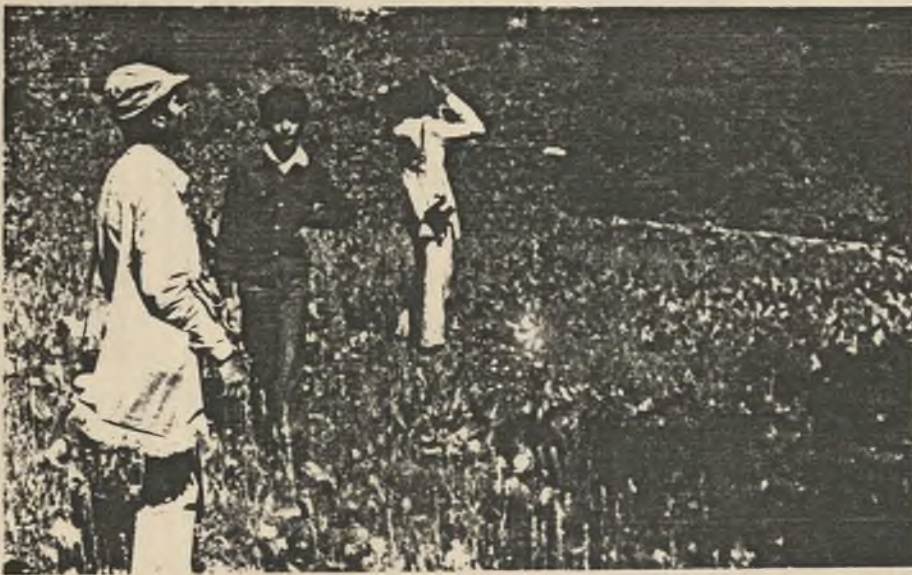


# YOUTH & ENVIRONMENT

ASHISH KOTHARI

*Today's youth faces a bleak future. We are the unfortunate inheritors of a mutilated, ravaged earth which may no longer be able to sustain us as it has been sustaining our ancestors for millions of years. Our surroundings are becoming more and more poisonous, our natural resources are rapidly dying out, indeed being killed off by a world hungry for immediate comfort and unmindful of the future. Unless we do something fast, the next generation will have no oil to run on, no forests to provide oxygen and stop floods, no wild creatures to wonder at, no clean water to drink, no clean air to breath, no peace and quiet amongst the growing din of 'civilization'. If we don't end up in a nuclear holocaust, we'll perish in an environmental one. That is, if we don't do something fast.*



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late, if it is not so already. In some areas of rural India, environmental movements like the Chipko Andolan have attempted to involve the youth. But what about our urban areas? Our cities are fast becoming ghastly concrete jungles whose youth knows the delights of video games but not those of nature. There is an urgent need not only for urban youth to get environmentally conscious, but also to actively join the fight to secure a better future.

Fortunately today there is a growing awareness and concern for the degradation of our environment. People all over the world have started acting to try and save the situation. However, in much of the Third World, including India, environment is still considered a minor issue compared to the pressing problems of poverty and disease. It is not yet fully realized that these problems are intimately connected with environmental problems. This is not to say that there are no movements at all in this direction—infact sporadic 'andolans' have come up, especially amongst these who feel the impact of environmental destruction directly—but these movements are isolated and often

shortlived. There is no 'national' movement as such. What is really tragic and ironic about this is the fact that the youth, which in several other countries is spearheading the environmental movement, is in India largely ignorant or unconcerned about its own environmental future. Most urban youths are still wasting their free time burning buses, gheraoing vice-chancellors or just "hanging around". With a few exceptions, most of us just don't know, or don't care a bit for what is happening to the air, water, and land we live on.

This youth energy must be channelised to productive environmental activities before it is too

There are three basic points that could be put across here. First, that though the environmental crisis is largely the making of generations before us and of those who are at the helm of political and economic power today, we ourselves are contributing a great deal. Consider the garbage we throw around carelessly—ultimately it may wash down to our water systems and pollute them. Consider the cosmetics we use—they are often made of products obtained by slaughtering endangered wild animals. Consider the excessive amount of paper, gas, petrol, electricity, etc. that we burn up—can we afford to waste such scarce resources? When we roar noisily down the street on silencer-less motorcycles to attract attention, are we not being a public nuisance?

Secondly, these acts by us and by irresponsible industrialists,

tractors, politicians and technocrats, ultimately backfire to our own detriment. Remember the floods in Delhi three years back? It is now well-realized that these and other such calamities all over the Indo-Gangetic Plain are often a direct consequence of deforestation in the Himalayas. With our increasing demand for paper and wood products, we are encouraging the large scale cutting of forests in the hills, thereby exposing the soil to erosion, leading to a rise in river beds and consequent flooding. Recently another startling causal link was exposed—Children in Bombay were drinking poisoned milk because the cattle there had been drinking polluted water and grazing on pastures full of deadly chemicals released by neighbouring industries.

Third, and most importantly, we have the potential youth power to pressurise our elders and force the culprits into stopping this wholesale destruction. We have a whole lot of information, and the help of a few committed conservationists in India. We have the support of an increasingly sympathetic mass media. We even have the support, though usually it may only be lip-service, of a Government which proclaims to be quite concerned about the environment. But the point still remains—are we willing to do anything? Do we have the motivation to do it? Cocooned in the relative safety of our urban lives we may not be convinced by statements saying that it is a fight for our survival. It may only be when the floods are upon us, or when some of us die of polluted water, that we may be roused to act. Won't that be too late?

We must act now. There are several things we can do at our own level—plant and protect trees, reduce wastage of paper, oil, electricity, water, etc., stop careless littering, control our noise levels (did you know that the noise level in a discotheque is over 110 decibels, while human safety level is about 80?), start a local nature club, and spread the message around to build

up a stronger pressure group. Don't think that individuals and small groups can make no impact—the environmental movement must start at an individual level, and often there is chain reaction to your actions, with more and more people joining in.

One such pressure group has recently sprung up in Delhi. KALPAVRIKSH, as we call ourselves (after a tree in Indian mythology), is an informal group of young people interested mainly in environmental action and education. As a group we were brought together by the urgent need to do some thing about the destruction of Delhi's largest green area, the Ridge forest. Before this

paid off as 4,900 acres of green areas in Delhi were declared 'Protected Areas.'

Following this concerted move, we decided to form an informal group with two primary objectives spreading awareness about environmental problems, and attempting to get them solved through **action**, rather than sitting and talking endlessly at national or international seminars.

We have tried to blend these two objectives through a number of regular programmes-giving slideshows and talks in schools and colleges on various environmental issues, taking



*The kulpavriksh youth trekked in the Garhwal to estimate the damage caused by deforestation.*

some of us had been active in number of ways—trips to nature areas in and outside Delhi, involvement in school Nature Clubs, and occasional protest marches, like the successful one against the hunting of the Great Indian Bustard by Arabian princes in Rajasthan in December 1978. Through regular visits to the Delhi Ridge, we had realized its importance in lowering temperatures, absorbing dust, muffling noise, harbouring wildlife and providing recreation and education. Alarmed at its steady destruction, we decided to do something! A large protest rally in late 1979, extensive press coverage and lobbying amongst decision-makers including the P.M.,

out field trips within and outside Delhi, and running Nature Clubs in a few of Delhi's schools (where creating awareness is combined with action work, like planting trees and digging a compost pit in Sardar Patel Vidyalyaya). In all these we often collaborate with other organisations like World Wildlife Fund and the Gandhi Peace Foundation Environment Cell. We also bring out a newsletter—'Nature'—which aims at creating consciousness on environmental issues and outlining small-scale action programmes.

A number of special projects have also been undertaken in the past two years. In the summer holidays of 1980

& 1981, we trekked in the Garhwal region of northern U.P., staying with the villagers, trying to assess the damage caused by massive deforestation in the hills. We also established contact with activists of the Chipko Andolan, which is trying to save Garhwal's forests. We followed this up by writing articles, giving a memorandum to the P.M., doing a radio programme on Chipko, and preparing an audio-visual which has been shown in a number of institutions.

Last January we initiated Delhi's first bird count, aimed not at a quantitative data merely, but more at measuring fluctuations in bird

budget an inch. We followed this up by collecting as much information on the subject as possible, and we're now trying to build up a greater public pressure.

Feeling that there was a serious lack of interest among college students, we held a three day workshop on environment, involving slide shows, films, discussions, and trips to a few green areas. Over hundred students participated. Several collegiates have since joined us, and attempts are being made to start Nature Clubs in a few colleges and schools.

Recently we protested against the holding of the International Seminar

plush conference halls, fancy food, and enormous use of paper and electricity? The cause of environmental education could have been served much better by holding a down-to-earth, inexpensive, localised workshop involving all sections of society.

We managed to get the signatures of over 20 participants a note registering this protest and suggesting a number of concrete alternatives.

Our other projects in progress include the preparation of two more slide series (Delhi's Environment and Indian Wildlife), and collaboration with other organisations on the preparation of a "state of the Indian Environment" report and on the dissemination of material on environment to various active groups. We've also joined an effort to highlight the environmental, social and economic problems caused by preparations for ASIAD 82, and to build up a strong public opinion so that the government can be stopped from undertaking any such disastrous extravaganzas in the future.

We've tried to keep our campaign to save Delhi's green areas, and we did achieve a victory when we saved Kushak Nala, a green area in Chanakyapuri from destruction by sitting in front of the bulldozers. This was in October 1980. However we have failed to ensure that the Administration's "Protected Area" declaration is effectively enforced in other green areas. The Ridge, for instance, continues to be destroyed, often falling prey to violations of its own rules by the Delhi Administration. Our efforts to establish a constant dialogue with the Lt. Governor and the Horticulture heads have also proved futile, as we are merely paid lip-service while the destruction continues. Last year a large tree-planting project had to be dropped when the Administration having promised several hundred saplings of native trees, along with tree guards, backed out at the last moment.



*Kalpavriksh members at Dodital in Uttarkashi.*

numbers year after year to assess the extent of environmental damage and disturbance in Delhi. It is also a good way of involving as many young people as possible and getting them interested in ornithology. Two counts—one winter and one summer/monsoon—are to be held annually.

On 5th June, 1981, the World Environment Day, we held a cycle rally to highlight the problem of water pollution in Delhi and the Administration's indifference. Cycling from New Delhi to the Lt. Governor's house in Old Delhi, distributing Hindi leaflets on the way, we managed to create some awareness all right—but we failed to make the authorities

on Environmental Education in December 1981, on two main grounds:

- Since there had been several national and international seminars on this subject earlier, all of them coming to similar conclusions, and all of them ending with seemingly no follow-up action, we felt, why hold yet another one? This cult of seminars with no proper follow-up must be kept away from the environmental movement.
- Since the Department of Environment has so small a budget anyway, why then waste over a lakh of rupees on holding the seminar in a "5-star" manner, with