



Pioneers of the Planet

Episode Six: Kartikeya Sarabhai

Catherine Karong'o - I'm Catherine Karong'o. Joining us today is Kartikeya Sarabhai, a famous environmentalist from the Sarabhai family in India. He is the founder and director of Centre for Environmental Education (CEE) in India and has received the Tree of Learning award in 1998 from the AUCN in appreciation for his contributions to the field of environmental education and communication. Welcome Mr Sarabhai. Maybe you could give us a brief background of your education and your family?

Kartikeya Sarabhai – My family was involved in the freedom movement in India, it was an industrial family but also leading in a number of social fields. My family worked very closely with Gandhi when he was in Aminabad. And then, my father was a scientist, became the founder of India's space programme and atomic energy programme in India. I had, at that time, thought that I would do science because I was interested in science and mathematics and like many others in the family, went to Cambridge University in the UK to study that. And I thought I was very clear in what I wanted to do but when I went there, I found myself talking about India and trying to understand India. In many ways when you go abroad you study your own country in a different way and that's what, in a sense, got me going. I studied in Cambridge first and then I went to MIT after that.

Catherine Karong'o – Okay you studied developmental studies, when did you get involved in environmental work and how did you get involved in it?

Kartikeya Sarabhai – Well how I got involved in development in the first place, I was in Cambridge when the London Times was running a series called 'India's disintegrating democracy'. And that was really bothersome, I realised this was not what was happening in the country but didn't even have the words to defend it. And I started reading a lot on development and what development processes

were and trying understand my own country, then in the summer holiday there was a drought in India and I spent a month in Bihar which had this drought and this was when I really saw the type of voluntary movements, which were very effective. And I decided to go to MIT and work there, and then I came back to Aminabad and was working in the development field where we were asking people what it is they would like in the year 2000. It seemed far off at that time and people said that a woman can see a cinema and go back feeling safe, even at midnight. And we want that to still be there, even in 2000. And that's when I first started to use the word 'environment', I said 'what is that environment which makes for safety of women?' It surely can't be just cultural because you've seen one city after another as they grow larger and they become informal and impersonal that you loose this character. And why do you loose that character? So I started using the word environment in an urban environmental context. But we also at that time, we were starting work on what has now become CEE which is on a barren hill just outside Aminabad and we started growing trees on it and we brought in trees from different species and different places and saw this wonderful environment just regenerate itself. So we started looking at the natural environment and then the link between the natural and the human environment. So that's how I started in the environment. It started with an interest in development and realised very soon that development takes place in the context of an environment.

Catherine Karong'o – Okay, since you joined the environmental world, what are some of the works that you've been involved in?

Kartikeya Sarabhaj – Well we first started looking at people's natural resource base and as you know in many developing countries, the pressure has led to a complete erosion of the biomass and forests and other things. So we had come to the conclusion that you have to involve people in looking after the forests and the environment, it cannot be done through government and policy alone. And so we started working with local communities and rural communities to look after forests and other things and in a few years from now we will also realise that

government needs to be involved. And then there was a policy in India that was called the Joint Forest Policy which meant that people and government could come together and look after forests really successfully. So the whole concept of involving and engaging people in developmental work came in, and we were not using the world sustainable at that time, but we did realise that development and environment have to go together. This also came about because Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at that time in 1972 in Stockholm did mention that and India was very conscious that it's development strategy needs to be based on sound environmental policies. We then went into looking at the school system, and looking at school education. Initially our work was only to do extra-curricular activities, but if I fast forward it to today we are working on advising every state government on how to 'green' their curriculum. We work in every language in India; we have 40 offices across the country. So it was a long country to come from a relatively small NGO to getting that!

Catherine Karong'o – So that's how you founded the centre for environmental education?

Kartikeya Sarabhai – Yes, the centre got founded because the Ministry of the Environment was just being formed and they saw some of our work. I was doing work in wildlife, I was working in communities, I was working in urban areas and the then Secretary of Environment said wouldn't you like to do this at a national level? And I said sure, if he partnered with us but don't convert us into a government body and let us have our independence. And that is how CEE was formed and today works in a number of areas including working closely with industry, we work with media, we work with schools and colleges in the formal system, we work with rural communities and we do several things which are called knowledge management; getting people information.

Catherine Karong'o – Okay, you're also a member of the Earth Charter International Council. What is the Earth Charter?

Kartikeya Sarabhai – The charter was an attempt at the time of Rio to have something like the human charter, some ethical framework for how to guide us in our development work. At that time the governments in fact had not adapted and therefore it became a civil society response to this. So the Earth Charter is more like a movement, it's not an organisation, it's more like a people's movement in several places people are using this to guide their own work.

Catherine Karong'o – Apart from the environment, you are also engaged in education. Why is this so? Is there a link between environment and education?

Kartikeya Sarabhai – Well, we feel that the whole issue of the way we use our planet cannot be solved through technology alone or through laws. The whole environmental issue cannot really be dealt with unless people change the ways they live on this planet. Today as you know, we are already consuming something like 1.3 planets worth of resources, which is unsustainable. If India and China and some of the other countries follow the same development path, very soon we will be consuming four of five planets which of course we cannot. So there is a major problem that the model of development that we have in front of us and towards which everyone is going is something which is a disaster. It's like running towards a cliff and then you will all fall down, so we need to change that direction. And we need to teach people how to think so that they can pick right solutions. Our campaign in India is called 'Pick Right', it's called that because how do you choose the right development solutions? Rather than follow the traditional curve, get into a mess and then try and come out. Now that is a huge challenge that can't be dealt with unless you deal with education. But we use the word education in its very wide sense so that it includes capacity building, engagement, training, awareness and the whole wider meaning of that.

Catherine Karong'o – And you've also been awarded the Worlds Human Rights Promotion Award by the Indian Institute in 2005. Tell us more about your human rights work.

Kartikeya Sarabhai – Well, we feel that human rights and environmental rights are extremely closely linked and we do need to talk about a rights based approach. I think you are finding more and more at CSD people actually are talking about it. They're talking about it for food for instance, for food security they're talking about the rights approach. There needs to be a concept that every person on this planet and every other species too should have space for its growth and its life.

Catherine Karong'o – You've studied some of the works that India is doing to promote environmental integrity and you've said that it cannot be done without education and recently your government started collecting some bits of traditional knowledge. How do you think this local knowledge can contribute to the development in environmental protection?

Kartikeya Sarabhai – I think that traditional societies lived so closely with the environment and respected it and there is just so much to be learnt, even if you spend just two days to talk to people in rural environments, in farming communities and others, then you find that there are small practices that are just so sustainable, for instance in India you will typically find that when a crop is taken out, they allow the cattle to come in and graze there and so the droppings of the cattle can turn into fertiliser for the next crop. Now these are small, small practices which people do, the way they conserve water, but they also discovered how certain plants are good for certain medicines. They discovered how biomass based traditional cures are there. Now, we're trying to protect some of that intellectual property in India and so the first way is to codify it and write it down, because it varies from community to community, from village to village. And this is what is happening, you should also realise that India has passed a law that every formal curriculum, has to have environmental education in it. And this is a Supreme Court ruling and therefore the whole connection between the environment and schooling is very high. We are trying to go to rural schools to also look at traditional knowledge and even for instance, grow plants in schools; we are promoting school nurseries now, which grow plants which people know

about. Parents and communities can also get involved with the schools. And this is something which I hope can be done in all developing countries; not just in India.

Catherine Karong'o – Do you find that in India as much as you are trying to have sustainable development, about a fifth of the population is illiterate but again there are a lot of very rich people; is this sustainable?

Kartikeya Sarabhai – No, it isn't sustainable to have that type of difference that you would find in society; poverty is not and should not be sustainable. I mean even if it is, it should not be! And that's one of the human rights issues, poverty needs to be addressed. What happens in India is that we have a large urban population and we have a large indigenous population and we have to use this intellectual capital to address the problems. The wonderful thing is what the mobile phones have done; we have over 300 million mobile phones now. The people, who are otherwise illiterate and cannot necessarily deal with the computer, now have a little mobile phone and they're suddenly into a different communicating world. Trying to get people to know about prices for instance, what are farm prices, what are vegetable prices can be done on a phone. So you can use oral traditions.

Catherine Karong'o – Okay, let's go back a little to your family. Do you find that your family is very diverse? They're dancers, you're an environmentalist. How is it when there is a family gathering?

Kartikeya Sarabhai – Well the family meets very often, they have always promoted an equality between men and women first of all; we have very strong women in the family; it is always seen that each person has their own potential and someone's potential may be to do public work and someone is a dancer, someone is a scientist, someone is a creative person, someone is a singer. So we've got a whole tradition, you look at people's tradition as you grow up and as a result there have been some outstanding members. My grandfather in the early part of last century, was the head of the Mill Owners Association and his sister

who he helped educate at the London School of Economics, became the founder of the Labour movement. And they would fight in the first strike in Aminabad at that time and dine together in the evening and respect each other. And that's when Mahatma Gandhi intervened and a formula was worked out for negotiation, which has stood us well until today. So one separates the human quality but everyone has their different opinions and different skills.

Catherine Karong'o – Alright and what would your final word be?

Kartikeya Sarabhai – My final word would be that the world can be very positive, we have a lot of young people in the world and we just need to all work together for a better planet and this should be the last generation where we show this disrespect which we have done for the last hundred years. This has to end with this generation and I think we can do it.

Catherine Karong'o – Thank you very much Mr Sarabhai for joining us.