# The Search For Radical Alternatives

## Key Elements and Principles

KALPAVRIKSH
कल्पवृक्ष

**Cover Photo:**
Nadimidoddi Vinodamma, one of several hundred dalit women farmers of Deccan Development Society in Telangana, who have transformed a situation of scarcity, caste and gender discrimination into one of food sovereignty, ecological conservation, high productivity through dryland farming, assertion of cultural and biological diversity, women's empowerment, dignity, and self-reliance.

# INTRODUCTION

Can there be a collective search for paradigms and pathways towards a world that is sustainable, equitable and just? How can such frameworks and visions build on an existing heritage of ideas and worldviews and cultures, and on past or new grassroots practice? How can they be fundamentally different from today's dominant economic and political system, which has brought the world to the brink of ecological collapse and the depths of socio-economic inequalities and despair? Can they provide rays of hope in what currently seems to be a worsening situation of social tension and conflicts, the resurgence of regressive right-wing forces, and suffering caused by environmental damage?



*Participants of Ladakh Vikalp Sangam at Saboo Village near Leh, July 2015*

This note attempts to lay out some thoughts towards such a process, and is offered as one means to stimulate dialogue and visioning. It is based on an ongoing process called Vikalp Sangam ('Alternatives Confluence'), a platform for networking of groups and individuals working on alternatives to the currently dominant model of development and governance, in various spheres of life (**see http://kalpavriksh. org/index.php/alternatives/ alternatives-knowledge-center/353-vikalpsangam-coverage; see also Daga 2014, Kothari 2015, Thakaekara 2015).** Its major activity
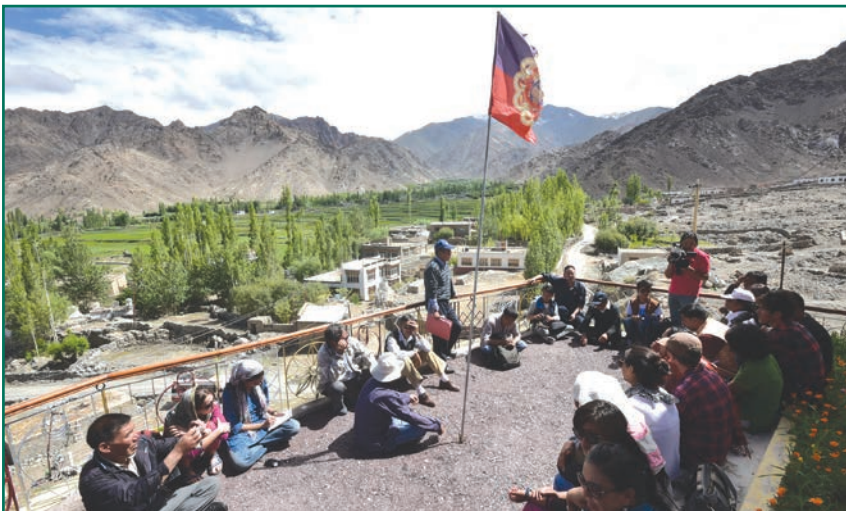
is the convening of regional and thematic confluences across India ; additional activities are a website with stories and perspectives from across India (www.vikalpsangam.org or www. alternativesindia.org), case studies, a mobile poster exhibition (printed as a booklet, Kalpavriksh 2015), and video coverage of initiatives.

The Sangams are spaces for people to exchange experiences and ideas emerging from practice and thinking in a whole range of endeavour: sustainable agriculture and pastoralism, renewable energy, decentralised governance, community health, craft and art revival, multiple sexualities, inclusion of the differently abled, alternative learning and education, community-based conservation, decentralised water management, urban sustainability, gender and caste equality, and more. People practicing and conceiving some of the most amazing initiatives in the country have been able to get together and share.

Beyond the sharing of practical experiences, however, one of the most important outputs of the Vikalp Sangam process is a conceptual framework of transformative alternatives. This framework (hereafter called 'the Framework') is constantly evolving, through

discussions at each Sangam. Several hundred people from the range of sectors mentioned above have debated the various aspects of the Framework (made available in regional languages relevant to each Sangam, thus far Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu). This essay presents its key elements, to elicit even wider comments and inputs that can be taken up in its further evolution, perhaps even resulting in 'peoples visions' of the future of India.

The Vikalp Sangam process consciously avoids detailed discussion on social, economic, ecological problems we face, or into their root causes; it believes that this context is widely discussed in other forums, and that the participants of the Sangam process share at least some basic common understanding of this context. In just a few lines, the Framework notes the structural roots of ecological unsustainability, inequity and injustice, and loss of life and livelihoods, including: "centralised and heirarchical state systems, capitalist corporate control, patriarchy and other forms of social and cultural inequality (including caste), alienation from the rest of nature and from our own spiritual selves, and undemocratic control of knowledge and technology". Not everyone may agree with all of this, but participants of the Sangam process have agreed that we can discuss the specifics of the problem elsewhere, while here we focus on "paths and visions forward" assuming a "broadly shared sense of the crises".

Given below are (a) the key spheres or elements of what constitutes an alternative, (b) some examples of alternatives in various fields or sectors, (c) the main principles or values emerging from these initiatives, (d) strategies to achieve transformation along these lines, and (e) further issues to explore.

◈ ◈

# What is an Alternative?

A thread running through the Sangam process is the search for what constitutes an alternative. Assuming that what we are looking for are pathways away from the problems (and their root causes) mentioned above, the Framework states that "alternatives can be practical activities, policies, processes, technologies, and concepts/frameworks. They can be practiced or proposed/propagated by communities, government, civil society organizations, individuals, and social enterprises, amongst others. They can simply be continuations from the past, re-asserted in or modified for current times, or new ones; it is important to note that the term does not imply that these are always 'marginal' or new, but that they are in contrast to the mainstream or dominant system."

The Framework proposes that alternatives are built on the following key elements or spheres, interconnected and overlapping :

a.  **Ecological integrity and resilience,** including the conservation of nature and natural diversity, maintenance of ecological functions, respect for ecological limits (local to global), and ecological ethics in all human actions.

b.  **Social well-being and justice,** including fulfilling lives (physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually), equity between communities and individuals, communal and ethnic harmony; and erasure of hierarchies and divisions based on faith, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, ability, and other such attributes.

c.  **Direct and delegated democracy,** with decision-making starting in spaces enabling every person to participate meaningfully,

and building from this to larger levels of governance by downwardly accountable institutions; and all this respectful of the needs and rights of those currently marginalised.

d.  **Economic democracy,** in which local communities and individuals have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets, based on the principle of localization for basic needs and trade built on this; central to this would be the replacement of private property by the commons.

e.  **Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy,** with multiple co-existing knowledge systems in the commons, respect for a diversity of ways of living, ideas and ideologies, and encouragement for creativity and innovation.

The Framework proposes, on the basis of the above, that the "centre of human activity is neither the state nor the corporation, but the community, a self-defined collection of people with

some strong common or cohesive social interest. The community could be of various forms, from the ancient village to the urban neighbourhood to the student body of an institution to even the more 'virtual' networks of common interest."

Of course, the framework recognises that actual initiatives towards alternatives may not fulfil all of the above. As a thumbrule, therefore, it proposes that if an initiative helps reach at least two of the above five, and does not seriously violate the others, and perhaps is even considering how to achieve those too, it should be considered as an alternative. Importantly, this is not in the form of an external judgement by anyone, but rather a process by which relevant actors can themselves come to an understanding of where they stand in the process of transformation, and what more needs to be done. The Framework, in fact, also gives examples of what kind of



*Decent housing, easy to construct, for low-income families in Bhuj, Kachchh*

actions and processes could count as alternatives in each sector or field of human endeavour, and what may not; this is given briefly below.

❖ ❖

# What are the alternatives in various sectors?

*The Framework provides indicators of the kinds of initiatives that could be called alternatives, in 12 sectors or fields. To these are added actual examples of initiatives, mostly taken from the Vikalp Sangam website.*

## Society, culture and peace

This includes initiatives to enhance social and cultural aspects of human life, such as sustaining India's enormous language, art and crafts diversity, removing inequalities of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, literacy, race, religion, and location (rural-urban, near-remote), creating harmony amongst communities of different ethnicities, faiths and cultures, providing dignity in living for those currently oppressed, exploited, or marginalised, including the 'disabled' or differently abled and sexual minorities, promoting ethical living and thinking, and providing avenues for spiritual enlightenment.

*Several examples come to mind. The work of Bhasha in documenting and sustaining language diversity across India while including related economic, political, cultural and social aspects, includes the People's Linguistic Survey of India which documented 780 languages (see http://www.vikalpsangam.org/ article/the-language-of-diversity/). The initiative of Landesa, a Seattle based non-profit, helps educate young women in West Bengal about their right to inherit property along with their brothers and teach them the hands-on skill necessary to be food secure (http://www.vikalpsangam. org/article/how-to-teach-a-girl- to-farm-and-transform-her-life- in-the-process/#.VgZ7WPntmko). To promote preservation of local/ traditional food, Kalpavriksh*

*facilitates women's self-help groups to organise 'Wild Food Festivals' in Bhimashankar (Maharashtra) to help the local adivasis revive traditional knowledge of their food and imbibe a sense of respect for local cuisine in an atmosphere of junk food invasion (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/food- fest-to-revive-tribal-cuisine/#.Vic- wH7hDIU and http://vikalpsangam. org/article/wild-foods-festival-yum/#. Wc4tgdjhXIU). Other examples mentioned below also deal with sustaining crafts as a livelihood and tackling gender and caste inequities through sustainable agriculture.*

The Framework points to a caution that is important in the current context of an increasingly right-wing agenda supported by the state: that initiatives which appear to be alternative in one dimension, e.g. conservation, or sustaining appropriate traditions against the onslaught of wholesale modernity, would not be considered so if they have casteist, communal, sexist, or other motives and biases related to social injustice and inequity, or those appealing to a parochial nationalism intolerant of other cultures and peoples.



*Bamboo products can be a major source of livelihoods for millions, sustainably harvested from community-governed forests*

## Alternative Economies & Technologies

Initiatives that help to create alternatives to the dominant neo-liberal or state-dominated economy and the 'logic' of growth, such as localisation and decentralisation of basic needs towards self-reliance, respect for and support of diverse livelihoods, producer and consumer collectives, local currencies and trade, non-monetised and equal exchange and the gift economy, production based on ecological principles, innovative technologies that respect ecological and cultural integrity, and moving away from GDP-like indicators of well-being to more qualitative, human-scale ones.

*Several examples highlight the above, such as the localised manufacture and the ideas of regional self-reliant economy initiated by the village Kuthambakkam's ex-sarpanch Elango Ramaswamy (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/kuthumbakkam_1st_july.pdf). Women in Chennai have moved to replace plastics with environment-friendly products as palm plates, bags made of cloth, paper, and jute recycled products. Their venture Nammaboomi manufactures products to combat the throw away culture ( http://vikalpsangam.org/article/two-women-engage-in-battle-against-plastic/). There are several dozen*

*producer companies of farmers, fishers, pastoralists, craftspersons, like the one set up by Timbaktu Collective, Dharani, with an aim to empower villagers especially women and young adults, encourage organic farming, sustainable ways of living and promote environmental conservation and development (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/very-much-on-the-map-the-timbaktu-revolution/).*

*Another example is Goonj's attempt to create a parallel cashless economy around cloth. Its 'Cloth for Work'*


*Organic farming based products by Dharani Producer Company at Timbaktu Collective, Andhra Pradesh*

*and 'Not Just a Piece of Cloth' initiative has elevated cloth from its status as disaster relief material to a valuable resource that can generate earning. The initiative works with exchange of two currencies, material and labour, welcoming the old practice of barter and reducing the dependence on monetary resources*

*(see http://vikalpsangam.org/article/cloth-as-currency-how-goonj-is-creating-a-parallel-cashless-economy/#.Vgoyvvntmko).*

Here too, the Framework cautions against would-be alternatives: "What may not constitute alternatives are superficial and false solutions, such as predominantly market and technological fixes for problems that are deeply social and political, or more generally, 'green growth'/ 'green capitalism' kind of approaches that only tinker around with the existing system."

## Livelihoods

Linked to the search for alternative, localised economies, this includes initiatives for satisfying, dignified, ecologically sustainable livelihoods and jobs. These could be a continuation and enhancement of fulfilling traditional occupations that communities choose to continue if enabling conditions exist, including in agriculture, pastoralism, nomadism, forestry, fisheries, crafts, and others in the primary economy; or they could be jobs in manufacturing and service sectors that are ecologically sustainable and dignified.

*Examples of such livelihoods include: the revival of sustainable, organic agriculture by dalit women members of the Deccan Development Society in Telangana who are practicing highly bio-diverse farming methods, treasuring traditional seeds, and initiating the Africa-*


*Revival of loom weaving in Kachchh sustains traditional skills and provides decent livelihoods, enabled by Khamir*

India Millet Network, which is getting both national as well as international recognition (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/cultivating-biodiversity-peasant-women-in-india/#.VgTVlMvtmko); small farmers associated with Timbaktu Collective in Andhra Pradesh (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/very-much-on-the-map-the-timbaktu-revolution/); pastoral initiatives supported by Sahjeevan in Kachchh (http://www.kalpavriksh.org/images/alternatives/CaseStudies/KachchhAlternativesReport.pdf); and Anthra, a team of women veterinarians in Maharashtra


*Jharcraft has enhanced traditional skill-based livelihoods and reduced outmigration from Jharkhand's villages*

that address the problems faced by small farmers, adivasis, peasants, pastoralists, dalits and women by building a strong base of evidence-based practices which are enduring, sustainable, equitable, and respectful of people's knowledge (http://anthra.org/index.php); The Food Sovereignty Alliance, a common platform for Adivasis, Dalits, Pastoralists, small and marginal farmers, and social movements to build solidarity in defence of sovereign rights to food and rights of mother earth (https://foodsovereigntyalliance.wordpress.com); the state-run Jharcraft in Jharkhand which has enhanced livelihoods of over 300,000 craft skilled families by creating employment opportunities for the locals and changing the way they perceive art (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/being-the-changejharcraft-in-jharkhand/#.Vgzzmvntmko); innovations in Malkha cloth to empower weavers and artisans through stable livelihoods (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/the-key-to-the-handloom-crisis/#.ViYyCH7hDIU); and unionising wastepicker women for more secure, dignified ways of doing

their work by recognising wastepicking as legitimate work through SWaCH in Pune (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/picking-a-brighter-future/).

What would not fit are livelihoods, traditional or modern, where non-workers are in control and profiting (monetarily or politically) from the exploitation of workers; this is especially relevant in the current context where many capitalist or state-run corporations are claiming to be eco-friendly, but in the way they treat workers or deal with profits, they remain essentially exploitative.

## Settlements and Transportation

This includes the search to make human settlements (rural, urban, rurban) sustainable, equitable, and fulfilling places to live and work in, through sustainable architecture and accessible housing, localized generation of means of satisfying basic needs as far as possible, ecological regeneration, minimisation of waste and its full upcycling or

recycling, reduction in elite urban resource use, replacement of toxic products with ecologically sustainable ones, sustaining and reviving the urban commons, decentralised, participatory budgeting and planning of settlements, and promotion of sustainable, equitable means of transport (especially mass, public, and non-motorised).

*Examples of such initiatives include: 'Homes in the City' in Bhuj programme by several NGOs that aim to empower poor citizens to either self-provision or get access to decent housing, water self-sufficiency, waste management, open spaces and other services (see http://bhujbolechhe.org/en/hic ); the revival of urban wetlands in Bengaluru and Salem (e.g. Kaikondrahalli, http://vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/kaikondrahalli_lake_casestudy_harini.pdf); urban farming such as widespread rooftop gardening in many cities; the wastepicker cooperative KKPKP and union SWaCH in Pune (http://swachcoop.com and http://www.kkpkp-pune.org) and participatory budgeting in Pune, where citizens have a say on how to spend a part of the public budget (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/participatory-budgeting-in-pune-a-critical-review/).*

The Framework points out that elitist, costly models that appear to be ecologically sustainable but are not relevant for or affordable by most people, may not fit into alternatives.


*KKPKP & SWaCH have enabled women wastepickers in Pune to achieve greater dignity, better earnings, and social empowerment*

## Alternative politics

Initiatives and approaches included here are those that aim towards people-centred governance and decision-making, including forms of direct democracy or swaraj in urban and rural areas, linkages of these to each other in larger landscapes, re-imagining current political boundaries to make them more compatible with ecological and cultural contiguities, promotion of the non-party political process, methods of increasing accountability and transparency of the government and of political parties, and progressive policy frameworks.

*Some examples reflect the above. The 30-year old story of Mendha-Lekha, a village that has taken control over its commons and declared that for itself, it is the government, is iconic. It has successfully enforced the long forgotten Maharashtra Gramdan Act of 1965. Through this act the villagers have donated their entire agricultural land to the village Gram Sabha to strengthen it and also secure their land rights (Pathak and Gour-Broome 2001 and http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/mendha-lekha-residents-gift-all-their-farms-to gram-sabha/). A decade-long experiment at ecoregional decision making through a people's parliament ran in the Arvari basin in Rajasthan (Hasnat 2005). There*


*Urban SETU empowers citizens towards self-governance and greater government accountability, in Bhuj (Kachchh)*

*have been movements aimed at gaining citizens' right to information, independent oversight of governance through lokpals, and public audits (e.g. of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), and others.*

## Knowledge and media

This includes initiatives using knowledge and media as tools for transformation, including processes using modern and traditional, formal and informal, and urban and rural spheres of knowledge equitably, attempts to make knowledge part of the commons and freely accessible, and alternative and innovative use of media forms for communication.

*Examples include the following. The urban SETU programme (Urban Bridge) is a civil society initiative in Bhuj town, Gujarat started in 2007 by workers and activists to equip city dwellers (including those in slums) with knowledge and capacities to understand their rights, various government schemes and policies available for them (http://vikalpsangam. org/article/a-bridge-not-too-far/#. VgUFNMvtmko). CGNetSwara is using mobile and radio technologies to make governance more accessible to far-flung villages of Chhattisgarh (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/cell-phone-based-networking-system-in-the-forests/).*

## Environment and ecology

Initiatives included here promote ecological sustainability, including community-led conservation of land, water and biodiversity, eliminating or minimising pollution and waste, reviving degraded ecosystems, creating awareness leading to greater respect for the sanctity of life and biodiversity of which humans are a part, and promoting ecological ethics.

*There are thousands of examples of community conserved areas (CCAs) across India. CCAs are areas where humans and wildlife co-exist. In these times when biological diversity is under grave threat, conservation*


*Organic Medak event by Deccan Development Society in Telangana: enabling dalit women to gain socio-economic dignity and decision-making power*

*Zero-waste trekking trail at Khangchendzonga National Park, Sikkim*

efforts of the local communities gain immense significance (http://www.kalpavriksh.org/index.php/conservation-livelihoods1/community-conserved-areas). Even in urban areas, there have been attempts to revive ecosystems in Bengaluru (http://vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/kaikondrahalli_lake_casestudy_harini.pdf), Udaipur, and Salem. Jheel Sanrakshan Samiti,  a people's organisation formed by concerned citizens of Udaipur in regard to water management and pollution crises has worked tirelessly to ensure lake rejuvenation and combat water issues in the city (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/anil-mehta-a-man-with-a-mission/#.ViYCL37hDIU; http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/life-of-pi-yush-21st-century-activist-salem/#.V6wEuWVkTSo).  There have been efforts at making tourism more ecologically sensitive as well. Kanchendzonga Conservation Committee (KCC), an organisation that was set up by the local youth of Yuksom village, west Sikkim in 1997, works to balance resource and conservation to make the mountain and tourism development sustainable. The committee promotes village home stays, zero waste trekking, and has formed Ecotourism Service Providers Association of Yuksom (ESPAY) (see http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/conserving-sacred-spaces-kanchendzonga-conservation-committee-sikkim/). There have also been many initiatives at creating localised curricula and extra-

curricular material on biodiversity for children and young adults.

Superficial solutions to ecological problems, such as planting trees to offset pollution and carbon emissions rather than reducing the emissions, may not be considered alternatives.

## Energy

This includes initiatives that encourage alternatives to the current centralized, environmentally damaging and unsustainable sources of energy, as also equitable access to the power grid, including decentralized, community-run renewable sources and micro-grids, equitable access to energy, promoting non-electric energy options such as passive heating and cooling, reducing wastage in transmission and use, putting caps on demand, and advocating energy-saving and efficient materials.

*Examples include a large number of decentralised renewable energy projects such as Dharnai micro-grid in Bihar, which was started by Greenpeace India along with Centre for Environment and Energy Development (see http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/energy-empowerment-the-story-of-bijli-and-dharnai/#.VgaQefntmko). Another example is of BASIX that launched a project for electrifying a village in Bihar using a solar-powered microgrid. The project aimed to challenge the centralised model of electricity and create a community run and owned system (http://www.basixindia.com/).  SELCO, a social enterprise based mostly in southern India works extensively to provide sustainable energy solutions and services to under-served households and small business. It works to create awareness and provide pivotal financial schemes in many remote regions of the country ( http://www.selco-india.com).*

What may not count are expensive, elitist technologies and processes that have no relevance to the majority of people; or perhaps even large-scale centralised renewable energy projects with the same problems of access for the poor that fossil-fuel based grid systems have and with significant ecological costs. This latter issue is a major concern with the current government's large-scale solar energy initiatives.


*Solar power micro-grid at Dharnai, Bihar, provides reliable electricity and is managed locally*

## Learning and Education

This includes initiatives that enable children and others to learn holistically, rooted in local ecologies and cultures but also open to those from elsewhere, focusing not only on the mind but also the hands and the heart, enabling curiosity and questioning along with collective thinking and doing, nurturing a fuller range of collective and individual potentials and relationships, and synergising the formal and the informal, the traditional and modern, the local and global.

*Examples are aplenty in India, though still marginal compared to the soul-deadening and status quo reinforcing mainstream education. Examples include: the Ladakhi learning centre SECMOL, which runs an energy self-sufficient campus (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/secmol/#.VgTg5Mvtmko); Adharshila, a residential school for adivasi children based in Badwani, Madhya Pradesh, that believes in a learning environment that enhances the traditional and cultural knowledge of student's community (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/the-school-on-the-hill/#.V6tfnmVkTSo); Imlee Mahuaa School for Adivasi communities in and*

*around Balenga Para in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, which fosters independent learning environment where children decide what they wish to learn at school (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/imlee_mahuaa_learning2.pdf); and Karigarshala of Hunnarshala foundation based in Kachchh, Gujarat, started with an objective to capacitate people for reconstruction of their habitat by*



*Jeevan Shala at Manibeli (Maharashtra), one of several alternative schools set up by Narmada Bachao Andolan as part of its struggle*

*initiating activities on community empowerment, knowledge networks, and research and development (see https://issuu.com/hunnarshala/docs/newsletter-vol1).*

## Health and Hygiene

Initiatives in this are those that ensure universal good health and healthcare, through the prevention of ill-health in the first place by improving access to nutritious food, water, sanitation, and other determinants of health, ensuring access to curative/symptomatic facilities to those who have conventionally not had such access, integration of various health



*Swasthya Swara connects health workers to people in Chhattisgarh through innovative use of communications technology*

systems, traditional and modern, bringing back into popular use the diverse systems from India and outside including indigenous/folk medicine, nature cure, Ayurvedic, Unani and other holistic or integrative approaches, and community-based management and control of healthcare and hygiene.

*Examples of such initiatives are growing in India. For example, Swasthya Swara based in Chhattisgarh aims to address rural community's health issues by reviving the traditional herbal/medicinal knowledge of Vaids and Ayurvedic doctors (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/swasthya-swara-a-unique-community-health-solution/#.V6tiv2VkTSo). Similarly, Tribal Health Initiative based in Tamil Nadu works to provide decent health care services to tribal communities living in the Sittilingi valley by initiating a variety of community health care programmes.*
*(http://www.tribalhealth.org).*

## Food and Water

This includes initiatives towards security and sovereignty over food and water, by producing and making accessible safe and nutritious food, sustaining the diversity of Indian cuisine, ensuring community control over processes of food production and distribution, and commons from where uncultivated foods are obtained, promoting uncultivated and



*Decentralised, locally managed water harvesting and socially regulated use in India's driest region, Kachchh*

'wild' foods, making water storage, use and distribution decentralised, ecologically sustainable, efficient and equitable, producer-consumer links, advocating the continuation of water as part of the commons, and promoting democratic governance of water and wetlands.

*There are several examples of the above in India. Deccan Development Society and Timbaktu Collective are mentioned above. Apart from these, Gorus Organic Farming Association around Pune is working on the model of Community Supported Agriculture by training small farmers in organic and natural farming practices and providing a market with a year-round guarantee of purchase at an assured price (http://vikalpsangam.org/ article/placing-faith-in-the-farmer/#. VhYMxvntmko). Another example is of Arid Communities and Technologies (ACT) based in Kachchh, Gujarat, that works to strengthen the livelihoods*

*of communities in arid and semi-arid areas by resolving ecological constraints through facilitation and access to technologies or institutional solutions. The focus is on groundwater management and urban watershed management (http://www.kalpavriksh. org/images/alternatives/CaseStudies/ KachchhAlternativesReport.pdf and http://act-india.org). Many more examples are available on India Water Portal (http://www.indiawaterportal.*

*org/)*
Purely elitist food fads even if they pertain to healthy or organic food, and expensive technological water solutions that have no relevance for the majority of people, are unlikely to be considered as alternatives.



*Participants at Tamil Nadu Vikalp Sangam, February 2015.*

## Global Relations

These encompass state or civil society initiatives that, in the words of the Framework, "offer an alternative to the prevalent state of dog-eat-dog, belligerent and hyper-competitive international relations fuelled by geopolitical rivalries". These include cross-national dialogues among citizens and diplomats, moratoriums on increases and gradual decrease in military, surveillance and police spending, bans on 'harms' trading (e.g. arms, toxic chemicals, waste), and even re-examining notions of 'nation-state' and emphasising relations amongst 'peoples' of the world.

*Examples include several people-to-people dialogues between citizens of India and Pakistan, and the positive (mostly in the past) advocacy of disarmament, non-alignment, environmental sustainability and other such global policies by India and Indian civil society.*

What would not count as an alternative, is the attempt by India and other emerging powerful economies (the BRICS nations) to provide a counter to the power of the USA and Europe, for even as it does so, it follows the same neoliberal, state-corporate dominated policies that the industrialised countries have done so far (Bond 2015).

◈ ◈

*URMUL's work with women craftspersons near Bikaner, Rajasthan, has helped generate self-confidence and livelihoods*

# What principles are expressed in alternatives?

A crucial part of the Framework (http://vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/) is the articulation of a set of principles, that underlie many of the alternative initiatives mentioned above or that have been shared at the various Sangams. This is recognising the fact that such initiatives vary widely, and none are replicable in precise form from one place to the other, given the diversity of local situations. Learning their underlying principles however may help to create similar alternatives elsewhere.

The Framework notes that these principles themselves are based on "more fundamental human ethical values that should be the bedrock of the principles below, including compassion, empathy, honesty & truthfulness, tolerance, generosity, caring, and others. These are espoused by most spiritual traditions and secular ethics, and are certainly worth keeping central to a discussion on the principles described below."

The following principles are laid down by the Framework (with descriptions or definitions contained therein):



*Endangered Greater adjutant storks thrive through community protection near Bhagalpur, Bihar*

- Ecological integrity and the rights of nature
- Equity, justice, and inclusion
- Right to and responsibility of meaningful participation
- Diversity and pluralism
- Collective commons and solidarity with individual freedoms
- Resilience and adaptability
- Subsidiarity, self-reliance and ecoregionalism
- Simplicity and sufficiency
- Dignity and creativity of labour and work
- Non-violence, harmony, peace
- Efficiency in production and consumption (in terms of energy and materials usage)
- Ethical or spiritual worldview

# Strategies that could lead us to such alternative futures

The Framework notes several strategies and actions needed to move towards a world based on the above key spheres and principles. The kind of networking and linking of alternatives that the Sangam is attempting, and promotion of further innovation along these lines, needs to be taken much further.

But simultaneously, participants at all the Sangams have recognised the importance of "resistance, civil disobedience, and non-cooperation (both collective and individual) towards the forces of unsustainability, inequality and injustice, and the decolonisation of mind-sets and attitudes and institutions". Along with these are actions to re-common what has been privatised or 'enclosed' in the past, facilitating the voice of dalits, adivasis, women, landless, disabled, minorities, nomads, 'denotified' tribes, workers, and other marginalised sections. Participants working on gender and sexuality issues stressed the strategy of exposing ('counter-shaming') those who display gender, sexual, or other stereotypical prejudices and biases; others mentioned the need for non-violent communication and resolution of disputes. Promoting public awareness regarding problems and solutions, and providing platforms for people of different faiths and cultures to understand and harmonise with each other, including through spiritual and ethical processes, have also been advocated. Through these and other means, taking responsibility for one's own actions as part of personal changes, while promoting the sharing of knowledge, experiences, resources, and skills (including in non-monetary ways!), and engaging in continuous dialogue, have been mentioned in the Framework.

Other strategies given importance are engaging with political formations in both party and non-party form, and using available democratic means of redressal and transformation while pushing for further enhancement of such spaces. Creating consumer awareness and options for more socially and ecologically responsible consumption patterns, especially in cities, is mentioned. For creating awareness and fostering resistance and change, the use of both mainstream and alternative media and art forms is given importance. But art and crafts



*Villagers in Bhimashankar Sanctuary, Maharashtra: forest rights, forest-based livelihoods, planning the future, facilitated by Kalpavriksh*

are also not for instrumentalist use only; it is vital to integrate these "into everyday lives, fostering the creative in every individual and collective, bringing work and pleasure together."

An interesting discussion in the Sangam process has been the question of which 'ideology' do we base our exploration on? The collective wisdom emerging on this says it is important to "learn from

both 'classical' and 'folk' traditions including humanitarian ones (eventually removing the dichotomy between them); from both prominent ideologists and thinkers (Gandhi, Marx, Phule, Ambedkar, Aurobindo, Tagore … others), as also feminists, environmentalists, and adivasi/indigenous/tribal/dalit people , and that this process also involve "mutual learning with other peoples and civilisations across the world."

While the Framework lists such strategies and actions in a rather dry way, it is based on the knowledge that somewhere or the other in India, these are being practiced or explored already (as illustrated by the examples given above). Clearly they are still marginal to mainstream practice, but the fact that they exist is itself crucial, a sign of what is possible on a broader scale.

◈ ◈

# Could all this converge into holistic alternative worldviews?

Finally, the Framework lays out a set of questions that are important for further exploration, discussion, and resolution. It notes that such a process is crucial if the networking of alternative practices and concepts is to result in holistic alternative worldviews. Given below are these questions almost verbatim, editing only for brevity:

- How strongly can we posit the community/collective as the fulcrum of power, rather than either the state or corporations?

- How much are ancient practices and concepts still relevant; often co-opted by communal or capitalist/corporate forces, how can they be rescued from such misuse to further causes inclusive of all?

- How do we learn from worldviews usually submerged under the more dominant articulations, such as, for instance, the feminist?

- How do we make all this relevant to today's India, including its youth, tapping into peoples' need to see positive messages?

- How can these issues reach across to a wider (non-converted) public, what languages and forms of communication would work more effectively? How to combine reason and emotion in the messaging?

- What kind of transitions would work for those already caught in today's dominant systems, including the urban middle classes; conversely, how to ensure that those already living relatively sustainable lives are enabled to continue and enhance them?

- Who would be the main political agents of change? How can mass movements that are resisting currently dominant systems, be engaged with for an orientation towards alternative futures?

- What processes can bring together the dispersed, fragmented, and diverse struggles working towards alternatives across India, on some common grounds and visions? How does this become a force for political change?

- Is there consensus on issue of private property?

Finally, participants of the Sangams have also asked of themselves: "To what extent are we as individuals or organisations living these values and principles? Are our organisations and our work based on solidarity, simplicity … are there alternative economic options for our own work?"

◈ ◈



*Andhra Pradesh and Telangana Vikalp Sangam at Timbaktu, October 2014*

*Traditional crop diversity conserved by Beej Bachao Andolan, Uttarakhand*

# Conclusion

The Vikalp Sangam process has, as one of its long-term objectives, the creation of a political mass of people who can affect larger change. It is too early in the process to say whether it is moving in this direction. The Framework described above could be one basis for an alternative, grassroots-up visioning of the future of India; but for this to come out much more churning and dialogue is needed, and much greater work on creating peoples' agendas in every sector or field of endeavour. As a follow up to the Energy Vikalp Sangam (http://vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/bijali_vikalpreport_sb.pdf), for instance, there is some discussion on whether a citizens' roadmap towards alternative energy for India can be developed, as a counter to the still fossil-fuel dominated focus of the government, to help influence future policy directions, and to give some holistic context to peoples' own efforts at resisting dirty energy and tapping clean, decentralised sources. Similar processes could happen around food, learning and education, youth, the arts, cities, and other thematic areas around which Sangams are being organised. In combination with similar networks and platforms of interest (such as writers, academics, workers' groups, resistance movements), in what is being called a 'Sangam of Sangams', there is an attempt to bring together energies and perspectives from various sectors and peoples' movements and parts of India, for such bottom-up visioning and advocacy. Such efforts could provide some light at the end of what currently seems a very dark passage through which India, and the world, are moving.

◈ ◈



*Energy Vikalp Sangam, Bodh Gaya, with groups & individuals working on energy policy, grassroots practice, and advocacy, March 2016*

13

# References

Bond 2015, Patrick and Garcia, Ana (eds). 2015. BRICS: An anti-capitalist critique. Jacana Media, Johannesburg.

Daga, Shweta. 2014. All the way to Timbaktu. Anveshan, 28 October, http://projectanveshan.com/timbuktu/

Desor, S. 2014. Strengthening Local Livelihoods with Ecological Considerations in Kachchh, Gujarat. Kalpavriksh, Pune, Maharashtra. http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/kachchh_alternatives_report_titled.pdf

Hasnat, Syed M. 2005. Arvari Sansad: the farmers' parliament, LEISA Magazine, December.

Kalpavriksh. 2015. Vikalp Sangam: In search of alternatives, Poster exhibition available in book form, https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-fW5lp3Tj9YMTg0NkdHcTVyZms/view?pref=2&pli=1.

Kothari, A. 2014. Radical Ecological Democracy: A path forward for India and beyond, Development, 57(1), 36–45, http://www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v57/n1/full/dev201443a.html.

Kothari, A. 2015. Confluence of hope: Converging for a better world, India Together, 11 March, http://indiatogether.org/vikalp-sangam-champions-of-alternative-sustainable-development-op-ed

Nagendra, Harini. 2016. Restoration of Kaikondrahalli Lake in Bangalore: Forging a New Urban Commons. Kalpavriksh, Pune, Maharashtra. http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/kaikondrahalli_lake_casestudy_harini.pdf

Pathak, N. and Gour-Broome, V. 2001. Tribal Self-Rule and Natural Resource Management: Community based conservation at Mendha-Lekha, Maharashtra, India. Kalpavriksh, Pune and International Institute of Environment and Development, London.

Thekaekara, Mari Marcel. 2015. What an idea! The Hindu Sunday Magazine, 28 March, http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/what-an-idea/

---

i. As of mid-2016, the following regional Sangams have been held: for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, at Timbaktu, October 2014; for Tamil Nadu, at Madurai, February 2015; for Ladakh, in Leh, July 2015; for Maharashtra, in Wardha, October 2015; for Kachchh, in Bhuj, July 2016; for Western Himalaya in August 2016, for Kerala in early 2017, and for Muniguda, Madhya Pradesh in mid-2017. Additionally, a thematic (national level) Sangam on Energy held in Bodh Gaya in February 2017, on Food (September 2016) and Youth Bhopal, (February 2017). Sangams are proposed on Alternative Economies (2018) and Arts (early 2019).

ii. This framework was first prepared in 2014 to stimulate dialogue in the Vikalp Sangam process. The version referred to in this article is based on comments received on successive drafts at the first four Vikalp Sangams (Timbaktu, October 2014; Madurai, February 2015; Ladakh, July 2015; and Wardha, October 2015), at the Vikalp Sangam Core Group meeting (December 2015), and other comments received orally or on email. For the full Framework in its current (5) avatar, see http://vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/). For comments and correspondence: Ashish Kothari, chikikothari@gmail.com

iii. In an earlier form these were expressed as pillars of an alternative future, see Kothari 2014

iv. 'Culture' here is used to mean ways of being and knowing, including language, rituals, norms, ethics and values, worldviews and cosmovisions, lifestyles, links with the rest of nature, and knowledge.

v. This section is adapted from broad guidance used by the website www.vikalpsangam.org. Other sectors and aspects could be added. This is partly based on work done by Lenka Topinkova, a Czech intern who worked at Kalpavriksh, Pune, in 2015.

# Gallery



SECMOL alternative learning centre, Ladakh, powered by passive and active solar energy



Staff of Saiyaren Community Radio, Kachchh, servicing 25 villages with features, music, discussions, and much else



Living Lightly, a mobile exhibition on pastoralism across India, devised by communities and civil society groups, as a tool for transformation and public awareness

# Gallery



*Ledo Village women's group with traditional recipes using local biodiversity, at Ladakh Vikalp Sangam, July 2015*



*Kaikondrahalli lake, Bengaluru, revived as public space and wildlife refuge by local residents*



*Members of women's self-help group in Bhimashankar (Maharashtra), displaying products in honey festival organised by Kalpavriksh & others, April 2017*

# Gallery



*Participants of Western Himalaya mini-Vikalp Sangam at Sambhaavnaa, Himachal Pradesh, August 2016*



*Participants of Youth Vikalp Sangam, Bhopal, February 2017*



*Anand Niketan students demonstrating clay work at Maharashtra Vikalp Sangam, Wardha, October 2015*

Across India and the rest of the world, there are thousands of initiatives at meeting human needs and aspirations without destroying the earth and its species, or leaving half of humanity behind. Based on these, can there be a collective search for paradigms and pathways towards a world that is sustainable, equitable and just? How can such frameworks and visions build on an existing heritage of ideas and worldviews and cultures, and on past or new grassroots practice? How can they be fundamentally different from today's dominant economic and political system, which has brought the world to the brink of ecological collapse and the depths of socio-economic (including gender and caste) inequalities and despair? Can they provide rays of hope in what currently seems to be a worsening situation of social tension and conflicts, the resurgence of regressive right-wing forces, and suffering caused by environmental damage?

This publication offers some thoughts towards such a process, and is aimed at stimulating dialogue and visioning. It is based on an ongoing process called Vikalp Sangam ('Alternatives Confluences'), a platform for networking groups and individuals working on alternatives to the currently dominant model of development and governance, in various spheres of life (www. vikalpsangam.org). The text offers ideas on what is an alternative, how it plays out in various sectors and spheres of activity, what are the core values expressed in such alternatives, and what strategies can be adopted to achieve them. These are illustrated with examples of actual initiatives from across India.