

# People in Conservation

*Biodiversity Conservation and Livelihood Security*



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## Index

### Opening Words

#### 1. News and Events

- Maharashtra's toy train station turn green
- Hassan water tank rejuvenation
- Bridging urban-rural divide
- Direct selling, adivasi style
- 'I do' the green way

#### 2. Perspective

- The think tank and the ashram
- People as Auditors - Social audits ensure a citizen-centric mode of accountability

#### 3. In Focus : Imagining Alternative Education

- A journey of Re-imagining education- Interview with Manish Jain

#### 4. Case Study

- Uralungal: India's oldest worker cooperative

#### 5. Signs of Hope

- Small sustainability initiative changes women's lives in a big way

#### 6. Special feature: Resistance through Alternatives

- ACT one: Anti-dam, pro-people

*Special Issue on Alternatives*

## Opening Words

The statement 'There is no alternative' (TINA) often used by the erstwhile conservative British prime minister Margaret Thatcher in order to justify a political, social and economic order based on capitalist principles is often referred to by those working for radical transformation of that order to stress exactly the opposite – that not only is there an alternative to the current capitalist order (or mis-order!), but it is necessary to bring it into reality.

It is important to understand why it is necessary to do so.

One reason why we need a radical transformation is that the current order is characterized by contradictions and extremes - rivers of riches amidst of oceans of deprivation, privatization of profits and socialization of losses, globalization of communication in the midst of extreme existential loneliness, glorification of the individual at the cost of devastation of communities, manicured landscapes on the one hand and loss of natural habitats and biodiversity on the other, urban concretization amongst areas of wilderness, secure gated communities and socio-political violence, religious fundamentalism devoid of spiritual insights, blind superstitious faith thriving in the age of technological progress, etc. Poverty, unemployment, conflict spread across regions, social unrest, gender inequity, existential loneliness, spiritual alienation, and ecological destruction are some of the manifestations of the capitalist social order. This being the case, we need to ask what would bring about a radical transformation. Very briefly it would mean resolving the afore-mentioned contradictions in a manner that will not only take humanity towards a social, political and economic order that guarantees egalitarian redistribution of power and wealth, ecological sustainability, social justice and well-being, gender equity, cultural pluralism, etc. but also ensure a world in which human potential (for emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth) can flourish in tandem with protection of rights of nature, thus bringing about what has variously been called an ecological civilization, radical ecological democracy and eco-socialism.

If we are agreed on the above then the next question is how to bring it about? History teaches us that there is no clear blueprint available according to which a heaven on earth can be established. The failure of the erstwhile soviet republic has shown the dangers inherent in a utopian vision if we have a formulaic approach to it. In fact it can lead to totalitarian regimes with scant regard for human rights or the rights of nature, even if it can provide at least some of the fundamental rights like education, housing, employment and health better than

capitalism can. So we have learnt/realized that the idea of a top down approach implemented by a vanguardist political party and passively accepted by people as a universal panacea has outlived its usefulness. So who will be the agent of such social transformation? Perhaps it is time to reverse the approach. Rather than employing top-down approach, why not seek change upwards from the bottom? After all, people know best what is good for them. And this is precisely what is happening across the world. People are no longer waiting for solutions to the problems and issues that affect their lives to come from great leaders or political parties or representatives elected to the nation's parliament. They are taking destiny in their own hands and effecting positive changes at local levels. And they are doing this individually and as communities...be it in the area of health, education, natural resource management, employment generation or whatever. People are building their own alternative futures. There are many such experiments happening all over the country. Some such stories have been curated on the Vikalp Sangam website [vikalpsangam.org](http://vikalpsangam.org) This issue tries to give visibility to some of them

- Milind Wani

## 1. News and Events

### Maharashtra's toy train station turn green

The four stations of Central Railway's Matheran Hill Railway in Maharashtra's Raigad district have turned green with the installation of solar power and wind energy plants, an official said in April 2018.

Sunil Udasi, the Chief Public Relations Officer, Central Railway said in a statement that on the installation of Green Energy System, the generation capacity of each system at three stations - Jummapatti, Waterpipe, and Aman Lodge is 75-80 kWh, while at Matheran, it is 680-690 kWh per month.

All four stations are now provided with a solar power plant of capacity 500-1000 Wp (solar electricity systems are given a rating in watts peak (Wp) or kilowatts peak (KWp)) and windmill of capacity 6.1 KWp at Matheran including energy efficient LED lights and fans. The electric supply from the renewable sources will bring down the hill railway station's power bill drastically resulting in savings of Rs. 2.07 lakh per year, besides reducing its carbon footprint.

The Matheran Hill Railway is narrow-gauge heritage railway in Maharashtra.

A delight to the tourists and the route to the summer destination for Mumbaikars, the line covers a distance of 21 km, cutting a swathe through dense forest in the Western Ghats from Neral to Matheran.

**Source:** <https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/renewable/maharashtras-toy-train-stations-turn-green/63853382>

### Hassan water tank rejuvenation

Hassan district of Karnataka was listed among the 16 permanent drought-prone districts of the state by the Central drought study committee. A once green district that borders on the Western Ghats was going dry. So some concerned residents of Hassan began making enquiries. Reading about the Paani Foundation in Maharashtra a group of like-minded people formed Hasiru Bhoomi Prathishtana with 19 trustees, led by RP Venkatesh Murthy, editor, Janatha Madhyama- a local daily.

This led to the rejuvenation of at least 28 Kalyanis (traditional water tanks) and more than four tanks in 2017.

**Source:** <https://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/news/state/karnataka-tradition-to-the-rescue/articleshow/64055266.cms>

### Bridging urban-rural divide



**AFP PHOTO/ Manpreet**

An unfortunate aspect of our development experience has been the growing rural-urban divide. Even though many city dwellers continue to have some links with their rural homes, there is a growing feeling of urban elites getting more alienated and aloof from urgent issues concerning the majority of rural people.

While farmers' movements and government response to them will continue to make headlines, there is need also for smaller, quieter but sustained efforts to bridge the urban-rural divide in ways which contribute to mutual understanding and a caring attitude.

Such an effort has been initiated recently in Odisha. This is a small effort just now but in terms of its aims and possible replication, it has great potential.

This effort has been initiated by a voluntary organization, Living Farms, which works at two levels – among tribal farmers of Rayagada district and urban consumers in Bhubaneswar.

The project coordinator Dr. Jagatbandhu Mahapatra says, "It is important to tell city people about the real problems and issues faced by farmers. It is important to try to bring them together on the basis of genuine understanding and empathy. This is best done in the context of issues of common and mutual interest."

**Source:** <https://www.thestatesman.com/opinion/bridging-urban-rural-divide-1502615312.html>

## Direct selling, adivasi style



**Locavore's heaven: The Sunday organic market sets shop on the grounds of the 60-year-old Christian Hospital in Bissamcuttack, in Rayagada. Photo: Chitragada Choudhury**

At an organic market in Odisha, middle-class consumers get to interact with the producers of their food and appreciate traditional knowledge systems.

In policy and public imagination, Odisha, particularly its southern districts like Rayagada and neighboring Kalahandi, connote bad news — terms like “poor” and “backward” dominate discussions. But this undulating region has breathtaking ecological and cultural diversity, and the weekly Bissamcuttack market is an ongoing experiment to nurture the area’s ecologically-attuned agricultural traditions. The market also wants to forge a close connection between consumers and the farmers who practice such traditions — thus consciously departing from the dominant model of chemical inputs-driven, mechanized, industrial agriculture that leaves farmers vulnerable to global market shocks. The produce ranges from freshly harvested vegetables to pulses, legumes, greens and herbs, as well as food items central to adivasi agriculture and diets, such as nutritious millets and tubers. All of these are mostly from small farms (under five acres), which avoid synthetic inputs and incorporate traditional knowledge of diverse cropping. Significantly, rates for the produce had been pre-decided through consultations between buyers and sellers to ensure the farmers recovered their cost of production, and made a profit (a long-standing recommendation of the National Commission of Farmers that largely remains unimplemented elsewhere).

Debjeet Sarangi of the Odisha-based Living Farms organization is the brain behind the Bissamcuttack farmers’ market. “Our thought was to initiate a consumer-producer network that generated a sense of connect with agriculture, and the issues of social and environmental justice in food,” he said. “The market thus nurtures the ‘nature-agriculture-culture-community’ continuum, and promotes direct, fair and short distribution chains.” Mahendra Nauri, a young farmer-seller, said the local

families entirely avoided buying hybrid seeds, pesticides, or fertilizers like urea and potash: “We preserve and circulate our own seeds in our farmer networks. On my family’s two-acre farm, we have a compost pit near the mango tree in which we create farmyard manure to replenish soil nutrients. To address pests, we make a concoction of neem leaves, bitter gourd, custard apple and lime combined with cow urine.” The methods they used, Nauri said, married knowledge handed down generations with new skills learnt at organic farming workshops.

Many of the buyers are drawn to the market because of concerns about the taste of food, their health and the wellbeing of the farmers. Shikha, who works on community health issues, said that buying produce at the market and, more importantly, interacting with the farmers each Sunday had altered her perspective on food. “It has made me more alert to what we consume, and changed my eating completely in terms of incorporating millets and produce grown without chemical pesticides, even if this means spending slightly more on occasion.” She added, “The market has made us respect these farmers for what they do.”

**Authored by:** Chitragada Choudhary

**Source:** <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/know/direct-selling-adivasi-style/article22116068.ece1>

## ‘I do’ the green way

Eco-sensitive weddings, supported by local bodies, are no more an anomaly in Bengaluru.

When a wedding came up in the family, Meenakshi Bharat (a gynecologist) explored ways of making it ecologically sustainable. Having taken part in a green wedding conducted by a sustainability pioneer, years ago, Bharat went on to become a consultant to a couple of other such weddings. For her daughter’s wedding, also a green one, held in 2014, Bharat curated ‘what-to-do’ and ‘how-to-do’ guides for herself. So when it came down to her son’s wedding a few months ago, she knew the cues to totally green nuptials.

The invitations were dispatched through email. Updates were subsequently sent out to the guests, giving them heads-up about the arrangements, along with instructions they had to follow to keep up the green theme. The venue was a garden where lush trees provided a natural canopy as well as cool breeze. The menu was fashioned with items that were natural and healthy and could be served in steel ware and glass crockery. No paper rolls or bottled

water either. Cloth napkins with the wedding logo, embossed by the autistic children of ASHA (Academy for Severe Handicaps and Autism), where Bharat's daughter works, were used instead of disposable tissue papers. The local Chittara art and traditional rangoli drawn on khora cloth made up the stage backdrop and placements. Decorative hangings were made from painted coconut shells, while the decor was done with flowers strung without Styrofoam or zari. In fact, Bharat went out on a limb to collect art created from waste.

Instruction boards guided guests to the corner for used plates, bowls and spoons, which were soaked and washed with bio-enzymes. No boxed presents were received and the return gift was a glass bottle with organic turmeric and a jasmine sapling. Bharat says the pleasure was in the diligent planning and attention to details. "I shredded and composted at home the food and wet waste generated at the event. There was hardly a sack full of dry waste. That satisfaction tops everything else."

Green events are gaining currency among Bengaluru's small, yet growing, ecologically sensible section of the population. Beginning with ideation, and extending to planning and execution, the green initiatives are sustainable, say its advocates. Expenses at a green wedding, they vouch, often work out much cheaper. And



Little big steps the venue for an ecologically sustainable wedding in Bengaluru was a garden where trees provided natural canopy as well as cool breeze, and crafted coconut shells added to the decor - Meenakshi Bharat

green philanthropists such as Bharat are willing to help out with re-usables like plates, baskets and napkins, and their wisdom. The feel-good experience of such events has already inspired a strong, cultish following. Many organizations across Bengaluru have started providing plates, cutlery and crockery for weddings and other events for a refundable deposit.

Green advocates admit some people have reservations over such initiatives. There are conflicting perceptions of hygiene. People are not happy yet to move away from bottled water. "One look at a landfill will change perceptions radically," counters Bharat.

Will more stringent rules work in order to achieve a complete turnaround in approach and involve the majority?

**Authored by:** Vijayalakshmi Sridhar who is an independent writer in Bengaluru

**Source:** <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/know/i-do-the-green-way/article23612505.ece>



## 2. Perspectives

### The think tank and the ashram



Anniversaries often become moments of rhetoric and hypocrisy rather than a space for recollection, a crossroads about future strategies and debates. One needs to rethink them. The more literally charismatic the person, the greater is the attempt to embalm him in mothballs. The Gandhian idea suffers most from it as the regime plays officially Gandhian, even moving into the Khadi and Village Industries Commission calendar. In April 2018, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the centenary year celebrations of the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmadabad. Between the official rhetoric of Gandhi and the disturbing silence of the civil society lies a huge void that one needs

to talk about, discuss openly, if Gandhi needs to come alive as he did in Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

### **The ashram and Gandhi**

The relevance of Gandhi is not in doubt. What is in question is the way we articulate that relevance. The ashram as an idea, as a way of life, becomes central to this exercise. The ashram was not just the home of prayer; it was the crystal seed of ethical inventions from weaving to a dream to liberate scavenging. Gandhi's experiments on the body had implications for the body politic which ranged from work, walking, consumption to compassion, where the ethical and the political wove together to create a theory of resistance as invention and of democracy as caring. At a recent meeting, the physicist and eco-centric technologist Ashok Khosla put it matter-of-factly. He said Gandhi was no Luddite, but a framework for the future. It is the regime, babbling about climate change and corporate social responsibility that needs to catch up, linking lifestyle and livelihood. Gandhi was a huge catalogue of inventions where prayer, walking, weaving, writing, bhajan all had to be reworked so that the neighborhood and the cosmos, swadeshi and swaraj, were in consonance. Central to it all was the ashram as a mode of thought and as a way of life. The futuristic implications of the ashram have not been grasped. Ask yourself, what is the ashram as an act of trusteeship?

The ashram was not a place to pickle Gandhi into potted jars of consumability. It was a centre for ethical invention, where spirituality met everyday life to enhance democratic creativity. Think of a few possibilities where civil society rewrites Hind Swaraj to answer the challenge of climate change. A Gandhian trustee would understand that responsibility needs polysemy that sustainability is a provincial idea till it combines with plurality, justice and peace. For this, one has to go beyond odd ideas of Make in India and the vision of a national security state.

### **The new-age think tank**

At a policy level, what is challenging the ashram, vying for cognitive space, is the think tank. There is something brutal about the idea, of knowledge in a Darwinian world, where fang and claw marginalize violence. A think tank technocratises knowledge into a domain of strategy and expertise. An ashram opens up a question to issues of ethics and cosmology. There is a Promethean hubris about the think tank, a conviction that knowledge is subject to problem-solving. An ashram understands the modesty and the limits of knowledge. A think tank invites you to a machismo of power, speaking strategy to power. With a decline of the universities and the debates on knowledge, the think tank has acquired a touch of machismo, hypothecating ethics to the margins.

To policy, ashram offers prayer, an understanding of the limits and complexity of knowledge. When one watches think tanks from Observer Research Foundation, Carnegie, Vivekananda, one senses an obsession with security has dispensed with Satyagraha. Non-violence is for the laymen and the illiterate. Bad ethics hide behind patriotism and expertise. Each promotes a myth — the first of the nation state, the second of the value neutrality of knowledge. One cannot think of a single think tank which has a clear-cut idea for peace. By specializing in information and expertise, the think tank has lost out on the ethics of epistemology of knowledge. Even war is seen as an act of plumbing, of balancing interests.

When one looks at a think tank and compares it to the great social movements of our time, one sees the difference between the new imaginaries of peace, democracy and the conventional ideas of policy. I remember the social scientist Rajni Kothari laughing at the idea of think tanks. He said that ours is the hospitality of democratic theory; a think tank sugar-coats knowledge in secrecy. A think tank commoditises knowledge. He told me if the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies was a think tank, it would not have challenged the Emergency. Only the combined wisdom of the chowkidar, the gardener, the senior fellows, the visitors allowed for the courage of that solidarity. For Kothari, a think tank is too seduced by power to be truly ethically autonomous. Sadly, as political scientists like him disappeared, the lack of a democratic imagination got solidified into the current fetishism about think tanks. The Gandhian ashram has to challenge the alleged efficacy of think tanks.

### **Revitalizing the ashram**

The Gandhian ashram, without playing partisan politics, can be the centre of the dissenting imagination. It can emphasize that dissent as an act of caring and conscience is always plural. The marginal, the minority, the displaced, the defeated, the informal, the alternative imagination, the subaltern in every sense represent a festival of knowledges rarely represented in constitutional law or a democratic forum. The ashram becomes trustee of the silences, the margins realizing that the margin in India is huge, a continent of suffering and survival in its own right. It realizes that trusteeship — unlike a bound membership — is not a comfortable chair to speculate on retirement. It is a perpetual summons to conscience and whistle-blowing. Third, it links ideas to lifestyle and livelihood so that one lives for ideas, not off them. Fourth, trusteeship cannot put that memory in mothballs but realize that memory, like language, is a perpetual source of invention. To soak Gandhi in the formaldehyde of nostalgia will not do. A Gandhi lives so long as he is reinvented by every citizen. If trustees even become a think tank, then the Gandhian idea becomes a form of

secondariness ready to be museumized. Trusteeship in that sense is the ethics of memory, prayer, invention and goes beyond any official committee. Every citizen becomes a trustee and the ashram a commons for the new experiments in ethics from Irom Sharmila, the women of Kashmir to the battle of the Narmada dam to the new controversies in agriculture, where experts look on agriculture as a 'twilight industry'.

In fact, for me and many others of my generation, one of the greatest ashrams was a science laboratory, the photosynthesis research centre (Shri A.M.M. Murugappa Chettiar Research Centre) in Chennai under the late C.V. Seshadri dreaming dreams of alternative energy, of a poor man's science which was not poverty-stricken in terms of ideas. The slum around the laboratory became a compost heap for ideas of fishing, wind tunnels, ventilation, waste, algae. It was probably the only science lab where the worker, the cleaner and scientist shared a patent, where work, not only science, had a dignity. Seshadri dreamt of an India where Gandhian truths collaborated with scientific truths, where knowledge and lifestyle followed collaborative strategies.

Seshadri and Kothari were intellectuals who saw the public more as a commons for ideas, not a space to be hypothecated to experts. Seshadri created an ascetic science, not dismal in its morality, but playful in its possibilities. One wishes ashrams today would reinvent that confidence.

Rethinking the ashram as a part of the future is one of the great Gandhian challenges, as civil society fights to link swadeshi and swaraj which the current regime — playing to a second-rate nationalism — has disrupted. Reinventing an ethics for the 21st century is a task for the ashram, where spirituality does not lose its sense of the sacred, or ethics its quest for a new sense of science. It is a search for new paradigms and exemplars and Sabarmati Ashram is a true heritage site because it both made history and is futuristic. On its 100th anniversary it is time to retune it, so the great rituals of freedom, faith and inventiveness can begin again.

**Authored by:** Shiv Visvanathan who is Professor, Jindal Global Law School and Director, Centre of Study of Knowledge System, O.P. Jindal Global University.

**Source:** <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-think-tank-and-the-ashram/article19253231.ece>

## **People as Auditors -Social audits ensure a citizen-centric mode of accountability**

The breakdown of institutions has underlined the fact that democracy — and especially public funds — need

eternal public vigilance. But in India, the elites close ranks to neutralize voices of dissent and alarm, thus preventing public vigilance. Democratic governance needs the citizen to be legally empowered to ask questions, file complaints, and be a part of the corrective process. Social audits, as they have begun to evolve in India, can potentially become a powerful democratic method by which transparency can be combined with an institutionalized form of accountability to the people.

In the mid-1990s, the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) experimented with, and began to conceptualize, village-based Jan Sunwais (public hearings) on development expenditure. These helped establish the Right to Information (RTI) as a potent, usable people's issue and, in parallel, the institutionalized form of social audits.

### **Information is empowering**

In a Jan Sunwai campaign, organised in five different development blocks of central Rajasthan, people learnt by doing. They realized that information is at the core of their empowerment. The process of verification, inquiry and auditing of records was demystified. Public readings of informally accessed development records had dramatic outcomes. As the names were read out from government labor lists, the responses were immediate and galvanized the people. Information about payments made to dead people and non-workers propelled residents to testify in the Jan Sunwai. These included serving government and armed forces personnel and names randomly copied in serial order from electoral lists. Even animals absurdly enough had found their way into the lists of workers. Unfinished buildings without doors, windows or a roof had been shown as audited and 'complete'. Fake development works had been 'completed' and paid for on paper. This enraged local residents. Ghost names and ghost works were exposed.

The people made four sharply focused demands and circulated them in a pamphlet: full and open access to records of development expenditure; the presence and accountability of officials who are responsible to answer people's questions; the immediate redress of grievances, including the return of defalcated money to its intended purpose; and mandatory 'social audits'.

Amitabh Mukhopadhyaya, then an officer of the IA&AS, who visited, watched and contributed to the architectural growth of the process till he passed away a year ago, remarked that this was "audit returning to its roots": the word audit comes from the Latin word *audire*, which means "to hear". The Jan Sunwai facilitated the reading of information and recorded the people's response. The effective institutionalization of this platform could be a fundamental breakthrough in the attempt to give people and communities real monitoring powers. One of the

defining slogans of the RTI movement that emerged from these Jan Sunwais and people's agitations — "hamaara paisa, hamaara hisab" (our money, our accounts) — succinctly encapsulated the concept of a social audit.

The RTI Act brought into effect the first prerequisite for social audits — giving citizens access to government records. The last 13 years of its use have demonstrated its salutary effect, but also made it obvious that information itself is not enough. Contemporary discourse on the RTI reflects frustration when ordinary people are armed with information but are unable to obtain any redress. The social audit places accountability in the centre of its frame, and transfers the power of scrutiny and validation to the people: a citizen-centric mode of accountability.

### **The power of social audits**

The social audit is conceptually simple. Information is to be proactively shared amongst people so that they can "performance audit" a service or programme, from planning, to implementation and evaluation. This is, however, easier said than done. An independent facilitation structure needs to be set up, fleshed out, legally empowered and mandated to ensure that social audits are conducted. The relationship between the powerful and the powerless has to shift from patronage to rights and from inequality to equality, making the right to question sacrosanct. Specific methods of sharing information, recording comments and acting on findings have been worked out. They now need to be acted upon.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was the first law to mandate social audit as a statutory requirement. However, even within the MGNREGA, social audits made painfully slow progress. They faced their most trenchant opposition in Rajasthan, where the concept was born. Elected representatives and officials reacted with intimidation, violence and pressure on the political leadership to stall and neutralize the process. The notable exception was undivided Andhra Pradesh which institutionalized social audits and drew significant positive outcomes. There have been innovative efforts in States like Sikkim, Tamil Nadu and Jharkhand. Nationally, institutionalized social audits have begun to make real progress only recently, with the interest and support of the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), and the orders of the Supreme Court. In what was a social audit breakthrough in 2017, Meghalaya became the first State to pass and roll out a social audit law to cover all departments.

The Office of the CAG developed social audit rules for the MGNREGA in 2011, conducted a performance audit in 2015, and finally a year later formulated social audit standards in consultation with the Ministry of Rural Development — the first time in the world. If these are

followed, it can be ensured that the social audit process is viable, credible and true to first principles of social accountability.

The Supreme Court has recently passed a series of orders to give social audits the robust infrastructural framework they need. Citing the statutory requirements in the MGNREGA and the National Food Security Act, the court has ordered that the CAG-formulated Social Audit Standards be applied to set up truly independent state-supported State Social Audit units. The current dispensation makes a cursory mention of social audits in its manifesto. But there has been no delivery on legal accountability frameworks such as the Lokpal Bill and the Whistle Blowers Protection Bill. The system of social audits needs synergetic endorsement and a push by multiple authorities to establish an institutionalized framework which cannot be undermined by any vested interests. It is now an opportune time for citizens groups to campaign to strengthen social audits, and make real progress in holding the political executive and implementing agencies to account.

**Authored by:** Nikhil Dey, Aruna Roy

**Source:** <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/people-as-auditors/article23721429.eces>.



## **3. In Focus : Imagining Alternative Education**

### **A journey of re-imagining education: Interview with Manish Jain**

**From Harvard to Wall Street to UNESCO to becoming a social innovator how has been your journey till here?**

As a student in school, I remember being bounced back and forth between honors classes and remedial classes due to my rebellious questioning nature and boring classes/uninspired teachers. I started to notice that the 'dumb' children were not really dumb and comprised of various gifts which the school system was not able to see or appreciate. I noticed that many of those being labeled as 'dumb' or 'slow learners' were either from minority or low-income backgrounds. Once you label children into a category, it was very difficult to get out of it. This seemed very unfair from a social justice perspective. Gradually, I realized that using IQ tests and labeling millions of innocent children as 'failures' is one of the greatest crimes against humanity.



My parents always pushed me to pay attention towards studies rather than 'extra-curricular' activities. I always resisted because I felt I was learning more through these 'extra' activities (such as starting my own businesses, community service, working on a newspaper, playing sports, etc.) which encouraged me to interact in meaningful ways with the real world. It is ridiculous that schools only recognize the learning that happens as a result of classroom teaching and negates the learning that happens in everyday life. I also started to understand how the education system was based on fear, driven by rewards and punishments. There was virtually no time or space to explore oneself. As a kid, I felt that one day I should change the education system.

After working with Wall Street, I began to see that most of the horrible crimes against people and the planet were being committed by the so-called brilliant 'Ivy League educated' people, not by the 'uneducated' people. I wondered why the 'educated' people behaved this way. I started to understand what role the modern education plays in disconnecting us from our inner conscience, from our hands, from our hearts and from nature. It makes us slaves in the global economy. I felt that the purpose of my life should not just be to help rich people get richer.

After visiting and working in many villages in Africa and India, I noticed that schooling was a primary vehicle for spreading the 'West is best' monoculture. Today's 'educated' students are ashamed of their traditions, communities, local languages, working with their hands and their elders. This has disrupted our notions of community, and has left many people feeling alone, inferior and depressed. My own father was a victim of this. And so was I. Today, it has become very clear to me that the strong interest in 'educating the tribals' is very much linked to an agenda of displacing tribal communities from their land (which are full of valuable natural resources). It is also about converting rural communities into urban-like consumers.

Along with this, I also started understanding the nexus of propaganda and control between the mega corporations, the government, the military and the World Bank, UN and mega NGOs and factory schooling i.e. how the elite ruling class is set-up and maintained through factory schooling, how education is so deeply tied to social exploitation and ecological destruction, and how the entire game is unfairly rigged. I could see that we were on the Titanic. What was really needed was a larger process of rethinking development and changing the fundamental rules of the game. Gandhiji's book *Hind Swaraj* became very useful in helping me to make sense of my experiences and offer a way forward.

After working with many international development agencies, governments, schools and NGOs, I gave up

on trying to improve the schools. I felt the most useful thing I could do with my life is to expose the lie of this fake education system. In other words, to help students break free from the suffocating logic of factory-schooling. My village grandmother helped me to see that lots of illiterate and uneducated people have lots of important knowledge and wisdom which is needed to solve many challenges that we face on the planet. We need to reclaim these people from the education dumpsites. That's how my wife and I came to this vision of 'Shikshantar Andolan'.

**You have performed different roles across different sectors. When did you realize that Alternative Education is your actual calling?**

After my experiences with the UN, Harvard and Wall Street, I learned that factory schooling is promoted to build new global markets and to destroy local economies and local cultures.

The first major unlearning milestone for me was to start questioning whether the so-called experts really had all the answers to the world's problems. The second unlearning milestone was to question whether the poor illiterate villagers and tribals were really as poor, powerless or stupid as we were taught they were. The third milestone I had to overcome was the belief that the system could be reformed or fixed with more money or technology.

I think we need to shift our consciousness and imagination to get out of the global mess that we are in on the planet. I used to think that modern education was part of the solution but then I realized that it is a big part of the problem. So my wife and I decided to create a resource center to support us in creating a village of creative people to raise our children. The two famous ancient stories *Eklavya* and *Nachiketa*, which capture the spirit of self-design learning and deschooling ourselves, were a strong inspiration for us as was my village grandmother.

We wanted to create a space where people who were aware of deep critiques of factory-schooling could come together and engage in creative ways to dismantle the educational monopoly and to co-create diverse learning spaces, processes and knowledge systems. We wanted to promote the idea that it was possible for people to learn on their own without the force and structure of dominant institutions. We wanted to create a space where we could draw from traditional knowledges and the spirit of the gift culture to change our lives. We wanted to create an intergenerational space which would support our children's learning (since we decided not to send them to school) and our own unlearning and up-learning. I particularly wanted to have a working life which was not a boring routine, one which every day gave birth to something inspiring.



### How do you anticipate the future of education in India?

There are three very important trends to look at. I see a future where modern education is creating more and more unemployment among youth. The promise of getting a good job is fading fast. Also there is a huge amount of dissatisfaction in those people who do get a job—many people actually hate their jobs or find the work they are doing quite meaningless. So degrees are losing their value. This is going to hopefully lead to more and younger people venturing out of schools and colleges to explore themselves, to develop their different skills and real world interests, and to work on their own startups.

The second significant trend is the new digital technologies that are becoming more and more accessible to youth. This is a double-edged sword. Of course, there are lots of exciting online learning opportunities such as MOOCs, Ted talks, DIY videos, etc. The third trend is a growth of many new different eco-careers which are not dependent on formal schooling or degrees. I call these Alivelhoods. We have spent the past 100 years on industries that have destroyed eco-systems; I think that in the next 100 years we have to create enterprises which regenerate the planet. Unlearning is the first thing we need to focus on in education, which is, decolonizing and deconditioning our minds. I believe that a focus on unlearning will create new spaces for rethinking everything we have been taught and for moving beyond our fear and scarcity-driven mindsets.

I foresee that many new models of education based on self- designed learning, like Swaraj University, will emerge in the coming years. With crisis, there are lots of opportunities. We recently initiated the Indian Multiversities Alliance which features 10 peoples' universities from around the country. More are soon to come.

**Note:** This is an excerpted interview by Sheena Sachdeva.

**Source:** <https://medium.com/swapathgami-walkout-walkon-network/a-journey-of-re-imagining-education-interview-with-manish-jain-efc8d4477b46>



## 4. Case Study

### Uralungal: India's oldest worker cooperative



Photo credit: ULCCS

In Kerala, India, a remarkable worker cooperative has defied the predictions of mainstream economists for over 90 years. Uralungal Labor Contract Cooperative Society (ULCCS), a 2000 member-strong worker-owned construction cooperative, builds large infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, and building complexes. Named after the Uralungal hamlet in northern Kerala's Malabar region, the Uralungal Cooperative has pioneered local-level alternative production, epitomizing qualities of the solidarity economy such as democracy, equity, solidarity, reciprocity, and integrative networks. These principles are encoded in the fabric of the cooperative through its members' ethos, as well as through cooperative bylaws which describe the cooperative's primary objective as serving members – that is, the workers of the cooperative – by ensuring secure, rewarding, and well-remunerated work. To do this it has pioneered democratic workplace organization and egalitarian redistribution, even in the context of a highly competitive sector dominated by large, profit-seeking (and often corrupt) contractors.

ULCCS's commitment to democratic and egalitarian principles harks back to its founding years in the early twentieth century. In the 1930s and 1940s, Uralungal was at the vortex of political turbulence, when powerful peasant and workers' movements sprang up in Malabar, the nationalist movement took a radical turn, and the Communist Party emerged as a hegemonic force in the area. In the cooperative's formative years, this radicalization of Malabar helped shape the ethos of an alternative economy based on democratic decision making, surplus subordinated to social goals, ecological sustainability, and collective production. Over the years, the cooperative has used its democratic organization, collective decision making, and alternative ethos of people before profits to creatively overcome each new challenge.

Mainstream economists often predict that even if worker cooperatives emerge, survive and prosper, they will soon degenerate into a typical capitalist firm, losing any lofty principles of worker control and worker ownership. Against these arguments, the actual performance of worker cooperatives such as ULCCS stands out as beacons for inspiration and as experiences offering valuable lessons for future practice.

At the center of ULCCS's success is its commitment to participatory and direct democracy within the cooperative.

### **Decision Making and Worker Democracy**

How do cooperatives ensure strict coordination and efficient production without the typical capitalist techniques of discipline and incentives? How do they ensure that worker ownership does not undermine the powers of supervisors or lead to workers shirking their responsibilities? More specifically, how did ULCCS succeed in creating a judicious blend of hierarchy and participation? To answer these questions, we must look at ULCCS's experiences in developing a labor process that is both efficient and participatory.

In ULCCS, workers elect the board of directors at an annual general meeting, and discuss a detailed report on the cooperative's past year. This general meeting is not a formality, and the re-election of the board of directors is not a foregone conclusion. Once the board of directors is elected, however, they are granted autonomy to procure contracts, choose technology, allocate workers to different worksites, and other routine decisions. Thus, the directors are the managers of the cooperative, which means that management is elected by the workers – in sharp contrast to capitalist corporations, where managers are appointed by an unelected leadership.

The construction sites are led by site leaders chosen from among the workers, in a process through which only workers with proven managerial ability and who enjoy widespread respect and trust are selected. Workers and site leaders continually discuss the division of labor and procedures at worksites – for example, over a collective lunch (prepared by the cooperative). While there is a great deal of inclusive deliberation, once a decision is made, everyone must abide by it. Disobeying site leaders' instructions, dereliction of duty, financial irregularities or deliberate lapses in performance can lead to disciplinary action – although such action is rarely needed.

Democratic processes are maintained through regular communication within the cooperative. Site leaders attend daily meetings with the board of directors. All site leaders, board members, and technical staff attend

weekly meetings, and all worker members participate in monthly meetings where new developments are reported, and where members can raise criticisms. Full financial statements are discussed at annual general meetings. While so many meetings involve time and energy, it also produces a sense of collective ownership, solidarity, and common mission, enhancing productivity.

### **Participation and Market Competitiveness**

The major challenge for ULCCS in competing with private contractors is that the cooperative cannot cut costs by curtailing workers' benefits or cheating on materials or specifications. The cooperative has always considered adherence to contract specifications a sacrosanct principle, which has contributed to its impressive reputation. Since India's public works projects are notorious for corruption and manipulation, these limits create a very serious handicap.

The cooperative's competitive edge comes from high labor productivity, stemming from both the effective use of technology and workers' diligence and skill – a vital asset in the labor-intensive construction process. For example, the quality and cost of an ordinary macadam road depend on the thickness of different layers, the effectiveness of red earth binding, the evenness in the mixing of the tar, and its timely application on the metal layer. Each step requires skill, diligence, and commitment from workers. In construction, concreting similarly requires close cooperation among many workers. Moreover, workers motivated to maintain a schedule and avoid unnecessary waste are critical to the cooperative's successful completion of projects on time. Thus, the skill and commitment of workers – not simply supervisors or managers – are the cooperatives' major assets. ULCCS has prioritized active participation in decision making, while maintaining generous remuneration packages and positive working conditions.

Mechanization has transformed worksites, and many of the jobs involved in construction have become unnecessary or deskilled. Further, the shift in pace linked to mechanization could alter workers' sense of involvement and bonds of solidarity. Aware of these potential dangers, the cooperative has responded by deepening democracy in three ways, with a deeper commitment to transparent, open deliberation; reprioritizing workers' feedback; and improving its skills development programs.

Another lurking danger is the erosion of commitment among contemporary workers. Until recently, most members were relatives of the pioneering generation, but today many new workers lack kinship or local ties. Many participants worry about the quality of deliberations

at the annual general meetings, and the willingness of workers to do extra work has weakened. There is no easy solution to this trend other than continued education about the cooperative's history, its traditions of commitment and sacrifice, and the principles that have made the ULCCS what it is today. Thus, the survival of ULCCS as a genuine cooperative is political. It must generate values of cooperation in a society dominated by market values.

**Authored by:** Michelle Williams

**Website:** <http://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/uralungal-indias-oldest-worker-cooperative/>



## 5. Signs of Hope

### Small sustainability initiative changes women's lives in a big way

With the help of NGOs, women in five small villages in Uttarakhand, India have transformed their lives using water harvesting, kitchen gardens and organic farming.

"It used to rain gently over many days, not continuously. That used to be good for our fields and to replenish water springs downhill, but now that has changed," says Kidi Devi, who lives in the village of Moan in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand. The village is tough to access due to difficult mountainous terrain. "Over the years, the rain has become erratic and untimely. It destroys our fields and we face a big problem with water availability."

adds Anita Bahuguna, who lives in the nearby mountain village of Ranichauri, around six kilometers uphill from Chambaghat Falls in Tehri Garhwal district, "It snows much less in winters than it used to and our water springs are drying gradually,".

But in 2011, a positive turn came to their lives when the Women Action for Development (WAFD) NGO started a project in five different villages near Chamba. The aim of the project was to train women as "climate leaders" so that mountain communities could adapt better to the effects of climate change and use scarce natural resources more efficiently. Soon, rooftop water harvesting structures were setup in some houses to collect and save the most precious natural resource – water.

For women like Kidi and Anita, who rely directly on natural resources in day-to-day life, even a slight change



**A roof water harvesting tank [image by: WAFD]**

in rainfall patterns can spell doom for their fields and increase their labor when it comes to the collection of water and other natural resources. The rain also exacerbates the danger in navigating the treacherous mountain terrain on which these women (and often young children) have to carry heavy buckets and pots full of water uphill and downhill.

"We are very happy with the initiative. It has brought a huge difference to our lives. Earlier, children didn't get any time to study as they would be required to go and fetch water right after they returned from school. But ever since we have started harvesting water, children can go to their tuitions instead," says Bahuguna.

Significant evidence now shows that climate change impacts women more than men, primarily because of the social roles they inhabit. That is why WAFD has collaborated with INSEDA (Integrated Sustainable Energy and Ecological Development Association) to help women take a lead in sustainable development in the region. Their partnership is focusing on making a difference in women's lives under the eco-village development programme, a volunteer based initiative.



**Anita with her compost bin [image by: WAFD]**

Rainwater harvesting tanks are made from baskets of woven bamboo strips that are reinforced by cement and concrete to lend strength and leakage proofing. With a capacity of 3,000 liters each, they collect water from the rooftop of houses and store it in tanks that can be used in the dry season. "WAFD helps us financially while we provide labor and contribute 25 katta of sand and 6 katta of cement (one katta = 25 kg) for each tank," adds Devi as she leads the way uphill to Guriyali village, which suffers the most from water scarcity in the region. For this reason most water tanks (22 out of a total of 46) have been installed in this village. Zareen Myles of WAFD told the thirdpole.net: "Guriyali has no water source and the women have to walk three kilometers to fetch water daily. But with the water harvesting structures, many now just make one or two trips a week."

The natural water resource that the village once had has dried up in Guriyali village over a period of time and now villagers have no option but to rely totally on rainfall, which is becoming increasingly irregular. Due to the high altitude, it took a long time to build a water pipeline to the village. When the water comes, there is only a trickle and villagers jostle for access to the one tap in the village of more than 60 households.

Seeing the success of water conservation, there is now a big demand to create more structures in the village, especially by women who have to make up to 10 trips downhill on a daily basis to fetch water from the closest spring. Pushpa, a farmer in Guriyali, is waiting for a water tank to be set up in her house to ease her burden. She has to climb down steep steps cut into the mountain to reach her house and go further down to her fields.

"There is a big problem with water and now that we also have cattle, there are children whose only job is to fetch water throughout the day as I have to tend to the fields. We have to make four trips [three kilometers each] in the morning and four in the evening. We really hope a water tank is constructed soon so that we can breathe a sigh of relief," says Pushpa while harvesting her pea crop.



Pushpa harvesting her pea crop [image by: Juhi Choudhary]

With the introduction of water harvesting and training in organic farming by WAFD, women are now also able to turn their kitchen gardens and fields into high yielding spaces, adding to climate resilience and ensuring their food security. Women have been trained to weave compost baskets out of bamboo reeds and almost all the people of the five villages – Ranichauri, Savli, Moan, Guriyali and Jagdhar – have replaced pesticides and chemical fertilizers based farming with organic farming. This has increased the yield, ensuring economic stability and reducing effort.

"We already had kitchen gardens but we didn't have the knowledge; we used to throw seeds randomly which hardly yielded anything. But now we have been trained to make separate beds for plants so even if a crop fails, we don't go hungry and can share our extra produce with villagers in need. We can also sell the surplus," says Krishna from Savli village. "We have become self-sufficient and are able to grow almost everything we need, including condiments. We just need to buy sugar, oil, tea leaves and cumin."

The transition to organic farming has allowed people to save the INR 400 (USD 6.20) every season of what they used to spend on chemicals and pesticides. The quality of soil has also improved. Thanks to different crops with improved yield and taste, they are able to make INR 4,500-8,000 (USD 70-124) from their kitchen gardens each year. There are also indirect benefits that improve the climate resilience of the village.

"Due to chemicals we used, the fields had to be watered every three to four days, but with organic manure we just need to water them every 15 to 20 days. That saves a lot of our effort and money," says Bahuguna. "Plus with urea, the soil became hard and we needed to hire equipment to till the soil frequently, but with organic manure the soil remains loamy, porous and produces such nice tasting vegetables."

**Source:** <http://indiaclimatedialogue.net/2017/11/02/small-initiative-changes-lives-women-big-way/>



## 6. Special feature: Resistance through Alternatives

### ACT one: Anti-dam, pro-people



Tenzing Lepcha sits at the hearth of his farmstay.

Tenzing Lepcha, the lead activist of Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT), is proud of his work in the last year. "All this was overgrown," he says pointing at the orderly farm. "I created the fields myself." He shows us the carefully dug out pond for water storage, the irrigation system, the compost heaps, the neatly staked peas and rows of mustard. It is difficult to recognize him now, my earlier image of him being that of a listless young Tenzing, weak from fasting for months.

Tenzing, Gyaatso and Dawa are among those who had gone on a relay hunger strike from the year 2007-2009 demanding withdrawal of the hydroelectric projects in the Dzongu region. The hunger strike lasted for more than 150 days. Tenzing recalls how he had first joined the movement. He says, "We attended a meeting that opened our eyes to these dam issues. I attended my first public hearing on September 18, 2005. It was against the Panang project in Dzongu and I got arrested. I was also there with Dawa for the hunger strike. It was in two phases-in the first phase, we fasted for 64 days and in the second phase, for 96 days."

This hunger strike, as well as the other protest marches, numerous petitions and presentations organised by the ACT succeeded in drawing national and global attention to the issue of dams on the Teesta. As a result of this struggle, the ACT was able to press for the first study investigating the carrying capacity of a river basin in India. As a result of this report and the protests, 10 dams were cancelled.

However, the people's struggles did not end with the calling off of the hunger strike. Two of the dams being planned are located in the Dzongu area, and people are mobilizing to stop those dams.

### Development is possible without dams



Entrance to Mayal Lyang. (Source: Mayallyang.com)

In addition to protests, the ACT members feel the need to demonstrate to people that development is possible without dams. Some of them lead by example and demonstrate alternative livelihoods that will bring in economic progress. This is in line with the philosophy of the late Shankar Guha Niyogi, the leader of the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha which was established in the 70s. In his last article, 'Our environment', Niyogi had stated that struggle and reconstruction must go hand-in-hand. He wrote, "Wherever there is injustice and oppression, there is bound to be resistance. The process of destruction can be countered by the creativity of construction". His slogan of "Sangarsh VA Nirmaan"-struggle and construction-inspired a whole generation of activists and movements in the 80s and 90s.

Gyaatso Lepcha, the secretary of the ACT runs a charming and successful homestay, Mayal Lyang. Gyaatso says, "A lawyer by profession, I was practicing for a while till I got involved in activism. My homestay is more of a silent protest against the state's idea of bringing devastating projects to an ecologically fragile and culturally important region like this. It is a different way of saying 'hey, this will also bring development without the ecological, cultural and human cost'." This homestay at Passingdang village in Dzongu shot to fame when the crown prince and princess of Norway vacationed there. The homestay finds mention in the CAG report on Sikkim and has spearheaded state interest in promoting homestays as a means of sustainable tourism in Sikkim.

## Farming too is profitable

Tenzing has gone back to his farming roots. He says, "The more close you are to the soil, the better the attachment to it. My efforts in agriculture will also motivate others (to take it up)." Tenzing's decision to start farming is also related to the protest against hydropower. He explains, "When they (the government) use the term 'economic development' it should not mean hydropower only. We are very lucky to have all this landscape. We have a lot of alternatives. Now see the Sikkim government has declared the state organic. We do have the potential. So, it is high time for the government to also tap those potentials for the future generations."

Minket Lepcha had settled down in Delhi when Gyaatso informed her about the struggles going on in Dzongu. Now, Minket is also part of the movement and uses her art to showcase the beauty and values of Dzongu so that people outside the valley have a glimpse of all that may be lost to dams. Minket's movie on the issue also helped convince pro-dam people within the valley. She says, "This is the only film that links the upstream and downstream people. When I mentioned that the Teesta is like a spine for the communities along the river, I could see acceptance in people's eyes." Minket's film, *Voices of Teesta*, became one of the 10 films screened at the eighth World Water Forum in Brazil held in March 2018.

Like Minket, Dawa Lepcha too is making films set in Dzongu. He began his career making ethnographic documentaries that described the Lepcha way of life. One of his documentaries, *Ritual Journeys* records the everyday life of Meyrak, a Bonthing (a holy man) over a period of seven years. More recently, Dawa made the first Lepcha feature film, *Dhokbu-the keeper*. In an interview with *The Darjeeling Chronicle*, he says, "Like every tribal community around the globe, we Lepchas also believe in natural deities and protectors of wild forest and wilderness. This film is about a mythical character who is the guardian of the wilderness in Sikkim Himalayas. The film reflects some of my thoughts influenced by my days of intense activism."

## Spreading the news far and wide

Keeping a peoples' movement alive for more than a decade takes an incredible amount of work. Public activities such as protest meetings and marches, sit-ins and hunger strikes, press statements and open letters are merely the tip of the iceberg. Far more relentless and exhausting is the quiet work of ceaselessly keeping up-to-date with government activities and decisions, collating documents and evidence, maintaining contact with supporters and extending friendship towards dissenters. They don't shy away from engaging people from outside Dzongu on the topic of hydropower in Sikkim, either. Gyaatso says, "I make sure the guests who come here attend one session where we talk of dams. I show them a documentary and then the conversation opens up."

Besides hydropower, they also engage with other issues in the region. Gyaatso organised a meeting of Panchayat presidents to talk about waste and consider zero-waste solutions for Dzongu. Minket travels the country telling stories and showing her film and is trying to engage especially with school children on environmental issues.

Reflecting on his decision to explore alternatives, Gyaatso mirrors Niyogi's philosophy. "I realized that activists are always looked at as anti-development by both the state and by people. In my small way, I wanted to change that. To some extent, a lot of those allegations are true. People have aspirations. This is Dzongu, what other opportunities are there? People need jobs and other things. This is where I thought, when we do activism, we should not just protest or go around resisting things. We should also start coming up with new ideas, showing alternatives (to livelihood)." To put it in the words of the Italian philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, the activists are creating "counter hegemonies" of the people.

**Authored by:** K J Joy.

**Source:** <http://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/act-one-anti-dam-pro-people>



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Kalpavriksh, Apt. 5 Shree Dutta Krupa, 908 Deccan Gymkhana, Pune 411004

Phone: 91-20-25675450, Tel/Fax: 91-20-25654239

Email: kvoutreach@gmail.com

Website:www.kalpavriksh.org

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