

Meet Ashish Kothari

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Brought up as part of an activist family headed by Rajni Kothari, who is even today one of India's most respected political analysts, Ashish Kothari says he is still attempting to match the austerity and Gandhian standards of his famous father. A vegetarian, teetotaler and a staunch champion of animal rights, he often, however, finds himself misunderstood by wildlifers who are taken aback by his pro-people stance that pits him squarely against those who seek to use displacement of local communities as a strategy to protect sanctuaries and national parks.



Your father is one of India's most famous political analysts. What's so special about nature and biodiversity that it has taken you so far from his field of interest?

Biodiversity. I don't think I had even heard the word till I was in my late twenties. Today, a decade later, I'm sprouting it from so many pores that even my family and friends groan when they hear the word. What makes you feel I have drifted far from politics? Biodiversity is a very political issue. It has come to occupy a central place not just in my life, but in national and international politics. And why not? After all, the control of natural resources determines the very survival of millions.

But you started out as an animal rights activist, right?

And I still am! In the late 1970s I saw pictures of rhesus monkeys being experimented upon in the USA. India had just banned the export of these intelligent, sensitive creatures, but there was considerable pressure on the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai's government to restart it. Some of us, then still school students, took a memorandum to him asking him not to give in to this pressure. His response was characteristic: "What," he asked, "makes you think I will give in to the U.S.?" Encouraged by this support, we also protested against the permission granted to Saudi Arabian princes to hunt bustards in Rajasthan. The government withdrew its permission.

And this is what drew you towards the defence of wildlife?

I had by then also been initiated into nature treks and birding trips (that initially confused and amused me no end, what with names like Booted eagle and Short-toed lark!). One of our favourite spots was the Delhi Ridge, a forested sliver of 7,700 hectares that was a vital lung. Delhi's planners were eyeing it for its real estate value. Alarmed, we mobilised students and local residents, and held demonstrations two decades ago in September 1979. After sustained pressure, the Ridge forests were declared "protected". That was a vital milestone for me and even more so because a side effect was the formation of Kalpavriksh, an environmental action group that has helped shape my life.

And where is the politics in all of this?

Everywhere. Over the next few years, I was catapulted into a whole gamut of issues related to the environment, development and equity. Two treks through Tehri Garhwal in 1980-81, in association with activists of the legendary Chipko movement, opened my eyes to the connections between forest policy, deforestation and the resultant hardships of villagers, especially women. And then came a journey I undertook with Kalpavriksh and the Hindu College

Nature Club, in 1983, along the Narmada river. We walked, bussed and sailed several hundred kilometres along the Narmada River Valley... through villages, forests and major towns. We spoke to officials and activists and came up with the first detailed critique of the Narmada Valley Development Project. If politics is about the power to control resources like forests and rivers, then environmental issues are as political as they are ecological and cultural.

The Narmada Valley. Animal Rights. Wildlife. Environment and Development. Isn't that a very mixed bag?

It may seem so, but everything is, in fact, connected. The single most important thing that the Narmada Valley revealed to me was that the model of development that India had adopted was incompatible with the values of biodiversity conservation, environmental sustainability and social equity. I remain involved with the Narmada Bachao Andolan and see my involvement as part of my battle to save wildlife.

So are you a wildlifer or a human rights activist?

Both. I see these as two sides of one coin. A decade ago, when I was invited to attend a workshop in Nagaland where Sunita, later to become my wife, accompanied me, we visited the Puliebadze Sanctuary near Kohima and were captivated by the incredibly beautiful forest. One particular tree is forever etched in my memory, a magnificent Dipterocarp. Massively buttressed, it harboured dozens of other species of plants: lichens, mosses, ferns, orchids... It was an ecosystem in itself, that tree. I would hate for anyone to cut it down for timber... but would argue against an urban conservationist who tried to stop local adivasis from sustainably using that forest.

You can't really believe that all adivasis live sustainable lives that are respectful of wildlife?

No. Certainly not. But in my travels to several dozen wildlife habitats in India and abroad, I have seldom seen local forest-dwellers make a business out of cutting trees. Where this is happening it is largely because traders and contractors have managed to exploit their poverty and circumstances. Speaking for the tree I can only say that my sense of astonishment at the sheer productivity of nature grows by the minute. I am acutely aware of the fact that the earth supports 50 million species of which humans are only one! When I think that humans are reducing this diversity at the rate of several hundred a year I am angered at our incredible stupidity. How can anyone be allowed to destroy the very evolutionary fabric that produced us?

Now you are talking like an Earth-Firster!

An Earth-Firster is not a human-hater. Bittu, you have to believe that not all of us destroy biodiversity. Many communities protect it and some actually help create it. Yet another of my lasting memories is the first time that Vijay Jardhari, a Garhwali farmer of the Beej Bachao Andolan, showed me his collection of rajma beans. Some 60 varieties in such colours and hues that they looked like hand-painted beads. This was only a microcosm. India's so-called 'illiterate' farmers have evolved over 50,000 varieties of rice, 1,000 varieties of mangos, 40 breeds of sheep, and much, much more. This diversity stood by them in times of drought, flood, famine. It catered to a myriad food, medicinal, cultural needs... and this is being destroyed by the transformation of agri-culture into agro-nomy, a pursuit for profits. I wonder how many wildlifers have considered defending this biodiversity, which is being stolen from adivasis and small farmers. Wildlifers and community rights groups must find ways to work together to protect the earth.

As of now, however, a major conflict exists between people and parks. What by your

reckoning is the genesis of this distancing?

In 1982, an incident in the fabulous Keoladeo National Park in Rajasthan forever altered my dreamy-eyed vision of wildlife protection. Six villagers were killed in police firing when they tried to forcibly enter the park with their cattle. They were protesting against the sudden decision of the Forest Department to stop grazing. A Kalpavriksh investigation team found the firing completely unjustified, and brought up crucial questions regarding the relationship between people and Protected Areas. By the mid-1980s, after joining the Indian Institute of Public Administration to work on a series of management profiles of PAs in India, many seeds of injustice and conflict became obvious. The dominant model of development seemed to treat adivasis as dispensable. I was uncomfortable with the fact that while environmentalists opposed the displacement of communities by dams they condoned displacement and dispossession at the hands of Protected Area managers.

Some people might point to places like Kanha and Ranthambhore, where when people and wildlife were separated, endangered wildlife recovered. Would you rather such wildlife recoveries had not taken place?

I am as smitten by Kanha, Ranthambhore and Bharatpur as the next wildlifer. And if communities voluntarily vacate remote dwellings in favour of locations closer to markets I have no doubt that nature will effectively colonise their turf. My point is, is it fair to single out poor villagers for forced displacement as a strike strategy to save our wildlife? Particularly when, with a few very notable exceptions, the government has itself failed so miserably to stem the rot that is eating away at our wildlife habitats.

What is it about people and park policies that makes you most uncomfortable?

I wish wildlife managers and policy makers would accept that the survival needs of communities has a lesser impact on forests than industrialisation and the conspicuous consumption and lifestyles of urban people. We live far from forests but destroy forests more effectively than villagers with our dams, mines, power plants and our insatiable demand for almost everything that nature produces. Not only do we perpetuate a false division between nature and people, but are hypocritical about the speeding cars and plush tourist facilities we set up in places like Corbett, Kanha and Ranthambhore from where villagers have been forcefully displaced.

Are villagers not also subject to consumerism and ambition? Are human rights activists not playing into the hands of developers by attacking wildlife laws?

Yes. I have witnessed how local community traditions of conservation have broken down and how they are embarking along our own road to destruction. I also know that local power politics can undermine community initiatives for conservation and justice. But, as I mentioned earlier, this was largely at the behest of commercial and political interests.

I have indeed seen many social activists being either ignorant of, or indifferent to the phenomenon of rapidly declining wildlife and biodiversity. This is why I believe that bridges must be built between wildlife and human rights groups. Wildlife conservation cannot be achieved using guns and guards alone. And the protective umbrella offered by wildlife laws will be strengthened by the involvement of local communities. In fact, if we can guarantee their rights to survival resources, justified even if there were no strategic advantage to be gained for wildlife protection, they would probably help us expand the Conservation Area Network to over 10 per cent of India's land mass.

And how would this be achieved?

By adding Community Conserved Areas and wetlands to all Reserved and Protected Forests and orienting locals towards the twin goals of conservation and livelihood security. I believe local

communities would, for instance, support a ban on commercial logging in natural forests, if their livelihoods, through the careful use of non-timber forest produce, can be secured. I also believe that perhaps around two per cent could be protected as inviolate core zones, in consultation with communities and incorporating sacred groves, tanks and grasslands.

Who shares this view with you?

Along with others, I am attempting to bring social activists, wildlife and government officials, conservation organisations, and villagers around to this view. We must understand each others' positions and jointly fight the juggernaut of commercialisation and destructive development. By opening lines of communication, common objectives such as the protection of our forests will forge partnerships that can make the dream come true.

Interesting, but some might say you are actually running with the hare and hunting with the hounds!

Hounds and hares incidentally have no intrinsic 'enmity'. Humans have created such conflicts as blood-sports. Similarly, local people set upon each other thanks to faulty government policies. We intend to quietly continue working on the strength of our convictions. In 1994, we organised the Jungle Jeevan Bachao Yatra. We have participated in a number of national consultations involving social activists, wildlifers and park managers. Treading this middle path does entail receiving flak from extremists on both sides - wildlifers who think I have become too populist, and social activists who suspect that I would still sacrifice human interests for tigers. But I see no alternative to cooperation.

Let's shift to another arena. With the biodiversity anthem now being sung even by the trans-national corporations (TNCs), who really controls our natural wealth?

It should be the Indian people. But few wildlifers are aware of the need to protect indigenous knowledge. Adivasis know how to use thousands of wild plants, over which TNCs are now claiming patent rights. In the early 1990s, I was among the few NGO observers at the negotiations of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and have since participated in most of its sessions. I am enraged by the biopiracy I see around us.... neem, turmeric, basmati, two dozen micro-organisms. If wildlifers and communities work together, we can insist on an alternative intellectual rights system. Otherwise, we could lose our biodiversity.

Do you still go bird watching? Do you visit tiger reserves...the kind of thing that drew you into the subject in the first place?

I do, but not as often as I would like. But I have always been fascinated by the little things in life, particularly by the staggering diversity of invertebrates around us. The sight of dragonflies mating, or a congregation of butterflies easily matches the thrill of encountering a tiger in the wild. Most of my wildlife photography is devoted to such micro-elements of nature. In fact, it is unfortunate that India's conservation lobby does not pay enough attention to these creatures, considering that they make up nearly 80 per cent of the country's faunal diversity. I'd love to see a Project Butterfly or Dragonfly on the lines of Project Tiger that citizens could be involved with, without travelling to distant destinations

Why, incidentally, is Kalpavriksh so invisible on the conservation scene?

Kalpavriksh has preferred staying small as a matter of strategy. Over much of its existence, it has had no office, no hierarchical structure, no presidents and secretaries. Salaries, whenever paid, have been fractions of what could have been obtained in the 'open' market. This has had its costs: a rapid erosion of members as people drift off to make a living and perhaps a somewhat less obvious 'output' than most institutionalised NGOs. But avoiding the stifling

bureaucracy that such NGOs are increasingly prone to has been worth the price of remaining small. Though we now have a tiny office and some paid full-timers, we hope to stay small and informal.

What introspection have you done on the eve of the year 2000? What are your plans?

I am acutely aware of the limitations of my work... as is Kalpavriksh of its unfulfilled potential. We have failed in many things; for instance, in reaching out to urban poor in our education programmes, or in changing our own wasteful consumption patterns and those of the classes we belong to. My wife Sunita has gently guided me to the possibility... as yet a dream... of living what we preach, perhaps on a small piece of land in the midst of a biodiversity-rich part of Karnataka. Increasingly too, I have felt the need to document, support and get involved in the quiet, positive initiatives of individuals and groups across the country.

Like the millions of tiny creatures around me, I would be happy to fill some small niches, and thereby play a little part in the struggle to conserve biodiversity and achieve social equity. You could say this is my year 2000 dream.

Communities do conserve

The Van Suraksha Samiti of Jardhargaon, Tehri Garhwal, U.P., has helped bring back populations of leopard, bear, and even the occasional tiger, because they protected and helped regenerate oak and rhododendron forests.

The Tarun Bharat Sangh worked with local communities against mining in the Sariska Tiger Reserve, Rajasthan. Villagers from Bhaonta-Kolyala declared a public wildlife sanctuary, which protects animals and helps harvest water.

The Gram Sabha of Mendha (Lekha), Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, has fought the destruction of a paper mill and forest fires, and moved towards sustainable extraction of non-timber produce over 1,800 hectares of deciduous forest.

The National Fishworkers' Forum is defending the Coastal Regulation Zone Rules and has united lakhs of fisherfolk in defence of coastal areas that are threatened by pollution. They have also staved off destructive trawling and have assisted movements fighting against industrial aquaculture.

Adivasi groups have fought large projects, such as the Bhopalpatnam-Inchampalli, Bodhghat, and Rathong Chu dams, which would have submerged valuable wildlife habitats.

Kalpavriksh is currently compiling a Directory of Community Conservation Areas in India, and is involved with several ongoing conservation campaigns. Sanctuary readers who wish to join or support Kalpavriksh can contact them at:

Apt. 5, Sree Dutta Krupa,
908, Deccan Gymkhana,
Pune 411 004.
Tel/Fax: 020 354 239.
E-mail: ashish@nda.vsnl.net.in

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