

National Vikalp Sangam

Venue: Prakriti Sadhana Kendra, Udaipur

Date: 27-29 November 2017

Brief report



This report was compiled by Shrishtee Bajpai with inputs from Ashish Kothari, Bablu Ganguly and K.J. Joy.

Thanks to the note-takers at the Sangam -Fatima, Annora and Ashish and to John D'Souza and his team for video documentation. Pictures were taken by Ashish Kothari.

The National Vikalp Sangam was financially supported by Misereor.

Introduction

Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence) is an ongoing process that started in October 2014. It aims to provide a platform to constructively challenge the current 'development' paradigm, and bring together practitioners, thinkers, researchers of alternative initiatives to learn from each other, build alliances and collectively evolve alternative futures that are ecologically sustainable and socio-economically equitable. As part of the ongoing series (with 12 Sangams having been organised across India thus far), a National Vikalp Sangam (NVS) was organised on 27-29 November, 2017, at the beautiful Prakriti Sadhana Kendra of Vidya Bhavan, co-hosted by Shikshantar and Kalpavriksh. About 100 people from various backgrounds, ideologies and interests came together to share their diverse initiatives, discuss broader issues of development and radical alternatives, and build further collaborations. The Sangam witnessed stimulating discussions, some fascinating sharing of grassroots examples, a night session on the history of alternative movements, film screening, and exhibits of alternative products and work. Like most previous sangams, the food at the NVS was local and very delicious!

Background

Since the Sangam process is three years and 12 sangams old, people who have been the part of it felt the need to review the process, and collectively deliberate on its future. The initial sets of objectives were:

1. Share key points from the Sangams held in 2014-2017
2. Review what we have achieved, what we have failed in doing, including exciting moments and results, disappointments, and key lessons from these.
3. Share thoughts on the next phase of the process ... what to do in 2018-2020, how to do things better, what to change?
4. Share the experience of linking with other networks through the Sangam of Sangam process, and its objectives of trying to mobilise people for political change.
5. Consider resourcing for the next phase; any ways to make the process more self-sustaining?

But the organising team felt that for a diverse group like the one that had gathered at the NVS, including many who have not been part of the Sangam process before this, it would be better to reflect on the general state of the alternatives 'movement' with meta-questions that usually don't get discussed. Discussions on some of the original objectives were then forwarded to the Vikalp Sangam Core Group meeting that followed the NVS.



Day 1, 27.11.2017

The Sangam was held inside a lovely bamboo grove, the tall grasses framing the gathering like (as one participant observed) a cathedral's arches. It started with Manish Jain of Shikshantar welcoming participants and requesting them to give brief introductions about themselves and their work by listing four words that best define their work. It was an interesting sharing as people working in diverse areas shared their work ethics, elements of joy and reflection.

Following this, Ravi Badri of Ekta Parishad shared the tentative agenda for the three days and asked for suggestions. Collectively the following agenda points for the meeting were laid out

- Dialogues on what is an alternative, in the context of Vikalp Sangam.
- Aligning to find alternatives with all the experience present and discussions to be steered by the group rather than the organisers.
- Celebrate and honour the history of alternative struggle movements.
- Breakouts for smaller sessions each day, enabling deeper and more intimate sharing.

Post the agenda discussion, Ashish Kothari of Kalpavriksh introduced the Vikalp Sangam process, and spoke about alternative initiatives like Mendha Lekha, Timbaktu Collective 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. The process of Sangam is to give political strength so that we have cohesive standpoints to speak at various governance levels and strongly challenge the current state of affairs. In relation to the above context, there was a need to have this national level Vikalp Sangam for critical reflection at the process and combine the visions collectively to anchor us all ideologically.

Shankar Singh of MKSS enthused and delighted participants with his songs that had strong political content. His songs were like breath of fresh air as they beautifully captured the essence of discussions.



Post which the group divided themselves in 11 small groups to discuss a given question for 30minutes and then to cross pollinate groups and do another question for 30minutes. One person per group was supposed to document all the pertinent points. There were 11 groups in the first breakout session for the question:

What are the major trends that are aiding or hindering the alternative movements in India?

The following questions emerged out of the breakout sessions.

1. What is an alternative, what are the criteria we use to identify it?
2. Is there a decline of the discourse within civil society organisations, and lack of genuine volunteers; if so, what to do about it?
3. There is a worrying trend of formalisation and corporatisation of NGOs, how do we respond to it?
4. Do our movements/NGOs practice the values/principles we espouse?
5. Do we have space for critical self-reflection? How robust are processes of knowledge dissemination and co-creation
6. Are we losing out on learning's from the grassroots?
7. Relationship with the state, questions of mainstreaming/scaling up VS like processes, while retaining essential self reliance, possibilities of slow growth
8. How do we bridge the gap between struggle movements and organisations working on alternatives?
9. What is the relationship of spirituality and alternatives?
10. How can VS process engage with (and creatively channelise) disillusionment in the society, especially of the younger generation?

11. What are foundational values for building alternatives?



Acknowledging that all these questions are very pertinent, Ashish requested the participants to limit the scope of discussions, and also give space for sharing of ground-level experiences, as a three day confluence (and indeed the Vikalp Sangam process as a whole) cannot solve all the problems facing us.

The first day evening concluded with a book release of ‘Alternative Futures: India Unshackled’, a collection of 35 essays containing dreams, visions and pathways of reaching a just and sustainable India, edited by Ashish Kothari and KJ Joy. It was released by youth volunteers from Shikshantar representing the future, and Ajay Mehta as one of the hosts of the Sangam. After dinner, John D’Souza of CED showed a film with snippets of the past 12 Vikalp Sangams, giving an overview of the process.

Day 2, 28.11.2017

The second day started with a small nature walk in and around the beautiful campus, which contains over 100 acres of regenerated forest.



As people gathered for discussions, Shankar ji again regaled us with a fascinating song performance, titled ‘Kahab toh lag jayi dakh se’ (If I say something, they will instantly feel bad).

Post the songs, participants felt the need to maintain one minute silence in remembrance of activists who lost their lives in the recent past: Latha Anantha, Gauri Lankesh and Subha Rao.

Discussion the feedback

Radhika Bijnoyi from Video Volunteers shared the questions that emerged from the 1st day’s discussions, and converted them into some key pressing issues:

1. Lack of solidarity between different sectors
2. Alternative spaces become inaccessible for the communities
3. There isn’t enough space for community members to take leadership positions
4. Due to increasing formalisation of NGOs, there is delegitimization of local knowledge.
5. The cooption of alternative initiatives by state-sponsored initiatives.
6. The lack of collective democratic processes within the groups, often subject to strong hierarchies of power.
7. Lack of space for youth.



The discussions were not limited to just the issues that civil society is facing but also things that could aid our work (and are at times reflected in how we operate), such as:

1. Self designed work which is fuelled with ground level experience and peoples' knowledge
2. Strong community mobilisation and clarity of objectives that the movement aims to achieve.
3. New and creative ways of social mobilisation like social media.
4. Remaining decentralised and a greater clarity on what is an alternative.
5. Greater deliberation on human values, diversity and inclusion that can help us to transform the ways we work.

The above sharing led to intense discussions. People spoke about the need about alternatives in the context of conflict-ridden regions, such as Kashmir, central India, and north-east India. Since social movements don't exist in isolation, conflicts of various sorts need to be looked into when talking about alternatives. Some participants questioned the need to talk about the idea of nation state, as not everyone in India experiences democracy. The state is repressive and autocratic in many areas and talking about alternatives in such regions as to be looked through a different lens than other more 'peaceful' regions.

Discussion on the framework note

The Alternatives Framework note

(<http://kalpavriksh.org/images/alternatives/Alternativesframework5thdraftVSMay2017.pdf>) has been evolving since the first Vikalp Sangam in 2014. 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. Ashish introduced the framework to the audience, giving examples highlighting five spheres that form its foundation: 1. Ecological Wisdom and Integrity, 2. Social Wellbeing and Justice, 3. Direct/Delegated Democracy 4. Economic Democracy/Globalisation, and 5. Cultural Diversity and Knowledge Democracy.



The discussion around the framework brought forward the significance of values and principles that form its basis. Some participants felt that *Trust* should be the key value of the framework, while some expressed the need of *Love* to be the core value of the framework. Some participants stressed that perhaps the entire framework could be centred around the core idea and practice of *Swaraj*; others wondered if *spirituality* needed greater focus. Other comments were:

- The note should not be treated as ‘this is the answer’ but as ‘exploration’, including pathways to collective and individual transformation, and making sense of the nation-state and its alternatives.
- The need to keep integrity of the whole perspective, and not compromise by accepting achievement of 2 or 3 of the spheres as being adequate to be considered an ‘alternative’; but recognising also that most initiatives are ‘in process’ and none are or can be ideal, so so long as 2 or 3 are achieved sans violating the remaining spheres, it is acceptable. At the centre must be the values of pluralism, diversity, equality, sustainability, integrity, justice, inclusion, collective commons, and others not yet listed such as trust and love.

Even after a full day’s discussions, participants had the energy to go on after dinner, with a wonderful open-air, somewhat warmed by a coal-*angithi*, sharing of the history of movements leading up to where we are now. There was collective remembering of elders and collectives in social movements and non party political movements, actions and struggles between the early '70s and the early '90s. Starting with "Chipko" in the north and the Liberation Theology in the south (Tamil Nadu and Kerala) and ISI Jesuits and others, AICUF and its work, followed by JP's call for Sampoorna Kranti and the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, especially in Bihar, Kashtakari and related groups in Maharashtra, Rajni Kothari and CSDS, Fish workers movement in Kerala - Fr. Tom Kocherry, KSSP in Kerala (Silent Valley), the Southern Collective, Andhra Pradesh federation of Agriculture labour unions, Lokayan - Smitu Kothari, Vijay Pratap and others, followed by NBA and then Jan Vikas Andolan, MKSS and NAPM.



Day 3, 29.11.2017

The day started with birding and nature walk in and around the campus.

To start the last day, participants shared their reflections on the last two day discussions. Manish expressed a concern as to how alternatives are being co-opted by capitalism, about which we need to be careful. Also, it is important to deliberate on principles that are non-negotiable. In addition to that, our public and private lives must be congruent or we end up grappling with contradictions. Some people felt that we should explore ambiguities and dualism in our work and our lives, so that the enquiry/philosophy that comes out is for mutual benefit.

Some interesting questions were raised like: the new trends like green capitalism and renewable energies or eco-technologies emerging, what are the benchmarks to distinguish true alternatives? We need to crystallise our understanding of alternatives and what pedagogies to adopt. The future society should focus on courage and clarity along with enquiry. But crucially, what are the roadmaps to reach this new society? Vikalp Sangam is a movement itself, but how can this expand to larger society? We must put the onus on ourselves to practice all the principles and move from such a space. There is an urgent need to put ourselves to the test first. Rajiv Rajan of Ektha expressed this dilemma of justice being denied even at the Supreme Court of India, referring to a recent judgment that did not allow their intervention in a petition on the recent disability act.



Following some intense discussions in break-out groups, various ideas for the future of the Sangam process were shared, including holding confluences on Peace in conflict zones including Kashmir and central India, Alternative Media, Community and Alternative Health, Alternative Politics/Democracy and Swaraj, Inclusion and Disability, Alternative Economies, Western Himalaya, and others. Specific responsibilities were taken for these (see Annexure 1). The annex in this report is the consolidation by the VS Core Group (which met after the national Sangam) of various tasks and responsibilities.

The day concluded with a felicitation for efforts that staff and volunteers of Vidya Bhavan, Shikshantar, and Swaraj University had put in to make the confluence a comfortable and a memorable experience. Kishore ji recited Faiz Ahmad Faiz's beautiful poem

The Sangam had interesting exhibitions by Jagran Jan Vikas Samiti with the *gunis* (traditional healers), Millets of Mewar (Udaipur based, youth-run, restaurant), and the poster exhibition by Kalpavriksh. There was ample time in evenings/during breaks for participants to look at these and have informal interactions. In fact, many participants went to *gunis* in between the discussions to figure their ailments!





Conclusion

The national sangam was a incredible mix of diverse set of actors working on fascinating set of alternatives. While the discussions sometimes meandered and repeated things that civil society circles have debated for decades, many such issues are always worth resurfacing, and there was also exciting sharing of experiences from the grassroots, some scintillating remembrance of history of movements, and earthy planning for the future. Deeper questions on ethics within/between civil society organisations, the politics of alternatives, what we even mean by 'alternatives', were flagged, some discussed in detail during (or often between!) sessions, and some kept for later reflection. Overall, it was an encouraging endorsement of the need and relevance of the Vikalp Sangam process.

Annexure:

1. Vikalp Sangam Core group's specific responsibilities

Task List – VSCG 2017

Actions	Responsibility	Time Period
Maharashtra Youth Vikalp Sangam	Tarak Kate to report	Jan-Feb 2018
Madhya Pradesh Vikalp Sangam follow up (Alternative agriculture and Ken-Betwa)	Seema to report	Dec-Jan
Ladakh VS (Temple offering and garbage follow-up)	Tashi to report	
Disability/ Inclusion VS	Rajiv Ranjan, Seema, Sujatha Jo McGown Chopra and P.Venkatesh(to be asked)	Early 2019
Media Sangam	Radhika, Subranshu, Ram, and Abha Contact Point: Radhika	May-June or October 2018
Chhattisgarh Peace Process sangam	Subranshu, Mohan	April 2018
Health Sangam	Ritu Priya, Regi George	May-June 2018
Alternative Economies	Ravi (along with core team set up earlier)	September 2018
Western Himalaya	Abha, Malika, Lubna, Shaikh	Winter 2018
Well-being sangam	Milind	Mid 2019
Arts Sangam	Radhika Mulay	2019
Politics of Alternatives and struggle movements	John, Milind, Joy	Mid-2019
Democracy Sangam	Ashish, Nikhil and Mohan	Early 2019
Video on Vikalp Sangam	Radhika and Rahul (Shikshantar) using john's material	Before March 2018
Visual representation of Framework note	Atreyee and Blaise	
Four videos on alternatives	Bablu	Bablu – February 2018
Booklet on Vikalp Sangam putting together background note and Framework note	Ashish and Shrishtee	Feb- March 2018
Translation of the new booklet	1. Marathi- Suhas tai 2. Telugu-Bablu 3. Tamil-Sangeetha 4. Gujrati-Soma 5. Funding for these translations Ram to check	February 2018
Fund raising	1. Monthly donations- Bablu	Bablu - January to December 2018

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Norms reg. sources and use of funding- KV 3. Circulate funding needs- KV 4. Alternative currencies in VS process-John, Abhishek , Sangeetha 5. Fund-raising for alternatives in general- John, Sangeetha, Manish, and Subranshu 	
Process document for Sangam (best practices etc.)	Sangeetha to anchor along with Abhishek, Ravi, Sujatha, Ashish, John, Shrishtee, Malika and Joy	
VS discussion with Video Volunteers community correspondents	Radhika	Ongoing
Mapping of core group members(geographical, thematic and social)	Joyatri, Radhika, Vijay, and Soma	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Volunteer support group within VSCG 2. Forwarding internship request 	Namgail to peg along with collective core group efforts.	
Filling membership gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transgender (Suhas and Rajiv) 2. Fishworkers (Radhika and Abha) 3. Children's group(Joyatri) 4. Dalit groups (Vijay) 	
Future coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ideosync 2. Video Volunteers to check 3. Shikshantar (Manish to check) 4. Ektha <p>Core team: Ram, Radhika, Manish, Sangeetha,Rajiv and Ashish</p>	
Translation Equipment possibility for future sangams	Subranshu	
6-day retreat	Timbaktu Collective	December 2018