But governments are bought over by these guys, so they obviously won't object. But NGOs have been protesting against big industrial houses. Reliance, for instance, had to face major protests and a public interest litigation was filed against the pipeline project in Gujarat. Similarly, Tata is facing objection against the port and an industrial estate they want to develop in Orissa. All business houses face problems if they violate environmental norms or take over land forcibly.

We had filed a PIL against the Narmada dam, and commercial logging in the Andaman Island, and we won the case. We helped with litigation in the Sahara projects in Sunderbans. At present we are supporting local groups fighting against Jindal steel plant in Chhattisgarh.

In case of Dhamara port we had raised objections and partly because BHNS was going to do an impact assessment study funded by Tatas. In north-east India, about 160 dams are planned; we are going there to document the impact.

Recently we were in Himachal Pradesh where a series hydro projects are planned by both NHPC and private players. Local

people are asking for help in environmental expertise. **How about those who circumvent rules, like project promoters and governments?** It's a serious issue. 90 per cent river valley projects circumvent rules and do not comply to conditions under which they were cleared. In the last few years, projects are getting pushed through without any regard for legal requirements. It can only stop when government starts penalising project authorities. **What success do environmental activists have when they protest?**

Environmental activists have a role to play as they are the ones who raise issues and bring it to the public's notice. Due to the Narmada Bacho Andolan for rehabilitation, the government has formed a committee to take care of rehabilitation. There are other cases where action has been taken. The Coca Cola plant is the best example. Construction on many dams has stopped or the plan has been changed to make dams environmentally sensitive.

For instance in Andaman and Nicobar islands where government contractors or the government itself was engaged in commercial felling. We filed a PIL and the Supreme Court put a ban on commercial felling. A few years back local villagers, along with Kalpavish, filed a case against a limestone mine at

Nahin-Badkot near Dehra Dun for being destructive. It was fairly successful.

**What about delays and cost escalation caused by environmental activists?**

Actually, seeking technical and

"We don't have spare land to build projects. Land is acquired either by destroying natural eco system or by displacing a large number of people."

financial clearance and land acquisition are also one of the major reasons for delays. Project authorities do not give full information in the first go. The project reports or the EIA report are so inadequate that project authorities have to be asked for additional information, which takes months and even years.

One should also count bureaucratic delays in the environment ministry and state government. In the proposed impact assess-

ment procedure there is a time limit set by the ministry for clearing or rejecting a project.

**What is your outlook on ultra mega power projects, large scale SEZs and irrigation, mining projects by states and the Centre?**

The proposed notification for SEZ says that SEZ need not go through environmental clearance, which to me is a disaster. It just does not make sense to allocate chunks of land where environment standards do not apply.

About ultra mega power projects, it's a wrong course of action and we need to decentralise source. That doesn't mean small source but decentralisation is required. We don't have spare land to build projects. Land is acquired either by destroying natural ecosystem or displacing people. With huge projects, the damage is equally as big as the project itself.

According to farmers, irrigation is not the only thing, technique of dry land production should be developed. If a huge amount of water is brought to dry land, the area can cause water logging and salination. To increase agricultural productivity, a huge irrigation scheme is a wrong solution.

Just like in power, irrigation dam projects have 30 to 40 per cent utilization, the rest goes waste. The reason behind this is that canals are not contracted properly or the state government has run out of funds. In Alwar district, Rajasthan, about 500 villages are water secure because of small decentralised check dams the villagers have developed. So where is the need for huge irrigation projects.

Mining projects, whether big or small, are destructive. Luxury mining such as diamond mining should be avoided. Who needs diamonds in India, or for that matter, gold? If thermal power stations are phased out you won't need coal mining. In Goa a lot of iron ore mining takes place and this iron ore is exported to Japan. Why should we destroy our country so that the Japanese can have iron? Not all, but a lot of the mining is irrelevant for our basic needs.

**What path do you suggest to sustainable development?** If we want to make development sustainable, we need very strong EIA and clearance procedures for all projects. The policy should make the EIA standards stringent and involve citizens.

It's also important to realise that there is limits to growth. There are limited natural resources, especially land and water. The development process needs to respect these limits. It's a demand-driven economy - since power is in demand we keep producing it, regardless of the impact on environment. We need to stop this.

As I mentioned earlier, land use policy, impact assessment, people's participation and search for alternatives should be considered. There is no need to develop highly environmentally destructive energy sources like thermal power stations and big dams. More energy conservation efficiency plus decentralised sources can produce substantial amount of power. We are losing 30 per cent in inefficiency and transmission. If we were to save that, we would not need dozens of projects that are being planned. ●