



CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

Essays on T N Khoshoo Memorial Awardees

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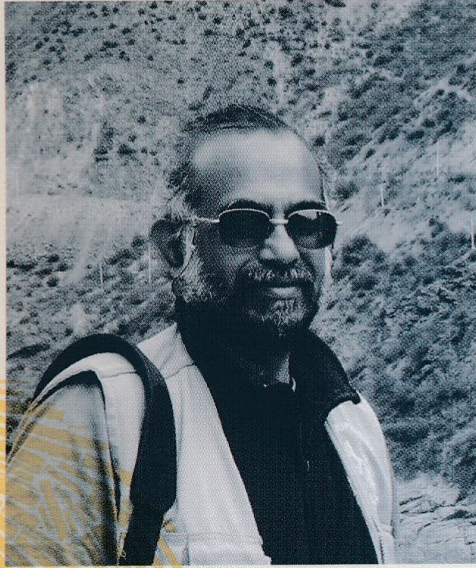
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Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology
and the Environment



TN Khoshoo Memorial Award



ASHISH KOTHARI

TN Khoshoo Memorial Award
for his contribution to the field of
conservation.

2009

It was 1979 and the site of focus was the Delhi ridge forest, one of the few places birders and others nature lovers from the national capital flocked to. Ashish Kothari and some of his friends who enjoyed birding in the area were shocked at the steady destruction of the forest by roads, construction, and garbage being dumped. Not wanting to bear silent witness to this crisis, Ashish and his friends, most of them still students, started a campaign with other students and local residents to save the ridge. It was at this point that a decision was made to come together as a group to deal with such environmental issues in a more systematic manner. Kalpavriksh, an environmental NGO of which Ashish is one of the founding members, was thus born.

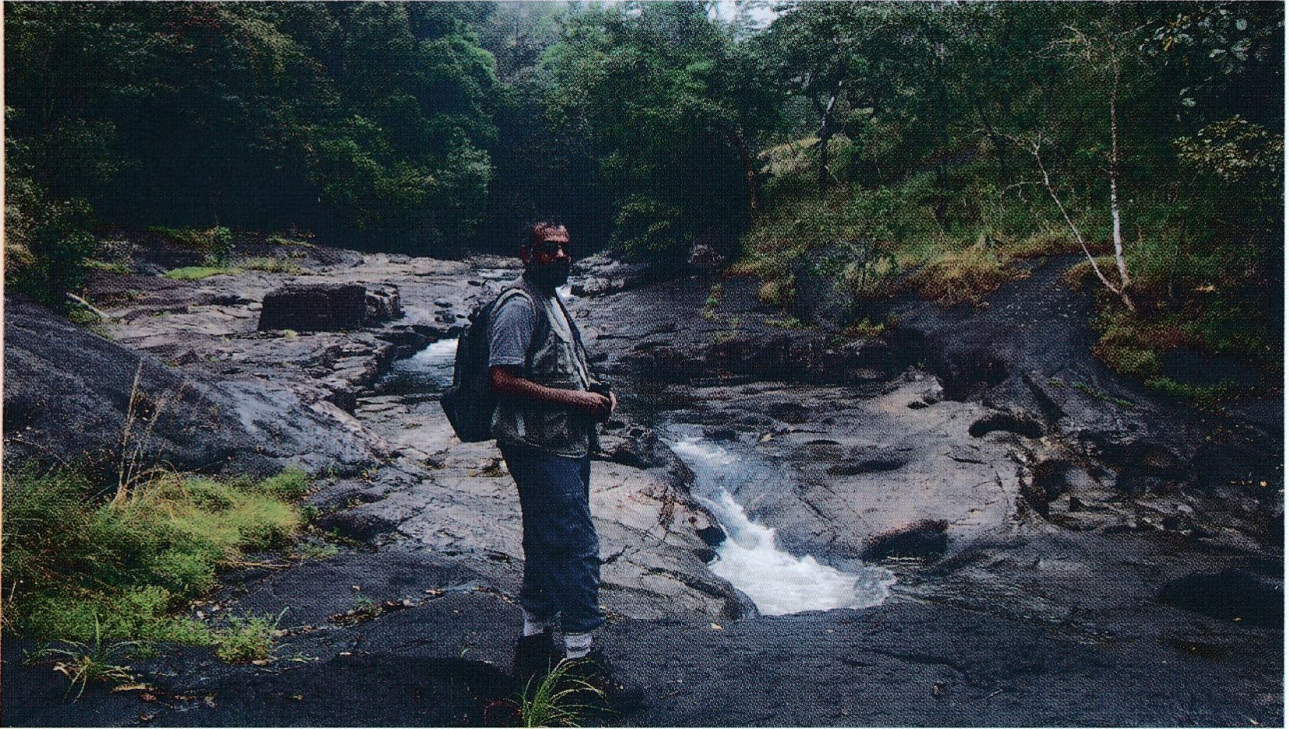
Ashish's activism started very early on. Influenced by his family members, who were involved in human rights activism, socially relevant research, and work with underprivileged children, he engaged on issues of wildlife and animal rights starting from his school days. Not many school-going children would be able to boast that they had met with the prime minister of their country to voice their dissatisfaction against a certain policy, let alone see the leader in person. But in the 1970s, that is precisely what Ashish and a few of his friends did. This meeting with the then prime minister, Morarji Desai, was to register their protest about the export of rhesus



macaques to the U.S. for research experiments. Although the exports had already been stopped, the group wanted to ensure that they would not be started again. They followed this up with another protest staged outside the Saudi Arabian Embassy to draw attention to the fact that the Indian government had given permission to the Saudi Arabian prince to hunt bustards and floricans. These engagements paved the way for Ashish's life in activism in the fields of environment, development, and conservation.

With forest staff and other participants of Uttarakhand Birdwatching Camp, Sitabani, 2013

Ashish and Kalpavriksh's work on forests and wildlife benefited from a broadened perspective soon after the organisation was founded. During trips in the early 1980s to the Tehri Garhwal region where the Chipko movement was born, the group realised the socio-political issues that encompassed forests. This realisation was soon followed by the incident of firing at the Keoladeo Ghana National Park in 1982, in which 6-7 villagers



Trekking in Neyyar
Sanctuary, Kerala 2011

were killed when defying a sudden ban on the entry of cattle into the park. Kalpavriksh conducted an immediate investigation into the incident and wrote a report. This episode represented a growing conflict over rights to natural areas wherein people who needed the resources the most were being deprived of them. It was then that the relationship between conservation and people became very crucial for the organisation. This sparked their analysis of conservation policies, which was an eye opener. They realised that the government was unnecessarily pitting humans against wildlife. Since then, Kalpavriksh has advocated inclusive, community-based approaches to conservation and especially highlighted the phenomenon of community-conserved areas.

From 1983 onwards, the organisation worked on these issues in the Narmada Valley and joined the Narmada Bachao Andolan after the movement took root in the region. Their engagement with this movement was the beginning of their fight against development and forest-related displacement. "Whether it is in the Narmada Valley or the various forests all over the country, displacement has been a constant in India's quest for joining the league of industrialised, so-called 'developed' countries," he



With members of
Kalpavriksh in Pune,
January 2017

says. In producing the first report on displacement in the Narmada Valley in 1984, Kalpavriksh questioned whether the project was indeed development or destruction. “Are we a country that believes that some people can be sacrificed for the greater good?” he questions. “As an organization, we believe that it is fundamentally not acceptable or necessary to displace some people for the benefit of others.”

INITIATIVES

The presence of a myriad of contradictory laws and policies in the country has not deterred Ashish from persisting in his line of work. Beginning in the 1990s, an attempt was made to build a platform for dialogue. Known as Building Bridges for Conservation, this platform was an effort to create a common ground for people involved in human rights and conservation, those in academia, representatives from the government, and others interested in these questions. Due to the group’s work, misconceptions that people from different fields had about one another were cast aside, which led to greater understanding. Unfortunately, this initiative ran out of steam after a few years. “A concerted effort to make significant policy changes was missing, but at least some level of greater understanding and dialogue

was achieved,” Ashish points out. “Looking at this more positively, there are organisations, especially some of the younger ones like NCF and ATREE that are aware of the nuances in this area.”

Since these organisations do have a better understanding of the realities, he feels that there is a need for a collective push by them for policy changes to ensure that humans can coexist with wildlife. Another attempt at a collective process was known as the Future of Conservation. This was a network of organisations and individuals committed to effective and equitable conservation of biodiversity. As part of this initiative, a series of meetings was conducted and documents were developed on the kind of approaches that could be adopted regarding critical tiger habitats, critical wildlife habitats, and the relocation of people. However, this did not go very far due to an unresponsive government, though a set of documents that has potential positive use was prepared.

Ashish and others in the field have also been engaging with international groups such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). According to Ashish, this has been a lot more satisfying and productive, since they have helped generate major paradigm shifts in global conservation policy towards co-management and community-conserved areas. This includes the inclusion of people-centred conservation governance in the policies of the IUCN and the CBD and the creation of a global network called the Indigenous Peoples’ and Community Conserved Territories and Areas (ICCA) Consortium. “Such policies must be used to put pressure on the Indian government, since it is a signatory to these international treaties and can therefore be questioned about the lack of change in the country.

There needs to be action on the ground as well. For example, the 2006 Forest Rights Act (FRA), although revolutionary in spirit, has not been allowed to live up to its potential. Only two percent of what can be recognised as Community Forest Rights has reached people,” he says in dismay. He adds with a word of caution, “Of course, this doesn’t mean that

communities will automatically start conserving forests, so work needs to be done with them in a mutually respectful manner, putting together various kinds of expertise and experience to figure out the best forms of governance, management, and sustainable use.”

Change on the ground for communities will require transformation that transcends policy. “Until and unless the hegemony of the forest department and its ineffective conservation mind-set is altered, nothing will change,” he asserts. Fundamental changes are required in the methods adopted to manage and govern forests as well as train staff, including the Indian Forest Service curriculum. In addition, an effort must be made to reconcile contradictory laws and policies. For instance, the Forest Conservation Act, the Indian Forest Act, the Wild Life Protection Act, and the Forest Rights Act appear to be in conflict with one another in some crucial respects.

MISCONCEPTIONS

In his work with communities dependent on forests and other ecosystems, Ashish has come to realise that the forest department and large sections of the public have many misconceptions about their way of life. The most common is that forest dwellers are illiterate and do not have an environmental sensibility because they are not educated. “This is a very strong bias, particularly among the urban middle class, including many environmental groups,” he states. A second belief of the middle classes is that some of the practices of forest dwellers, such as collecting timber for fuel or grazing their cattle, are unnecessarily destructive. Ashish counters this by saying that we as a society have internalised the British approach to forestry to such an extent that we now believe that any action of the locals is destructive. Conversely, we are blind to our own more destructive lifestyles simply because we may not be directly cutting the trees we use.

In urban areas, people are also entirely ignorant about the traditional structures and social fabric of tribal communities. They are not aware of the fact that tribals have their own institutions, knowledge systems, and practices related to natural ecosystems, which include regulations or rules about resource use in terms of when to hunt and when not to, when to

collect forest produce and how it needs to be harvested, and so on. "A lot of these rules may not be in practice today for a variety of reasons, but they did have them in the not too distant past, which maintained the forest ecosystems. And many still retain them or are bringing them back when their benefits are recognised," he says. There is also the widespread notion that tribal communities cannot coexist with wildlife, especially tigers.

It is no wonder then that Ashish feels that some of India's legislation, although good in spirit, is undone by regressive mind-sets. With the Forest Rights Act in existence for a decade, he says he continues to be amazed by the ability of the Indian government to create positive and progressive policies but not implement them. Nevertheless, according to Ashish, it is better that acts like the FRA exist, as opposed to not having them at all. In many parts of India, the FRA has created possibilities for significant changes in the governance of forests and more effective conservation as well. This has also been made possible due to the strengthened ability of communities to stop destructive 'development' projects like mines and dams. "This change has come about through sheer hard work and persistence and is not an automatic by-product of the Act," he says.

Kalpavriksh continues to work on the Act and the potential changes it can lead to in the future. "Of course there are problems with it, but overall, it is a positive policy space. This is good for changing governance but also for challenging destructive development. We will continue to support it, but there is the huge challenge of actually getting it implemented," Ashish says.

While he is positive about the potential of the Act, he questions why it was not taken a step further. "Why should it not be a natural ecosystems rights act, so that fishing and coastal communities, pastoralists, and others can have the possibility of claiming community rights? We have never been comfortable with individual rights, but community rights should be available to all ecosystem based communities. The lack of this thought process has been a big failure on the part of civil society movements. There has been a constant focus on forests since the time of the British, which is why there is a forest department but not a grasslands department or a coastal

“Raising the issue of the Narmada project before the movement started was important, as was our continued involvement. Though we did not succeed in stopping the project, the larger debate on development was highlighted.”

conservation department. Unfortunately, this is the case with civil society as well, which focuses on forests excessively, just as there is a predominant focus on large animals to the exclusion of plants and small animals, many of which are severely threatened. This is a major weakness,” he laments.

PUSHING FOR ALTERNATIVES

For the last 3-4 years, he has taken a step back to look at the larger picture of environment and development policy and research alternatives to development. This led to a book he co-authored with ecological economist Aseem Shrivastava, titled *Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India*. It charts India's story of growth, including its ecological, economic, and social impacts and possible alternatives to development based on experiments within the country that emphasise ecological sustainability and socioeconomic equity.

“In the current global context, putting alternatives into practice is a possibility, but this is extremely difficult and will take a lot of time. There are thousands of places where people are either resisting the destruction or creating constructive alternatives. The question is whether we will be able to understand, network, and collaborate to build a larger critical mass to bring about fundamental transformations in the structures that cause inequity and unsustainability. Without a concerted global effort, it won't be possible,” he states. With this goal in mind, he helped initiate *Vikalp Sangam* (meaning the confluence of alternatives), a process that brings

together movements that offer alternative well-being pathways to globalised development, documents these, and makes the information available on a dedicated website. Internationally, he has been involved in creating a discussion network around the concept of 'radical ecological democracy,' linking it with radical alternatives in other parts of the world. The launch of a website to feature such alternatives has been recently announced. Ashish is also on the board of Greenpeace International and its Indian wing, contributes to several global working groups, and helps coordinate a multi-country project called Academic-Activist Co-Produced Knowledge for Environmental Justice (ACKnowl-EJ). He writes frequently in Indian and foreign publications on these issues.

A MIXED BAG

Achieving its goals in the overlapping fields of environment, conservation, development, and rights of indigenous peoples and other communities has not been easy for Kalpavriksh. However, the organisation has made significant breakthroughs. One of them was putting a stop to commercial logging in the Andamans. A positive judgment from the Indian courts was a big win for the organisation, which fought for the cause with two other organisations. There have been many other positive outcomes of their struggles, including stopping mining in part of the Dehradun region and the successful struggle against POSCO in the Niyamgiri hills, among others. In other aspects, such as the environmental education work of Kalpavriksh in many parts of India or the policy advocacy on conservation and livelihoods, it is harder to measure 'achievements,' as the results are often long-term and not necessarily concretely visible.

A long-standing engagement of Ashish and Kalpavriksh was the struggle against dams on the Narmada River. "Raising the issue of the Narmada project before the movement started was important, as was our continued involvement. Though we did not succeed in stopping the project, the larger debate on development was highlighted," he explains. Another shortcoming on the part of civil society organisations in India has been the dearth of vernacular literature. "We have gotten better in the last few years, especially in places like Maharashtra, but the dominance of English has its limitations,



With participants of
the Himal Kalasutra
Birdwatching Festival,
April 2017

especially in terms of outreach,” he says. Kalpavriksh as an organisation has chosen to remain small, which can be perceived both as a strength and a weakness. The benefit is a flat, democratic decision-making structure in which all members are involved without any formal hierarchy. Apart from the greater ‘buy-in’ of members in decisions, this also helps promote independent thinking and action. Many other members of Kalpavriksh are now known in their own right as activists, researchers, and authors. On the flip side, Ashish feels that it has also made the organisation less effective, because there are limitations to engagement on a larger scale. However, the decision to keep the organisation small was deliberate. “We felt that we needed to be democratic within the organisation, especially since we were talking about democracy in society,” he explains.

Kalpavriksh: www.kalpavriksh.org

ICCA Consortium: www.iccaconsortium.org

Vikalp Sangam: www.vikalpsangam.org

ACKnowl-EJ: <http://acknowlej.org>

