

## **Interview with Ashish Kothari [AK] taken by Krishnendu Bose [KB]**

KB: Historically and predominantly, why are people, communities, living inside the forest, around the national parks, sanctuaries...dubbed as enemy no.1 of tigers?

AK: If you look at the history of how protected areas came in, in the first place, there was a lot of discussion on this around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Yellowstone National Park model and stuff like that were being discussed around the world, and Indian conservationists were fairly significantly influenced by that. Probably the reason was that most of the people who were talking about conservation at that time were from very elite circles. Topnotch hunters and people from *nawab* families. Interestingly, they were far more tuned to the Western discussions and debates on conservation than to our own traditional methods of community conservation that was already there for thousands of years before that. So you look at it from there and then you sort of jump to the 1950s, 60s and 70s, when again conservation becomes a very major concern because of the massive amount of destruction that was taking place, and again you find that the people in those discussions, around that time, especially in discussions with Mrs Indira Gandhi, and so on, were from this very elite lot of people. For them these wilderness areas were of course areas for wildlife, but they were also areas where they would go out to enjoy nature as photographers or as hunters. Anything which was out of that mindset, out of that vision of wilderness, which I can go and enjoy and which is good for wildlife, was seen to be counterproductive or was seen to be an enemy. And local people and their own ways of doing things are very different from [how] a professional wildlife manager would want to do things. To me that was the beginnings of this, [that] people are either enemies or they are [a] nuisance that needs to be kind of dealt with, or at the most that they are dependent people, we need to look after their needs – but there was never the issue that people have their own traditions, their own practices, their own rights and that we need to bring them on board as equals.

KB: So you would say that has continued till now or it's changing?

AK: I think amongst a small set of very vocal conservationists that has remained and in fact the latest tiger crisis and the debates on the Tribal Bill have kind of sharpened that vision, but there is also a very substantial number of conservation organizations and individuals who are questioning that now. They are beginning to realize that you can't possibly talk of conservation in a country like India without talking of people's issues.

KB: This certainly was the dominating feature which tied up the contours of conservation policy in our country and how conservation, wildlife has been looked upon. Do you think this could be one of the major disjunctions to understand conservation and forest?

AK: There are two major disjunctions. One is definitely this one and we have been screaming our heads off about it. Wildlife conservation, until it actually becomes a people's programme... – right now it's not [a] people's programme, it's for a few people sitting in cities and wanting conservation to happen. I am not saying that therefore it's not justified. Obviously it's justified, but it's a very shortsighted strategy. This is a huge disjuncture. What we have done actually in the last 30–40 years, or longer if you take the earlier history also, is that we have created enemies of millions of people who could've actually been allies in conservation. Very, very natural allies, because for them the long-

term protection of the forests and ecosystems is part of their livelihood strategy, so they could have been natural allies in that sense. This is a huge disjunct. I think the other very large disjunct is focusing on a few mega fauna. The tiger being an obvious one, but there are others also, which has meant that there is a serious neglect of the rest of biodiversity. We are talking about...several thousand plants and animals and until very recently, the conservation community had neglected 95% of them. In a way these two disjuncts also match up, because if you had focused on biodiversity as a whole, and then within that, the entire range of threatened species, big and small, then you would've seen that the conservation of the biodiversity also mirrors or matches people's own interests. By people I mean those who are traditionally most dependent on these areas. They don't want monocultures. They don't want systems in which that biodiversity is being degraded and destroyed. For them it's a part of their dependence, part of their cultural sustenance and heritage and so on. If these two disjuncts had actually not happened, if we had had a system where we were looking at the entire range of biodiversity and we were looking at people as being a part of that system, then to me the situation today would have been very, very different. We wouldn't have had the sort of crisis we are talking about.

KB: You don't buy the argument that the tiger was the icon of the entire forest and the symbol, and the tiger is as good as it gets? Through [the] tiger they were talking of the whole forest and biodiversity.

AK: As a public message, I don't have a problem with having the tiger as a symbol. But equally a butterfly could have been the symbol, a bee could've been the symbol. You could've had different symbols. There is no reason why you [can't] have a variety of symbols. The thing with having that one focus, as the tiger was, is two things. One is, it wasn't just a symbol. It was also that the management practices were oriented towards the tiger, not necessarily looking at the ecosystem as a whole. If you look at the whole thing of how protected areas are managed, it's really about protecting a big species, like a rhino in Kaziranga or a tiger or an elephant. It's just not a symbolic thing. The second thing is that if you really want to make it a citizen's movement, people also need to be aware of the fact that there are other fantastic things in the forest or in wetlands, etc. A beautiful butterfly or a frog that is seriously threatened could be equally powerful symbols, as they have in many other countries. There is no reason why we couldn't have done that. I think tiger, to the exclusion of everything else, has been somewhat detrimental.

KB: Coming back to these individuals, or these groups of individuals, whose voice really determined the policy that we had for the last 30 years...I just want you to dwell upon these people a bit more and get your response and reaction. There is definitely a thing about class. You talked about this earlier. Do you want to talk about it more, because their voice and their thoughts certainly shaped the way in which conservation has been followed in this country?

AK: Absolutely. If we can think of the critical 4-5-6 individuals, both from within the govt and outside, [who] have actually framed and dictated the policy in the last 30 years or so, there is a conservation mindset which – to me, I say clearly – is very elitist. It wants to protect wildlife supposedly for its own interest, for the sake of wildlife itself, which is fine – I don't have any problems with that. That's a good ethical standpoint and

I agree with that. But it also wants to protect wildlife in the vision of this non-peopled, to me, mythical, virgin forest kind of a vision, which completely ignores the fact that in a country like India, probably everywhere in the world, including supposedly the virgin forests like the Amazon, there are people's influences, which have been around for thousands of years. In fact it's very interesting that a lot of the ecosystems that we think of as natural, which we want to protect in a natural way, are actually people influenced ecosystems and many of the characteristics are because people have traditionally related to those, or modified those ecosystems for thousands of years. There is a very clear class bias, a very clear urban based, upper middle class or upper class way of looking at wildlife and conservation. I am not saying that's bad. I am saying is that if these people had a much greater grounding in rural India, in actually living with communities and actually experiencing what communities go through in their relations with tiger or lots of other wildlife species and with forests and ecosystems, then the policies they would've made would've been very, very different. I have no qualms in saying that we have a very elitist way of looking at things.

KB: It's very interesting. You say that they are very elitist, but a person like you for instance and the group of people we all belong to... Say Kalpvriksh, your organization, they're also very elitist. The fact that you live in this kind of a house, you just talk a different language. ...

AK: Absolutely. In terms of our lifestyles I am very much a part of the problem. People like me are very much a part of the problem, but to me there are a number of differences. One is that I have learnt to be far more humble about my own ideas and visions and messages and so on, because of a very strong involvement with people's movements, who actually speak very different languages. I don't think I can speak that language, but I can understand it, I can empathise with it – [it] is a language of livelihoods, of rights of [the people]. We are part of the ecosystem, we are not something separate from it. That's one thing and the other is that I have learnt – and probably because of the involvement with people like that – to accept the fact that I am a part of the problem, and therefore also look at people who might be causing destruction, local communities who might be causing destruction, in a very different way. Because I am not only pointing fingers at them and saying that you are destroying the forests, but so am I, and so then we look at each other and try and work out a system. We've got to look at each other with a level of respect that we're both parts of the problem. We could also both be parts of a solution. I am not looking only at my way of being the solution. I'm saying we need to talk to, consult with, actually look at the visions of so many different actors in this, and specially those who are living inside these wilderness areas, which can then modify my own vision. I see this as the major difference. Not my class background. It's the same as theirs and probably in terms of my consumption patterns I'm probably as destructive, but I think terms of the messages that one is giving for policy and programmes and so on – there is a difference.

KB: So being an elite is not the problem – it's also the perspective you hold?

AK: I think one can certainly break out of one's class background. I don't claim to have done it fully. In fact a lot of people who are at the grassroots movements think that people like me or Kalpvriksh also have middle class bias, but I think the more we are able to

question that ourselves, the more we're interacting with people who are questioning us, I think the more we're able to get out being a part of the problem and maybe being a part of the solution.

KB: Why haven't these people tried to break out into this new perspective? And also they've closed ranks. You can easily identify a bunch of people there and they speak the same language. ... Why over the last 30 years haven't they changed? They think that they are still right.

AK: Part of the answer to this would be that at the time when they were bringing those policies in – Wildlife Act 1972 and PT itself – it seemed that the way they were wanting was the right way, because you had political support. At least Mrs Gandhi who was giving at least in terms of policies, if not actually on the ground – she was giving support, issuing directions to state CMs saying this is important and you need to protect the tiger. A lot of the international conservation organizations were also speaking the same language and so they felt that there was a legitimacy and there was a viability in what they were saying that it was possible to do this through official diktats from New Delhi. When that actually started crumbling... – and it's in the last maybe few years that you see that this is crumbling. What has happened is that their vision is a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy because if they saw people as enemies at that point of time it would have been difficult for them to actually get concrete evidence and say this. Today you see people you've already made enemies of, who have actually got no livelihood options left because through policies we've foreclosed those options – we've stopped access, we've displaced them. These people have in fact become destructive. They are helping poachers. They're helping timber mafia. Not communities as a whole, but individuals within these communities. Today 30 years later, these conservationists can say we told you so. These people, they are destroyers and if you hand over forests to them as is being proposed under the Tribal Bill, then they will further destroy. Everything will become completely opened up. And you also see in the same 30–40 years that govts have sacrificed very large parts of our ecosystems, but some of the areas that are left are within the national parks and sanctuaries and clearly we also see that the Wildlife Act in that sense has helped in stalling development-based destruction in protected areas whereas everywhere else you see that there is massive destruction, so again it becomes a thing saying that the only thing that has really worked is Wildlife Protection Act and strict protection against destructive forces. What we are saying is that roll back 30–40 years and if you had actually had the Wildlife Act – nobody is saying that we shouldn't have had it – if we had a vision of protected areas which we completely agree with, but if we had it with people's support, rather than against people, then the kind of crisis and the crumbling of the edifice that is happening now, when no longer are the top politicians behind you [wouldn't have happened]. You don't have a Mrs Gandhi to sort of back you up anymore. The base of conservation would have been much wider and much more strong. You would have had people saying we don't want denotification of X area for dams etc, and you see where people's movements have actually succeeded in thousands of places in India. In small areas but nevertheless very important areas or wetland areas, this is what they've done. They've said we don't want this kind of developments to come in and we don't care what politicians in Delhi and Hyderabad, wherever they are, say. We believe this forest is important, we are going to regenerate and protect it and the wildlife

here is also worth protecting. I am saying that we've actually missed that massive opportunity. People are not seeing that. I've asked each one of my conservation friends in Delhi and Bombay, have you ever visited a community conserved site? Barring the Bishnoi area or the KokreBellur kind of thing, nobody has been to these. So they don't actually believe that communities can actually be a part of conservation.

KB: But they've also accused you of being out of time, and that you don't know the reality of what's going on. Thirty years ago maybe this was a great option, but today with the population increase, and markets making their way inroads into *adivasi* villages, forest villages, things have changed completely. You are not considering that – so to hand over forests to people [may be dangerous], they just might sell it off.

AK: It's entirely possible. That's happening anyway. There is a point in terms of ethics and morals and so on, in terms of that there are a million people who have rights and dependencies in these areas. You can't simply kick these people out. There's also a practical issue here. If you are talking about 3–4 million people inside protected areas today, there is no way on earth that you might be able to move these people out. You might be able to move a few 1000 or a lakh or two, not 3 million. You have to deal with the practical reality of the fact these people are going to live inside protected areas for a very long time to come. If the markets have entered these areas or commercialisation has taken place or whatever has happened, politicisation has taken place. Communities are no longer in the traditional mode as they used to be. That's a reality that we have to deal with. In fact when communities have mobilized themselves or where sensitive forest officers or NGOs have actually helped to mobilize them, they've counted those commercial forces. They have said we don't want timber felling, for instance. Hundreds of areas are there where communities have said themselves that no, we are not going to do timber felling. Nor are we going to allow the timber mafia to come in, because these are the areas that we depend upon. Or you can take the example of Periyar reserve or others where officers...have treated people as allies – you see much more effective conservation taking place and people are also happy, because their livelihood requirements are being met. We are not saying a simple handover of these areas to the local communities – and in today's context it would also be a disaster if we say instead of Forest Department, let the communities protect. We have our differences with some of our tribal rights friends on those counts because we think their messages are far more simplistic and extreme in some cases. But we are saying partnerships. We are saying where the state is really interested, where the communities are or can be mobilised, and where there are NGOs who can actually help in this process – in facilitation, in monitoring, in making sure that conservation is taking place through research – that partnership is eventually what will succeed. With enemies...you are just fuelling commercialization and politicization. ...

KB: What you are saying is that coexistence debates that we have been having for the last so many years are misplaced. Practically you are talking about 3 million people inside and around national parks and sanctuaries and [saying] they have to coexist. There is no question of science, or whether they can or they should.

AK: Absolutely. It's not 3 million inside and around – it's inside only. Around is several more million. If you actually speak to forest officers and state govts, almost everyone will

tell you that resettlement is impossible. Few villages here and there, yes. I spoke recently...to the Madhya Pradesh CWW and the CCF-Wildlife and they were saying that we have determined that out of the 700 odd villages in protected areas in the state, we can move out maybe 50–60, at the most 100 – there is no way we can move out [all], 600 at least will remain inside. If we don't think of coexistence strategies right now, another 30 years down we'll have nothing left. This practical reality is being realised by a lot of people on the ground, including the managers. For some reason, I can't understand why, [not] by our conservation friends who are dictating policy in Delhi.

KB: Probably it's pretty inane also to say this thing, that tigers and people can't have dinner together, as some have said. That's the debate that's been fueled and raging...

AK: The sad part is that science is given as a backup to that kind of an argument, but when you actually start asking for specific things, basically what happens is that they say that the tiger has killed the livestock of the tribal so the tribal has poisoned the tiger. Those are individual instances. They might well be increasing. That is not evidence to show that coexistence isn't possible. How is it that for thousands of years people have coexisted with the tiger? If there were an absolute non-possibility of coexistence, we would have seen that either people would have moved off or tigers would have been finished off. Whereas the crisis has been [there for] the last two or three decades or the last decade if you look at – tiger figures seemed to have been going up and now in the last decade they are crashing again. Is it suddenly that people and tigers are clashing with each other? Or is it that there are other forces that have moved in? Or other factors that have caused this? If you take a number of protected areas in India, say, the Biligiri Temple Sanctuary, tigers and Soligas have coexisted. Where is the problem? The Soligas say that if tigers come and occasionally takes one of our goats that's fine, that's part of our existence here. We are also taking from the forest and the forest takes from us. 3–5 years from now, you'll see the same Soligas say that we don't want the tigers here. Why? Because today our conservation friends have brought in a policy through the Supreme Court and so on, which says that you can't take anything from the forest. So you got 50–60 Soliga hamlets inside the BRT sanctuary who today cannot take the NTFP, which they have done for decades and, as has been shown, probably without causing any ecological damage. Tomorrow they are going to say that if you're not going to allow us this also in the name of the tiger, then we don't want the tiger. That is where coexistence becomes impossible, because you've brought in policy whereby people who have coexisted suddenly become disprivileged. You privilege a particular species over another. I just don't buy that argument of coexistence not being possible. I think coexistence does not become possible in situations where people actually start excessively taking away the prey as Ullas has rightly pointed out – then it's a problem. Then coexistence is not possible. But to say that no form of coexistence is possible, I think, is wrong. This whole thing of tigers and tribals can't coexist or whatever. ...because traditionally people have coexisted with tigers. Even today you'll find places like Biligiri where there is coexistence and many others where in fact there is coexistence. I think coexistence becomes a problem when people change their ways in such a way that it becomes destructive, for example, successively taking away the prey base or taking away kills or things like that...and of course excessive commercial harvesting of resources. There might be too much of hemming in, too much of population of certain predator species,

etc, but from that to jump to the conclusion that no coexistence is possible is, to me, contrary to all evidence from the last several thousands of years. ... I believe that's bad science.

KB: To me this coexistence debate has become sharper and more real, possibly because of exogenous reasons – possibly because forests have shrunk in the last 30–40 years for reasons of politics, development... Conflicts have increased...

AK: Absolutely. I think there are two or three factors there. One is that lifestyles of people have either changed or livelihood needs of people have not been adequately met. It's not just the Forest Department, we need to look at the state as a whole. The Rural Development Department and so on. The issue of the livelihood of the people living in and around the protected areas has been very badly neglected. Firstly, people have not been left to themselves to deal with it. There is too much interference and takeover of lands by the govt itself. Secondly, the govt has not been able to provide that kind of livelihood security. Then people turn to destructive activities – timber theft, poaching and so on. That's one issue. The second issue is very rightly that areas have shrunk because we've looked at these areas as islands. I think that's a huge mistake in conservation – to look at protected areas as islands and to think that if we can protect these areas then we can protect wildlife, which is ridiculous, because everywhere around destruction is taking place. There is a dam coming up somewhere. There is a thermal power station coming up somewhere. There is a city that's encroaching further and further into the forest. There is an expressway. Basically, these islands are getting hemmed in more and more because we've not looked at entire landscapes. We've not said that even if [we] are taking the case of the tiger...we need larger areas in which they exist. Not just one Panna National Park or Corbett NP. That's where people issues become important, because [you need to know] what is the kind of land use in that entire landscape, what is the kind of water use in that entire landscape. There is agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry operations taking place. There are settlements. There is all kinds of stuff. If it doesn't look at that and if you bring in destructive projects in the name of development in the surrounding areas, that's going to eventually impact upon both the people and the wildlife even inside the protected area. Even if you look at the Wildlife Act, it doesn't take this into account. It talks about either protected areas and doing everything there or individual species across the landscape. What is the point of protecting the species of a landscape, if that landscape itself is being destroyed? What's the point of protecting a small island if everywhere around is going to be destroyed? I think that vision also needs major changes.

KB: [There are] numerous cases of people destroying. What is the difference between these two systems because the wildlife conservationists always give examples of people destroying forests, much more than [of] people saving forests, the patches, the areas. How [is it that] in some areas people save and in others people destroy?

AK: There are many factors. It's difficult to generalize. Where people have had no other alternative, no other livelihood source and a market has been available, then you've found that either through timber or through other forms, [they] have actually very significantly destroyed the forests. Or they have encroached significantly for livelihood reasons. On the other hand, where communities have recognised that the protection of the forest is the only way of ensuring our own survival, and there has been very good

leadership amongst them or there's been an external intervention – through a good officer or an NGO – then you find a community mobilizing around it and defeating the few elements within them who might have linked up with the commercial forces or those who might have been wanting to sell off the forest. It's really an issue of the various relationships within the community, and between that community and the outside world, including the market on the one hand, which could be causing destruction and similarly the dynamics internal to the organization within the community and external links with conservationists, with sensitive officers etc, that could help defeat the forces of destruction.

KB: Simply put, if you leave the forest to the communities and the people, the chances are they might destroy it, unless they have a scaffolding to help them formulate this whole framework of conservation livelihood.

AK: In today's context, leaving the forest alone in the hands of any single sector could be problematic. Alone in the hands of the Forest Department, conservationists or in the hands of the community. That's why we need partnerships. The bad people in all the sectors are very easily able to get together and destroy things, right from topmost politicians to community persons or *sarpanch* or somebody on the ground, including the forest officer... The good people in all these sectors are getting together, but they are still looking at each other, either as enemies, or with some amount of distrust. Where you actually got the partnerships in place – Periyar is a very good example, as far as the tiger reserve is concerned; there are 100s of areas outside of tiger reserves, which are like that – then you find that conservation is on a much, much stronger footing. Essentially that's the difference. I am not saying hand over the forest wholly to the community. But I have very serious problems with anyone who says that let the Forest Department be the one that actually decides upon and dictates who owns the forest, which is what some of my conservation friends are saying and it's a very interesting paradox because on one hand they scream and shout and curse the Department, for instance you look at Sariska. On the other hand if you ask them what do you want done, it's still about giving more powers to the same Forest Department. Maybe somewhere in that they see that they'll also be part of the decision-making process – we'll get me and my conservation friends to be a part of the Tiger Authority and State Wildlife Boards and things like that. That's about it. It's still power in the hands of the bureaucracy, which they curse on the other hand. I just don't understand that.

KB: Let's talk more about your conservation friends and this world.

AK: Absolutely. The conservation world mirrors the NGO world which I don't think is any better than the govt in terms of being able to work together, coordinate, fight against each other, and not be territorial – all of these evils are there in the NGO world also. I am not starry-eyed about NGOs either, including my own. The attempts at trying to build bridges, which we have done over the last decade or so, have both failed and succeeded. Where they have failed is in not being able to convert the really high-profile, very vocal, sections on both sides – sorry to say sides, right now for simplicity... Whether we talk of some of the most well-known human rights activists and tribal rights activists or the most well-known conservation activists, senior conservation activists, I don't think that building bridges has really succeeded. On the other hand, there is a very large number of



younger groups, human rights activists, conservation activists, tribal activists and communities themselves, who see that there is a very strong point in this, and who are willing to build those bridges and be part of a different vision of conservation, which is much more broad-based. They see that the earlier polarized vision is simply not doing good. I think that's where the hope is. I really don't have much hope left in some of my most senior friends, and maybe people will discount me also for being a part of that. I think the much younger colleagues that we have are the ones who are actually going to take this forward, and make the breakthrough, if at all it is to be made.

KB: You'd like to name groups or activists?

AK: Groups like the NCF and a lot of people within groups like BNHS. Even organisations like WWF, ATREE, FES (Foundation for Ecological Security), are doing very good work on the ground, whether in terms of livelihood, or in terms of wildlife research and activism. I think those are going to be the leaders of the next 20–30 years and I see a lot of hope in them. And a lot of on-ground tribal rights organisations also.

KB: You may be right, because my experience also says that people, the so-called dominant voices in wildlife, they've got their backs against the wall. Do you think that they're seeing the world change and things slipping out of...?

AK: There is a sense of desperation because of that. I am still hoping that out of that kind of desperation they might say, well, let's try something different. I have been trying to convince them that just come with me to some of the community-conserved areas. You can go back with your opinion. I have been asking wildlife biologists, come and do flora-fauna studies, and tell me from a wildlife perspective whether they are being affected or not, because we go and we do a case study, but we are not doing that kind of...

KB: What scares them?

AK: Some people might be scared that their paradigms might get very fundamentally questioned, but I think it's also a question of priority. They still think that they want to do all of their work in protected areas. At the most there will be a few who'll say that we'll look at [the] Periyar kind of model. Because it's a tiger reserve you can still think of it as iconic. But people are just not willing to come with us to Mendhalekha or Jardhargaon, or lots of these areas where people are doing their own conservation. Maybe not perfectly, but even protected areas are not perfectly done. To look at those and see if there are lessons from that to be learned for the formal protected areas and build a whole network of conservation. In the recommendations of the NBDAP draft, this is exactly what we have said. Increase protected areas to 10% of India's landmass – today it is 4 or 5% - but do it through a network of conservation sites which includes formal protected areas, community protected areas, CCA sites, even reserved forests, where Forest Department should give up its claim on commercial forestry and treat them as reserved forests, with people who are living there. I think there is immense potential if we are able to break out of this mindset.

KB: You [make it] sound very idyllic...

AK: I am not as hopeful as I may have been 10 years back. But I still have a lot of hope, I'll tell you why. Because the forces of globalisation, which is what is driving the political moves today for completely sort of diluting environmental standards and giving away prime forest land to mining, etc – I think that's a real threat. Despite that, to me, it seems that the kind of resistance...that we're seeing across the country today, [there is] more and more the realization that we have to work together. Let me give you a simple example of the coastal zones. The attempts to actually dilute the Coastal Regulation Zone Notification have at least partly been defeated, for the time being, by the fisher folk organizations, and there are increasing attempts by organisations like ATREE and so on, to link up with these fisher folk organisations. See how you can defeat the designs of developmentalists who want to open up coastal areas or of commercial trawling etc, but also to see where are the sites where there are critical turtle nestings or other forms of mangrove and so on, where the fisher folk and conservation groups can work together. That dialogue is proving successful in at least some areas of the country. I see more and more of that happening. As a result of the fact that people are no longer sitting on the fence as a result of this development...in a place like Orissa it has become so stark that organisations in Orissa, people like Biswajit Mohanty, who is a conservationist, and the human rights activists, are getting together and fighting the Vedanta, or the other threats that are there. One day or the other, even out of sheer desperation, if not out of conviction, we'll have to be able to get together. That's what gives me hope. I may be seen as idealistic, but I have seen enough examples on the ground to show that it's possible.

KB: [What about] hand[ing] over forests to people, because you need a lot of monitoring institutions, like BRT [Billigiri Ramaswamy Temple Sanctuary] has shown? The way Tribal Bill has been pushed, especially after JPC, do you think these things will be dropped? These scaffoldings, thinking about it, the institutionalization of the relationship of people and forest, and politically it will just be handed over to them and thereby creating a problem.

AK: What actually will happen with the Tribal Bill is difficult to say because [in] even previous attempts at trying to provide rights and decision making powers – if you take the whole *panchayat* or Panchayat Scheduled Areas Act (PISA) where considerable amounts of these powers are supposed to be given to the *gram sabhas* and local communities – state govts have been very, very reluctant to actually hand over these powers. So actually whether the Tribal Bill will substantially hand over powers or not, we don't know. We can only wait and see. I am a little skeptical on how much that will happen. But supposing it does happen or in places where it does happen, will it create further problems or will it solve problems? I think, and we have said in the Kalpvriksh response to the JPC version of the Tribal Bill, that they have gone too far in the terms of the exercise of rights and the provision of rights and [do] not have enough responsibilities and mechanisms of checks and balances built into it. So if it happens this way, without the capacities of the *gram sabhas* to deal with the threats that are being faced, both internal and external, then I feel that conservation might as well suffer in a number of areas. On the other hand, where communities are already well organised, but can't actually achieve conservation, because they don't have the power or the authority to

actually protect the forest that they are currently conserving, I think the Bill will actually help, because, finally they have that authority and power. On the balance, I frankly don't know which one will be more. For instance, Orissa has probably 10,000 forest committees. If they can use the provisions of the Tribal Bill to stop mining companies and commercial logging, which the Forest Department is proposing in those areas, then it will be a fantastic thing for conservation. But there are lots and lots of other states where you don't have that kind of mobilisation, and where simply a handing over or a provision of rights could well lead to destruction. I frankly don't know which side it will go. That's why we've said build in those conservation scaffolding into the Bill. Build in the provision for capacity building, for creating or strengthening the institutional structures that can enable communities to use the Bill in a proactive way.

KB: Historically, [for] the last 30 years...exclusively state, wildlifers, [were] talking about animals and not people. In the last quarter, we see almost the tables turned. People taking over that, politicians threatening to take it away from people like yourself – pro-people conservationists.

AK: We are all to blame for this situation. For example, the CPM very stridently articulating the Tribal Bill or tribal rights over forests, to me, don't have a conservation perspective in mind. But why they have actually got this space is because we have never occupied it. If we had occupied the space of being pro-people along with wildlife conservation, then these forces, the politicians, who are today taking that space, would simply not have had it. They would have had to go along with a participatory model of conservation, not just issues of rights. So I'm saying if today we have a person like Brinda Karat who can very stridently argue for tribal rights, she is able to do that because we haven't done it, in the way we would have wanted to do it. This is also what people like [MD] Madhusudan are saying – conservation has lost a great opportunity. When the Tribal Bill came in, they could well have argued that good, tribals need those rights, the decision making, and so on and so forth, but it has to be done with a conservation perspective. Instead conservationists went all out saying this is a disaster, 60% of our forest will be given away, and so on. We lost that opportunity and we've lost that opportunity repeatedly in the last 30 years.

KB: Whats been our role in this....

AK: In the sense that I haven't been able to influence policy enough and my friends on all these sides enough, especially the really vocal, influential people. Yes, I accept the failure. That's why I like to place my [hopes] much more now in the younger generation, whose hair has not turned white yet. I think they are seeing the ground reality much better and understand that we need this paradigm shift.

KB: ... Why do we put so much pressure on people and communities? Why shouldn't they destroy the forests? If we [urbanites] can destroy the forest, then why can't they? Why this special responsibility on their shoulders?

AK: I agree with that. ... That's why we keep saying that we need to put the spotlight on ourselves, and our ways of living and what we are doing. If you want my response to "one tribal kills a tiger..." and such stuff, then one urban conservationist like myself who lives in a house which has marble, which has destroyed a forest somewhere, I should also

be killed. That kind of an argument doesn't really take us very far. What to me is very important is what kind of conservation actions are needed across the entire society. By communities who are living there and have a direct and day-to-day relationship and interaction with the wildlife and the forest. And then with people like us, who indirectly place a lot of pressure on forests and, therefore, what are our responsibilities, in terms of making our actions much more responsible. If we don't focus on both, then I would agree that it's irresponsible to say that the communities are the ones who should be conserving, just because they live there.

KB: Why haven't we heard new voices in tiger conservation in the last so many years? ... I can imagine why Sunita [Narain] was put there [in the TTF] and she has delivered.

AK: Barring the TTF [Tiger Task Force], which was obviously a different stroke by someone, somewhere, probably an officer in PMO, the wildlife establishment continues to rely on these small number of conservationists in a couple of cities. These conservationists have also not really encouraged new voices to come up.

KB: Allowed?

AK: I don't know if they actively stopped it, but probably people who have that much experience and name and so on, would probably have encouraged a whole new generation of people to come up and speak their minds...and do their own research. That has happened but not because of these people. One is that. Second is that, how are these sorts of names made or these hegemonies created? One is that people themselves will do it. But if you have a lot of committed people like that it's not that they are necessarily wanting to retain these spaces. What also happens is how does the outside world look at it. International organisations, because it's convenient for them to focus on one or two individuals, they focus on them and route everything through them. The media, whenever it wants a question on tiger, will only call up these two, three individuals. They will never call someone who might actually be working on the ground in some tiger reserve, or somebody like Sidappa Shetty or Nitin Rai or whatever, and ask what do you think about it. I think that's also a serious fault. Then the establishment. For them also it's very easy. First of all, they also need to get the funds from international organisations. Secondly they also need to get hold of 2-3 people rather than consult with a very large number of young researchers etc – again the same names. These are the reasons why either deliberately or as is the case with many of my conservation friends, there has been...kingdoms have remained small kingdoms. They haven't really opened out to the *praja* or the public. It's a shame, because there are so many fantastic young conservationists and researchers and activists out there. I think the TTF was a very interesting example, because of the composition of the TTF or the Chairperson herself. There was a much greater consultation process. Many more people, including a lot of young wildlife researchers, and young wildlife activists, community people, human rights groups, etc, were brought into the consultation process, and some of that is reflected in the final output itself. That was a huge breakthrough. What is important is to try and follow it up. Now where the problem is that the team is no longer available. The Chairperson – lots of other priorities that she has. I am not sure that there is actually a mechanism by which that breakthrough can be continued. If the output of that goes into the hands of only the Tiger Conservation Authority, then I'm afraid we've lost that breakthrough, unless that authority has a very

independent way of functioning, which I doubt. That's one thing. The other is that while the team did a very good job, I think that there were also opportunities lost in the TTF. One was the opportunity to actually still build the bridges. I think the personalities concerned in that team were such that it was very difficult to do. I see that then there was a problem with the composition. I think at least 2–3 people who could have helped to build the bridges within that very strong team, would have helped a lot. You'd have had a unanimous report. You'd have had a report which would have actually balanced a lot of these things out. The second opportunity lost was to not to point very directly, strongly, and critically, at the development policies of the govt. We've got the coexistence agenda there. We've got the resettlement agenda there. We've got the research agenda there. All that is good, but this thing of saying that wildlife habitats are still being opened up by the govt, they are still not considered to be sacrosanct by the govt itself which has declared those areas, and they are allowing mining, etc to come in – I think that could have been done. To say that at least declare that for the next 25 years we are not going to touch these critical wildlife habitats for big development projects. There is very little on that. You look at the recommendations. She got the PM to agree to the resettlement thing, the coexistence thing, to the Tiger Conservation Authority thing – all of that is there but she could have well have had the PM say that these critical habitats be off limits to mining, etc.

KB: Why [are these things] not mentioned?

AK: It could either be oversight, which would be a bit surprising, or it could be that the team didn't think it was going to fly so they didn't really put it. But I think a team needs to put what it thinks is right. Maybe they felt that experiences like the NBSAP show that if you say something that's too radical, then it'll just lie there and not get accepted. So I don't know the reasons, but I think it's a missed opportunity.