

THE SATURDAY INTERVIEW

'We need more stringent and responsible action'

You may miss him in a crowd but not when he begins addressing any gathering. Recognised globally as an expert on the environment and sustainable development, Dr Ashok Khosla sports a twinkle in his eye and a smile that hides a keen mind. He has demonstrated how it is possible to practice sustainable development through commercially viable technologies, particularly in the rural areas.

Dr Khosla founded Development Alternatives Group in 1982 and now chairs its Board. Headquartered in New Delhi, the DA Group was among the first civil society organisations set up to address the issues of sustainable development as a whole, combining business enterprises with conservation of natural resource base.

Currently, Dr Khosla is president of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, co-president of the Club of Rome and co-chair of the Resource Panel, which has been set up by UNEP to investigate the status and trends of natural resource use in the global economy. In India, he has served on the National Security Advisory Board, the National Environment Board and the Science Advisory Council to the Cabinet and on the boards of many official, NGO and academic bodies. He helped set up and head the first governmental agency for the environment in a developing country (under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, 1972).

With environment being much in the news today, ASHA



RAMACHANDRAN caught up with the environmentalist.

Looking at the role played by Development Alternatives and other NGOs to help local communities adapt to mitigate the impact of climate change, what do you think is the role government should play?

Obviously, the government has a job to do in setting policy, in helping research, because research is too expensive for individuals to pay for. And government has a role to set up regulations, to carry that scientific knowledge and policy making into actual action on the ground. But I think the most important thing for government

is to enable civil society, to carry these messages and take the knowledge forward. And I think the job of the government should be to strengthen...goods and services and to provide the basic support systems ~ infrastructure, communications, farmers, local industries, even housewives ~ they all need to know how they are going to adapt to change in climate.

Is the government performing this role?

There's a lot to be done. This is not to say they do nothing. Obviously, government has some programmes and schemes in these areas. But there's no coherent

package in any of these areas. Policies on climate change at the moment are rudimentary. There is very little support to research in order to find new crops, new storage patterns, new ways of delivering products and services and so on. There's very little support to NGOs. In fact, at the moment it's hostile.

What are the strategies that industry must adopt to meet climate change needs?

Industry does have a major role to play. Industry by law and by conception is generally concerned about how to make profits and mainly about its self-interest. Even CSR is now being imposed on them. It's not an expression of their social concern. Industry can respond to price signals, which show that it's in its interest to use resources, energy and water more efficiently...to make investments that would reduce its cost because it is conserving resources and resource productivity is a means of maximizing profits. But they don't often do that because it means improving technology, improving skills, improving even the choice of product mix. The main thing to do is to develop ways in which they stand to benefit from reduced costs from improved sales and profits. And that happens when both civil society and government try to show ways in which industry can actually benefit.

Like incentives, for instance?
Incentives, but I don't mean subst-

dies. Incentives in the sense that you train the consumer on what is good for the environment. Then express that by demanding more and then industry will respond to it by supplying. The other incentives are to undertake research to develop better technologies for using resources. What this boils down to is resource (productive) profitability that brings more research in technologies.

India has severe environmental issues. How does one balance between this and development needs, from the climate change perspective?

It's not very hard to do that. Because development is about improving environment. It's just that we've got a mindset in which we've set them off against each other. But, in fact, a large part would be to do with development scaling up environment because for development we need more access to nutritious food, water to energy to shelter to education, healthcare.

Where is it that we ought to make trade-offs? I can't think of very many. After all, you want to improve (develop) people's lives. So you need to develop that which reduces waste in the first place. So that's environment and development together.

There is talk about environment laws being diluted. What is your opinion in this context?

It's a very important talk. We need more stringent and responsible (action on issues of environment) whether it's conserving natural areas, protecting wildlife, to reduce industrial pollution, chemical run-offs into streams. Obviously, we have to do more, not less. But we do have a proliferation of laws and if the government wants to rationalise the laws, so we can get the outcomes of benefits without further delaying tactics, then that's good. But in rationalising laws we can't afford to lose all the benefits of

the good things the existing laws were intended to do, which is: protect people, human rights, indigenous people's lives and all the issue of assets. So, yes, there is a certain amount of talk on dilution of environment rights. I certainly can't support that. But I will say we have certain conflicting laws that complicate decision-making. We also have rules and regulations that are not always very clear. And we have a fairly large number of clearances to make which are not necessarily adding value to protecting people. And all those we can rationalise.

So you say safeguards are needed?

Absolutely. There is no way you can go blundering through life and set up factories that kill people. That isn't development. That's destruction.

Coming to cleaning up of rivers, of lot of work is needed but nothing has been done...

Or the wrong things have been done. Problem is that we have spent huge amounts of money to save rivers like the Ganga, Yamuna and others. And much of it has gone into doing things that are basically unable to yield results that are desirable. Cleaning up the river is seeing that the river is healthy both in terms of quality and quantity. And that's not something we have been able to do because we have not attacked the root causes of the pollution and threat. A large part of the problem is no one seems to understand that it's a systemic issue. So, a large part of the huge amounts of money that went into Ganga Action Plan and the other river development and improvement themes were spent in what is called ineffectually. I hope that the current effort to clean up the rivers is not a showpiece of making a few riverfront schemes. Unless this is one of cleaning up permanently, in a sustainable way, it's going to be meaningless.