

Kalpavriksh's Philosophy and Working Principles¹

1. A brief historical background

Kalpavriksh (KV) started off in 1979 as a group of youngsters concerned about the state and future of their city (Delhi), and motivated enough to try to do something about it. The initial impetus was the destruction of the Delhi Ridge, though prior to that some of us had got together as individuals to protest against Rhesus macaque export to the US, the permission given to Saudi Arabian princes to hunt the bustard in Rajasthan, and the non-ratification of CITES by a European country (Belgium). Our vision was somewhat limited, mostly relating to wildlife and nature (blissful innocent days, they were, none of these complexities of communities and equity and politics and so on!). It was only subsequently, with exposure during treks through the Chipko area (1980 and 1981), investigation into the firing at Bharatpur (1982), the Narmada trek/investigation (1983), and so on, that we considerably expanded our scope to the overall issues of environment and development, the politics of natural resource management, and so on. What follows is an attempt to distill this learning, which explicitly or implicitly became "KV philosophy"...and linked to this, the principles of our functioning.

2. Philosophy on environmental issues

From those early years has evolved a broader understanding of the nature and roots of the environmental crisis we are in; and some kind of philosophy of how we view environmental issues.

Broadly, Kalpavriksh believes that the environmental crisis is a result of the following factors:

1. Increasing alienation from our natural surrounds, and a weakening of the belief that we are part of nature and that nature has its own intrinsic worth.
2. A model of 'development' that places unlimited material growth as the ultimate objective to be achieved at all costs.
3. A society that has deep social, political, and economic inequities, which enable a small powerful minority to determine the fate of natural resources.

Emanating from this broad understanding, Kalpavriksh's philosophy contains the following **key elements**:

1. The belief in nature and non-human species having their own right to existence, and of humans being part of nature;
2. The belief in equity amongst human beings, in particular to do with issues of access to natural resources, decision-making power, community-government relations, and so on;

¹ This is a constantly evolving document, reviewed periodically by Kalpavriksh through group discussions. The current note is as of end-2005.

3. The belief that human development processes and projects have to be ecologically sustainable (in that they do not destroy essential ecosystem functions, do not endanger species, do not undermine the natural resource-based livelihoods of others), and therefore that current development processes and economic systems (which treat nature and people as mere raw materials and commodities, foster unbridled accumulation of material wealth, and have no checks on the development of destructive or exploitative technologies), need drastic change;
4. The belief that people should be able to manage their own lives and natural resources to the extent possible, and that governmental/corporate domination over their lives is undesirable;
5. The belief that natural and cultural diversity are crucial principles to uphold.

3. Working principles

KV has been acutely conscious of the need to reflect the above elements of environmental philosophy in its functioning style, to the extent possible. This has meant a stress on the following:

1. **Voluntarism:** For the first half and more of its existence, KV was totally voluntary. Today, it is a mix of paid and completely voluntary members. However, what is important is that the voluntary spirit remains strong, in which even paid members are willing to do much more than would be required by a 9 to 5 job, and are willing to work despite lower than market rates. Members are eager to put in that “extra” effort, help others, and take on voluntary tasks like campaigns and collective activities.
2. **Non-hierarchical and informal structure:** We’ve never had a formal hierarchical structure, and consciously so. “Natural” hierarchies (related to greater experience or motivation, who has initiated a particular task/process, etc) do manifest themselves once in a while, and there has been a trend to increase ‘systems’ and ‘structures’ in KV’s functioning, but we continue to be rather informal and egalitarian in our functioning.
3. **Democratic decision-making:** Linked to the non-hierarchical nature is the attempt to make decision-making accessible to all members, regardless of how new or old they are in the group. Such a mode of functioning was instilled right from the early days of decision-making regarding campaigns such as the Delhi Ridge. The downside of this is of course that it takes twice as long to take a decision, but it would seem to be worth it. Recent innovations like the email groups have increased the democratic participation in decision-making, though it may be somewhat unfair to the “computer-challenged” amongst us.
4. **Minimal and equitable pay:** The matter of how much members should be paid, has probably occupied a few hundred hours of discussion time in KV since we started paying people! have maintained what must be amongst the lower range of honoraria amongst urban environmental NGOs. Certainly most paid members, could get more income from other jobs outside KV. This issue is intrinsically linked to the voluntarism spirit mentioned above, stemming from and it and in turn encouraging its sustenance. Linked to it is the issue of internal equity in honoraria; currently we have a policy that the highest paid member should not be more than double the lowest paid.

5. **Non-ostentatious working environment and facilities:** As in the case of honoraria, KV has had hours and hours of discussions on our working facilities. Several times, we consciously decided not to have an office (in Delhi), though of course this was also partly possible because some of us used our other offices for the purpose! Our first few capital ‘acquisitions’ (computers, etc) came after more than 15 years of our existence. We continue to believe in this way of functioning, though of course the imperatives of working in the changing professional environment have meant more investment in office facilities.
6. **Collective activities:** For the better part of our existence, we have stressed on the importance of collective activities, in which several members can take part and feel ownership of. Nature-related activities were one major manifestation of this. This was also more possible in the context of most activities being voluntary. More ‘project-based’ work in the last few years has challenged such a collective functioning, but the group has consciously tried to bring it back as a central mode of functioning.
7. **Small organisational scale:** To stay “small” has also been a conscious decision from the start (several other groups that started around the same time as us, are now major institutions with dozens of employees and their own buildings). This is in keeping with many of the above aspects of our working philosophy, as it seems clear that an infinitely expanding group cannot sustain a non-hierarchical structure with a stress on voluntarism; several big groups have lost their open-ness towards other groups, their humility, basic human values, and technical quality. However, staying ‘small’ does not necessarily mean that our scale of work is small...indeed several of our projects and activities are at fairly large scale, which has been possible because of the voluntary spirit, attempts at increasing efficiency, and open-ness in networking with others.
8. **Grounded in grassroots reality, acting as support to grassroots groups:** KV has always tried to relate its work to the reality at the grassroots. This is how we started off, this is how we learnt most of what we know. But we are also not a grassroots group per se, rather we tend to see ourselves more as a support group to such organisations/movements. Some of us have moved off into doing primary grassroots work, and others have expressed dissatisfaction with our focus on policy/conceptual work. There is renewed interest in taking on campaigning, which would help to retain a balance between theoretical/policy level work on the one hand and advocacy/political work on the other.
9. **Sustaining interest in an issue:** KV members have tried to take an issue they take up, to its logical conclusion. Several campaigns and tasks have been followed through for years, or at least till some other group/community was able to continue with it. But this has not always been possible, and has at times suffered because the group has taken up a new activity without concluding the ongoing one.
10. **Non-violent tactics:** KV has not taken part in, nor condones, violent methods of environmental action (violence here refers to actions that could physically harm other human beings).

4. *The group structure*

KV has consciously made a choice not to have a hierarchical structure. Natural hierarchies (related to greater experience, motivation etc) do manifest themselves, but by and large the group continues to be rather egalitarian in its functioning. Formally, the decision-making is normally done by the entire General Body through email, group discussions, or at the Annual General Meetings. For day to day decisions, project coordinators are primarily responsible for their projects and deadlines.

Over the years, certain mechanisms have evolved to help members consistently meet the overall objectives of the group and the particular objectives of projects. One such mechanism is the decision that all members report to the group on the progress of their project and other activities once a month. The group responds with constructive criticism and other support that may be required.

Besides this a core group is elected every year at the Annual General Body Meeting. This group has the responsibility to see that the administrative requirements of the group and overall group objectives are met. Also, this group is empowered to take decisions for the group in case of an emergency.

5. Challenges for the future

To meet its philosophical tenets, KV needs to do more work on the following weaknesses and challenges:

1. **Greater focus on vernacular work**, extending the work done in local languages in some areas (Lakshadweep, A&N, Uttara Kannada, some NBSAP outputs).
2. **Greater ability to sustain key campaigns:** KV has been at the forefront of some of the most “cutting-edge” issues that India has faced in the last 2-3 decades: large dams (and related to that the model of development), people-protected area conflicts, mining, community based conservation, biodiversity policy issues such as biopiracy, and so on. But on some of these, we have not been able to adequately sustain our work, partly because of lack of long-term resources, partly for other reasons. There is now an attempt to focus on a fewer number of priority areas, to which the whole group could devote its energy and time and skills, so that sustaining them is possible.
3. **More active links to key non-environmental sectors:** We need more work in building sustained relationships with a range of non-environmental groups: labour movements and unions, human rights groups, adivasi/dalit movements, water related movements, and others that are not *directly* environmental but have a bearing on environmental issues. Some links have been established through campaigns like Narmada and mining, but much more needs to be done.

KV will face increasing challenges in maintaining its philosophical stands and working principles, as it confronts more and more complex and difficult challenges in the external environment. It has much to do to resolve its internal weaknesses. Crucial to its ability to face up to these challenges, is the continued willingness to discuss basic issues, thrash out problems, be self-critical, and be frank with each other in a constructive spirit.