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സംസ്കാരത്തിലെയും
ബദൽ ആവിഷ്കാരങ്ങൾ...

അനുഭവവും അവതരണവും



ബദലുകൾ 2017

The Confluence of Alternatives

2017 ഏപ്രിൽ 10-12
ബോധിഗ്രാമ അടൂർ കേരളം

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Thanal | Chalakkudy River Protection Samithi
Shanthigram | Gandhi Smaraka Nidhi | Ekta parishat
Sabarmathi Foundation | Darsanam | Bodhigram

Badalukal, 2017

Report on the Kerala Vikalp Sangam

10th to 12th April 2017

Bodhigram, Adoor, Kerala



This report is compiled by Shrishtee Bajpai with inputs from Ashish Kothari, Mini John, K.J. Joy, Deepak John, and Vineet John. Special thanks to John D'Souza and his team for video documentation. Pictures were taken by Ashish Kothari.

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Badalukal 2017, the Kerala Vikalp Sangam was held in Bodhigram, Adoor, north of Thiruvananthapuram from 10th to 12th April 2017. The Sangam was the seventh regional vikalp sangam, and was co-organised by Institute for Sustainable Development and Governance (ISDG), Chalakkudy River Protection Samithi, Kalpavriksh, Shanthigram, Gandhi Smaraka Nidhi, Sabarmathi Foundation, Darsanam, Thanal, and Bodhigram. Over the three days, about 130 people participated in the Sangam, though numbers declined rapidly on the 2nd and 3rd days. Participants included people working in health, activists in land issues, academics, environmentalists, peoples' science movement activists, educationists and journalists to painters, musicians and theatre artists. The Sangam witnessed stimulating discussions, some fascinating grassroots examples, presence of well-known alternative artists, delicious local food, and dance/musical performances.

Vikalp Sangam¹ is an ongoing process of bringing together practitioners, thinkers, researchers, and others working on alternatives to currently dominant forms of economic development and political governance. It aims to create a space to come together, dream and deliberate towards an alternative future. While resistance efforts are underway and need to be supported, we also need to create a cross-sectoral platform on alternatives (or constructive work) to share, learn, build hope, and collaboration.

Day 1

The Sangam started with a rendition of a Malayam version of Tagore's poem by Jayachandran Kadampanad. After which, John Samuel gave the background to the Kerala Vikalp Sangam, stating that Kerala has always had a very vibrant culture of dissent and alternatives; however, the need of the hour is figure out ways to deal with the co-option of these alternative initiatives by the dogmatic forces. After brief introductions by all the participants, Ashish Kothari introduced the Vikalp Sangam process, and spoke about alternative initiatives like Mendha Lekha, Deccan Development Society, Kuthambakkam and Kachchh urban initiatives to highlight principles and values emerging from the grassroots that can offer a vision for the future society.

During a small break, participants gathered around the gallery, where well-known artists from Kerala (NN Rimson, Sajitha Sankar, Tensing, Abraham George, Sudheer P.) spontaneously began painting on the canvas. It was scintillating to witness how from seemingly simple brush strokes, artists came up with beautiful and meaningful works of art.

¹ <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/>



The artists painting for the Sangam.

Post the presentations, MLA Chittayam Gopakumar of the area spoke about the vision for Kerala which has to be health and community centered and focussed on the revival of indigenous practices, with many more practitioners who are ready to serve the poor. He stressed on the need for a society where art predominates, artists mobilise issues of social justice and legal reforms to transform the society.

Discussions followed and various questions came up that require critical thinking in the context of Kerala.

1. What is development from Kerala's standpoint?
2. Can we aim for panchayats that are self-sufficient in all the basic necessities?
3. How to deal with life-style diseases?
4. Can scarcity or severe decline of the water situation be dealt with through greater local governance?
5. How can art contribute to the alternatives?

Groups were formed around six major themes- Art and Culture, Agriculture, Governance, Environment, Health, and Education to share issues, experiences, and insights from their work. The session continued until the second day.

Below is the consolidation of the key discussion points and the ideas that emerged out of the group discussions.

Art and Culture

Several acclaimed artists (painters, writers, poets, musicians) were part of the first day at the Sangam. They spoke about the current status of art in the state of Kerala and various experiments that are been undertaken to create an alternative discourse.

Sajitha R.Shankar, an acclaimed contemporary artist based in Thiruvananthapuram spoke about increasing '*Commercialisation of art*'. Art is subsumed by the demand of the galleries. On the contrary, art should be the means to create counter –hegemonic discourses by bringing in varied perspectives. The need of the hour is to highlight the struggles of the marginalised through folk songs or other new forms of art that threaten both new forms and the old. An alternative space would mean that art survives as the means to create counter- discourse, challenge the status quo, and bring out the plight of the forgotten and marginalised.

In an attempt to find a solution to the problem, Sanjitha has created a space known as Gowry Art Institute, on the banks of the Vamanapuram river in Kallar for women and tribal artists to come and interact and evolve.

NN Rimson, another famous painter based in Thiruvananthapuram, highlighted the issue of '*Professionalization of artists*'. In contemporary times, art schools are simply producing clones and with globalisation it is reduced to mere commerce, which in turn has resulted in a very limited space for alternative artists. The early 1960s did see the revival of indigenous theatre art form like Kallari Movement; however, with increasing commercialisation of various entertainment forms, an audience for non-conformist art forms is lost. Artists are grappling with the issues of lack of audience, infrastructure, and funds.

Issues highlighted

- Commercialisation of art
- Loss of indigenous art forms
- Sensationalising of art and culture
- Distance between art and social sciences
- Declining patronage of the state
- Lack of integration of art in education.

In the light of the above, the example of *Manaveeyam Veedhi* was shared by D.

Reghoothaman who is part of Abhinaya theatre group that has been for last 16 years using the street space in a festival form in Thiruvananthapuram, every month. Its objective is to provide a space to deliberate on art and its role in the society. The space is free for artists, accessible to LGBT and disabled. To fund the performances, money is collected from the public every evening. At the start, there were only 50 people joining in, but now over 500 people participate, on an average.



The jackfruit themed lunch.

The first day of the sangam concluded with a musical performance by Jayachandran Kadampanad (a musician singer specialising in a bamboo instrument ensemble) and his band.



Kadamanad and his band performing for the Sangam participants.

Day 2

The second day started with the sharing of experiences/insights from the last day group discussions, bringing out shortcomings of the first day and planning for more alternatives focussed discussions. A few volunteers shared their experiences with the larger group.

Agriculture

MP Parameswaran of Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad spoke about the problems in the agricultural sector and the issues that farmers have been facing. He facilitated a discussion in the group around alternatives by bringing out some key pointers to think upon:

- reducing food miles for each panchayat,
- priority to food crops,
- priority to less water intensive crops
- local production of seeds
- local sale/support to local markets

A challenging question that one of the participants raised was: *What motivation is there for farmers to continue?* Apart from commercial and tangible incentives, farming has to be promoted as a way of life which can never be reduced to mere commerce.

Further discussion on agriculture involved sharing insights from the successful organic farming examples that have enhanced not only the livelihoods of the practicing farmers but have also improved their health status. Ever Green Army, a group of 120 farmers, have come

together to integrate organic farming with poultry and livestock. The attempt is to encourage agriculture as the main source of livelihood, which promotes dignity among the farmers. To spread the message across the state, they have created a Yuva Karshaka Samiti of around 6000 people from Trichur to Kasargod.

Some important steps towards finding alternatives

- the need to work on fisheries
- no to GM, no to hybrids
- organic input increase by 20% should be implemented
- traditional seeds to be encouraged
- less water intensive crops- encourage millets
- responsible water management- stop filling the wetlands

Is it only about the monetary return or also about health, social, fertility/respect for the land, and governance benefits? The need is to change the paradigm that does not see a farmers' knowledge equivalent to the knowledge of a scientist sitting in the lab. The revival of cultural festivals and traditions of multiple faiths is necessary to bring back the lost joy in the agriculture.

Sabir Hussain, the district coordinator of Kudumbashree, a women empowerment and poverty eradication programme enforced by State Poverty Eradication Mission, shared his experiences from the ground. The focus of the programme has shifted from livelihood/wealth enhancement to reduce dependence and create self-reliant communities. Kudumbashree has also started to work on supporting disabled, establishing rehabilitation centres for mentally challenged, awareness about the lifestyle choices and support for the elderly through social welfare schemes.

Governance

The group spoke about the need to reflect on the principles of *Swaraj - right to self-determination* and *Sahajeevan- living together in harmony with all*. Although in theory, a gram sabha is supposed to make its own plan but currently in Kerala (as in other parts of the country) gram sabhas are very unclear about the criteria for drawing the boundaries. Few experiments were shared that have attempted to activate the Panchayati Raj in Kerala by establishing Ward Vigilance Samiti that is expected to participate in water, agriculture, women/children related issues and the representatives have to report to Panchayat Development Samiti. Experiments and initiatives from different parts of the country like Mendha Lekha, Maharashtra; Homes in the City in Bhuj, Gujarat; Arvari Sansad, Rajasthan were shared to highlight the principles of direct democracy emerging from the ground.

Environment

The group shared various alternative initiatives in Kerala that aim to protect and conserve the environment.

- The backyard agro-forestry initiative by Prof. Thangaman
- Waste recycling into eight categories
- Green Marriages to reduce the use of plastics, thermocol, provide leaf plates
- Night-soil based biogas

- Altering the housing trends (small families living in huge houses),exploring alternative construction models.
- Initiatives like roof-top solar installation, cleaning up of canals/streams which started with one Gram Panchayat but became a district run program in few years.

Participants stressed that environment related discussions are mostly focussed on resistance; the need is to bring in alternative and more reformatory examples.

Education

The group discussed various pressing issues of mainstream education:

- Mainstream education is disconnected from life.
- The group felt that home schooling can be an option but it has to be examined contextually from the feasibility perspective. There is an increasing need to develop new tools to help in learning, such as, theatre, which can be very educative as well as an enjoyable tool for the students.
- A democratic space is needed to think about these issues.

Health

The current situation of the health sector in the state and the need of decentralised, community centred policy action was the broad ambit of discussion for this group. Community health workers (ASHA/USHA) should be given better status and power rather than be mere implementers of government programmes.

Also, there is a dire need to revive local health care systems, respect and invest in multiple health systems including in research and development, and create a platform for the people in the health sector to jointly push for alternative approaches.

Some participants raised the question of the *politics of food*? Is organic=vegetarianism? Are we part of resistance to Brahmanic imposition of vegetarianism? The need to respect various food traditions and choices while also looking at the environmental and social impacts was stressed.

The second day concluded with Kaikottikali, a folk dance performance by women from Adoor municipality.



Kaikottikali, a traditional dance form

Day 3

In search for alternatives

The Alternatives framework 'In Search of Alternatives' has been evolving since the inception of the sangam process. This note talks about what is an alternative, brings together various experiences from the ground, elucidates the principles/values emerging from these experiments, and helps in envisioning an alternative future. K.J. Joy introduced the framework to the participants, which triggered interesting discussions. There were some suggestions to the framework along the lines of adding youth perspectives, gender, and technology that have not been addressed comprehensively.

Another session was facilitated to critically reflect on the three day sangam process. The Sangam had stimulating discussions, varied perspectives, and a large audience on the first day accompanied with sumptuous local food. However, there were shortcomings like floating population, inadequate representation of alternative initiatives, no fisheries group, and very few adivasi and dalit groups.

The Sangam concluded with some brief follow up action points that can facilitate developing deeper engagement amongst the groups.

- Supplementary notes to the Alternatives framework from different perspectives
- Malayalam translation of the framework in simpler language (Pradeep/Ravi/Jobin)
- Reach out to the missing groups/movements (Ravi)
- Collation of initiatives towards alternatives (John)
- Documentation of alternative lifestyles through case stories.