COMMUNITIES / INTERVIEW

Ashish Kothari: “We have to dream, with our feet rooted to the ground”

Imagining radical alternatives to the current development model

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Ashish Kothari has spent half a century advocating for environmental causes and people's movements, such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Beej Bachao Andolan. In 1979, while still in school, he cofounded Kalpavriksh, a nonprofit that initially sought to resist the destruction of Delhi's Ridge Forest and now supports community-led conservation efforts throughout the country. He has served on several government committees, helping to prepare the National Wildlife Action Plan and the Biological Diversity Act, and has also written and edited dozens of books, including Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India *and* Alternative Futures: India Unshackled.

In his work, Kothari has often had to confront, and examine, the paradigm of development followed by contemporary nation states, which, he argues, sees the destruction of the environment and community relations as collateral damage for the creation of material wealth that is often concentrated in very few hands. In an email interview, he told Hiral Trivedi, an intern at The Caravan*, about the limitations of this model and the need to develop radical alternatives that can bring about transformation without compromising on values such as solidarity, diversity, freedom and autonomy.*

At the time of Independence, India was one of the poorest countries in the world. Nearly eight decades later, it has gained a great deal of prosperity. Could you reflect on this growth and development? Is it reflected in people's lives?

It is important to interrogate the words "poor" and "development." The definitions of these words have been handed down to us by the Western industrialised world. These are based on a certain kind of neoliberal economics that views life in narrowly financial terms. Other aspects of well-being, such as community relations or mutual aid, what we get freely from nature, cultural attributes, diversity and so on are not included. In such a scenario, poverty reduction or eradication, or development, is focussed heavily on material growth, measured by indicators such as GDP.

A community or country that is poor in material wealth can be rich in other aspects that make for human prosperity—a word that denotes overall well-being but has been distorted to mean only financial wealth—but this is not factored into development planning. Indeed, the word "development" originally indicated unfolding, or opening up, and should have included opportunities to flourish as human beings.

In a book that Aseem Shrivastava and I wrote, *Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India*, we evaluate India's development trajectory from these multiple perspectives. We show that, even when GDP [growth] rates have been very high—especially after the shift towards economic globalisation in 1991—two phenomena have led to continued or new forms of deprivation for, perhaps, more than half of India's population. First, inequality has seriously increased, such that much of the new material wealth being created has been cornered by a small percentage of people. According to Oxfam, "The top 10% of the Indian population holds 77% of the total national wealth. 73% of the wealth generated in 2017 went to the richest 1%, while 670 million Indians who comprise the poorest half of the population saw only a 1% increase in their wealth." Second, the process of creating this wealth has led to serious ecological damage that has a direct negative impact on tens of millions of people who directly depend on the environment for their livelihoods and survival, and has entailed the grabbing of community land, water, forests and grasslands.

Possibly most telling is the direct displacement caused by development projects. Independent estimates, such as by HM Mathur of the Council for Social Development, put the figure of people uprooted at over 60 million. Or you can take a crucial indicator like nutrition. Evidence suggests that, despite impressive increase in total foodgrains production, extremely high rates of wasting and stunting in children, and general food-related ill health in the adult population, continue. With the Green Revolution's focus on quantity and not quality, a free-for-all given to corporations involved in the food industry and decreasing availability of healthy food, we are actually eating much more unhealthy food than before.

I'm not saying that development has brought no benefits. Per capita incomes have increased. People have greater access to material goods. Technological innovations in various fields have given us benefits. But very substantial numbers of people have not accessed these benefits. Could significant improvements in meeting basic needs have happened in ways that did not entail such huge costs—borne mostly by those on the margins—and in ways that benefited everyone?

I should also add that this phenomenon is not unique to India—it is global. And here, the crisis of climate is also important to note, as it is threatening to undo much of the gains that development may have brought across the world. If, in some decades, glitzy cities like Mumbai, which symbolise a narrowly defined prosperity, are going to be substantially underwater due to sea level rise, how is this progress? Of course, the climate crisis is not India's doing but, in promoting the same unsustainable model of development, we are adding to it and doing very little to help people adapt to the consequences.

Is development ideological rather than technological? If so, what is the politics of development?

In the book mentioned earlier, we briefly trace the history of development, showing how it emerged as a US strategy after the Second World War to revive its own economy. Through various means, the world was sold the idea that, to reach prosperity, economic growth based on industrialisation, urbanisation and financialisation was the only way to go. The notion of "developed" and "developing" also came up then, as a highly misleading method of asserting that the United States and Europe had already sorted out their paths of progress and that the rest of the world needed to copy them. In a way, this was a continuation of the colonial project to convert the whole world in the image of the white man, drawing on patriarchal roots, dividing peoples and nature into nation states that are in hostile competition with each other, enabling capitalism as the primary ideology and giving free rein to the military–industrial complex.

In the years leading up to India's independence, and briefly after it, there was a lively debate between [MK] Gandhi, who wanted to follow an indigenous notion of enhancing well-being for all, and others, including [Jawaharlal] Nehru and [BR] Ambedkar, for whom Western-style industrialisation was the way to go. We know who won the debate and are now facing the consequences. One of these is the inevitable growth of crony capitalism, where the state and corporations are increasingly hand in glove.

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Development projects have consistently been documented as failing to meet their goals, such as alleviating poverty. However, we see the Narendra Modi government's aggressive efforts to push large-scale development projects on some of the most vulnerable communities and regions—notably, the Great Nicobar Project. How do you see such efforts? Who will benefit, and who will be left behind?

There are many instances of how sensitively implemented development projects have helped alleviate poverty or increase food availability, so it is not a completely black-and-white picture. However, levels of deprivation have remained high and, in situations of displacement and dispossession, even increased. This is justified in the name of "national interest," which has never been properly defined. I remember an engineer of the Narmada project telling me that, "when an omelette has to be made, some eggs have to be broken." When I asked him why the omelette was mostly eaten by those already relatively well off, whereas the "eggs" were always Adivasis, small farmers, fisherfolk and artisans, and especially the women among them, he did not have an answer.

While this process has been going on since Independence, it was exacerbated by the "structural adjustment" policies of 1991—as we mention in *Churning the Earth*—and has become even worse in the last decade. In this most recent period, all the border areas and the Adivasi heartlands in

central India, which were relatively less impacted, are also being targeted. This also explains attempts by New Delhi to gain much greater control over regions like Kashmir, Ladakh, Lakshadweep, Nicobar, Kachchh and parts of the Northeast. These are areas with significant land, minerals, fisheries and other resources that the crony capitalist economy thrives on—never mind the social and ecological consequences. Elsewhere, I've called this "internal colonisation."

Ironically, in the vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat [self-reliant India] that has been our prime minister's mantra since COVID-19 times, Adivasi and other self-reliant communities are being displaced for coal-mining, energy projects, expressways and so on. The vision of Viksit Bharat [developed India] is the same. Whose *vikas*, at whose cost, is not asked. Nor do these visions care about what we are doing to nature and culture. Finally, what are we leaving for future generations? A world where prosperity includes fresh air and water, good nutritious food, livelihoods that are enjoyable and dignified, or one where we need masks and air purifiers, eat lots of food but mostly junk and poisoned, and have jobs, if at all, that are soul-deadening in mass-production establishments—what I've called "deadlihoods"?

From the Sardar Sarovar dam to the Great Nicobar Project, you have critiqued large-scale development projects for many years now. How would you trace the state's implementation of such projects and its response to resistance? Has anything changed?

At one level, the model of development has remained the same since the First Five-Year Plan: large-scale industrialisation, urbanisation, commercialisation and so on. Two of the big shifts that happened in 1991, however, were a greater integration into the global economy and opening up to the private sector. These have been taken further in the last decade—in particular, the withdrawal of the state and leaving many processes to the private sector, enabled especially by crony capitalism.

People's movements and civil-society groups have challenged these pathways for decades. We have some of the most inspiring examples of resistance in the world, including iconic ones like Chipko, against

commercial tree-felling in the Himalayas; anti-dam movements like Silent Valley, Koel Karo, Tehri and Narmada; anti-mining ones like Gandhamardhan and Niyamgiri, in Odisha, and against uranium-mining in Meghalaya; against nuclear projects, like at Jaitapur, in Maharashtra. In most of these cases, the state—with or without corporate involvement—has responded with one or more ways to break the movement: powerful narratives of how these projects are in the national interest, trying to split the movement by offering jobs or money to selected leaders, withdrawing official recognition and registration of organisations, intimidation, imprisonment and violence.

While these tactics are not new—virtually all political parties in power have used them—the use of anti-terror laws and clauses like sedition have become much more common in the last decade. Peaceful protesters, civil-society members, lawyers and journalists are being picked up and charged arbitrarily. The latest example of Sonam Wangchuk, in Ladakh, is typical. Such repression is especially prevalent if the resistance is against particular industrial houses that are close to the party in power, or in areas being eyed by powerful corporates.

Spaces for dissent against such projects have shrunk considerably, as have spaces for people's voices in decision-making. For instance, virtually none of the committees that advise the ministry of environment, forest and climate change on environmental and forest clearances have truly independent voices anymore—this was quite common from the 1980s to about 2010. Laws like the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, which could enable communities to challenge land grabs by corporate houses, are deliberately not implemented in areas with high-value minerals. All environmental laws, which came about especially in the period of the 1970s and 1980s due to a mix of people's movements and some sensitive elements in the state, are being diluted or bypassed.

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Your work has also focussed on radical alternatives to development. Could you expand on what these alternatives mean?

The question of whether we are destined to go down the Westernised GDP model of development or have alternatives is crucial. It is the most important question if humanity has to make peace internally and with the earth. Fortunately, we have alternatives aplenty. I'm not talking about actions like recycling and electric vehicles, though these may be a small part of the solutions. When we say "radical alternatives," we are pointing to those pathways that challenge and transform the fundamental relations of humans with the rest of nature, of humans with each other, of today's generations with future ones. This means challenging patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, racism and so on, as well as anthropocentrism, or the notion that the earth was made for humans.

In the economic sphere, for instance, instead of unending growth and the dominating role of governments and corporations, we would point to activities that are predominantly oriented to meeting basic needs, are managed and controlled as locally as possible by workers and consumers, are firmly within ecological limits and whose benefits are accessible to everyone. Most economic assets, including relevant knowledge, would be in the "commons," governed and managed by collectives that are closest to them or most dependent on them, with benefits going to all members rather than being privatised. In the political sphere, instead of concentrating power in politicians and bureaucrats, as in the current liberal form of democracy, the focus would be on collectives and communities on the ground being the primary decision makers, with governance institutions at larger landscape levels being accountable to them—what we call radical democracy. In the social sphere, we would focus on eradicating a set of discriminatory and inequitable relations, including gender, ability and caste.

An additional transformation that is crucial is to go beyond the nation state and other political boundaries that have cut natural and cultural flows. In a

recent exercise, the South Asia Bioregionalism Working Group came up with a vision of a South Asia where national boundaries have been transcended to re-establish river flows and wildlife migration, nomadic community pathways have been reopened, and people are able to go back and forth without visas. This kind of biocultural reconnecting across landscapes and seascapes is a crucial part of an alternative vision. I even say that we need not alternative development but alternatives to development, especially given how this word has been hijacked and defined in a narrow way for the last few decades, and how its concept and practice have led inevitably to unsustainability and inequality.

Could you share an example from your experiences?

I would not know where to start! I can cite dozens of initiatives that I had the good luck to visit or be part of, but I'll briefly give two or three. As an alternative to the Green Revolution, five thousand Dalit and Lambada women farmers in Telangana, members of the Deccan Development Society, have achieved full food security, high levels of nutrition and complete control over all this in what they call "food sovereignty," all with their own knowledge, seeds, organic agricultural technologies and collective work. In the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, several hundred villages have taken back collective control over forests, using the forest rights act, and are conserving and sustainably harvesting them for enhancing livelihoods and biodiversity. Their collective earnings have enabled several villages to set up their own community assets. In the Kachchhi town of Bhuj, five civil-society organisations have worked with residents of poor and middle-class neighbourhoods to create more self-reliant housing, sanitation and water supply, and assert greater citizens' voice in urban planning.

Why do we need alternatives to development? Why can positive social transformations not take place within the current development model?

The current development model has, to my mind, two inherent limitations. First, its capitalist base relies on unending exploitation of nature and

people. Second, it is inevitably prone to unequal distribution of benefits. So, even as some of its "trickle down" effects will benefit some sections of the poor, it will also invariably lead to sustaining or increasing deprivations of various kinds. Globally, its tendency to overstrain the earth's natural capacity has led to the climate crisis, collapse of ecosystems and biodiversity—most of the world's oceans, for instance, are seriously overfished—and a worldwide spread of deadly toxins and pollution.

So, it is increasingly evident that "sustainable development" is an oxymoron and that "green growth" is just a means of sustaining state power and corporate profits rather than sustaining the earth. This is painfully evident even in supposedly ecofriendly projects like large-scale solar and wind projects, which are leading to displacement of communities and destruction of wildlife habitats. Real alternatives, like decentralised renewable energy combined with a serious questioning of how much energy we really need for a good life, are ignored in this process.

How well are such alternatives able to push back state-backed development?

The combination of resistance and constructive alternatives can indeed transform the situation on the ground. For instance, the work of DDS farmers has helped restrict the imposition of Green Revolution technologies, including GMOs, in their villages. The mobilisation in Gadchiroli—and in the neighbouring areas of Chandrapur and Melghat—has helped stave off mining, reduce the imposition of inappropriate practices by the forest department and forced contractors to pay better prices for forest produce.

But such pushback is always fragile, given the power of the state–corporation combine. It is, therefore, crucial to establish networks among such initiatives, for mutual strengthening, for solidarity in times of crisis, for support in arenas where local communities may not have internal capacity, such as legal or technological expertise. In India, there is the National Alliance of People's Movements, which brings together dozens of groups resisting inappropriate development or other problems, like

casteism or communalism. We have helped set up Vikalp Sangam, a platform to bring together initiatives on radical alternatives. We established the Global Tapestry of Alternatives with a similar aim. There are many others like this to create collective strength.

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In your work, you also talk about the emerging framework of eco-Swaraj, or radical ecological democracy. What does this mean, and what is its significance? How does this framework affirm values of social and ecological justice, democracy and non-anthropocentrism?

The currently dominant form of democracy focusses on elections and representative power. It transforms power from the ground to institutions like political parties and to the centralised state. What emerges from many grassroots movements, however, is that the opening line of the Constitution —"We, the people"—connotes that, first and foremost, power should be located in local collectives. As one village in Gadchiroli said, four decades back, "We elect the government in Delhi and Mumbai, but, in our village, we are the government." Or, as a people's movement in Jharkhand said, the *gram sabha*—village council—is over the Lok Sabha, not subservient to it. This also means that all decisions important to such collectives are first taken by such assemblies, involving larger-level structures, including government institutions, where necessary. This can be called radical or direct democracy, or Swaraj in its truest sense.

It is crucial to understand that Swaraj is not only about grounded power but also responsibility. This is very different from the liberal Western form of freedom, which is individualistic and in which there is no space for being responsible for other people's freedom. As Gandhi repeatedly emphasised, our duty towards the well-being of other people should precede, or be as important as, our right to well-being. Some of us have extended this to propose the notion of radical ecological democracy, or eco-Swaraj, in which

it is not only humans but all of nature that is involved. In other words, we are all part of decision-making in whatever collectives we are part of, but we exercise this power with responsibility towards the freedom and well-being of others, including non-humans.

There are several such well-being approaches across the world—some having existed for millennia—such as Ubuntu, Buen Vivir, Sumak Kawsay and Kyosei. Our book *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* has several dozen examples. Even in the Western context, especially in Europe, movements are promoting "degrowth," an approach that brings down their material and energy consumption substantially. There are many similarities and differences among such approaches, but they all hold some values at their core: solidarity, cooperation, diversity, freedom, autonomy, dignity, respect for life, simplicity and so on. These values are in direct opposition to those promoted by today's dominant system, such as selfish individualism, consumerism, cut-throat competition and exploitation.

Given the threats to the environment and communities, where do you see India's ecological fate headed?

If currently dominant trends continue, we are in very serious trouble. The basics of life, including air, water and soil, are in crisis, and this will worsen. Hundreds of millions of people will face greater uncertainty, disasters like crop losses and heat stress and water scarcity and pollution spikes, malnutrition, unemployment, and various forms of alienation and loss of meaning. We focus a lot on armed security, ignoring the fact that ecological, economic and social security are so much more important. The various conflicts we see erupting in India and across the world will get much worse, as we create more and more ecological and climate refugees—imagine millions of people from coasts across India, Pakistan and Bangladesh pouring inland—and as corporations and powerful nation states use all their might to sustain their power and profits.

But there are also powerful countertrends, of resistance and constructive alternatives, which need to be recognised, documented, spread, networked and supported. To my mind, just like the movements against patriarchy and

against colonial occupation started small and became global forces for radical transformation, without any centralised leadership, the ecological movement—encompassing also the struggles for indigenous and community autonomy, collective and individual human rights, economic localisation and sociocultural justice—is spreading rapidly. I think it will be a major local-to-global force for transformation over the next few decades, led by newer generations in dialogue with earlier ones.

In the book *Alternative Futures: India Unshackled*, which my colleague KJ Joy and I edited, there are 35 essays from various experienced people on how India can be transformed into a much more just and sustainable society. Visions of this kind, along with the radical practice of communities on the ground, are what we need more of. We have to dream, with our feet rooted to the ground.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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development environment displacement