

# REVISTA LÜVO

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An artistic illustration of a woman with dark skin and hair, wearing a white dress and a pink flower headband. She holds a glowing blue globe of the Earth in her right hand. Two pink flamingos stand at her feet. The scene is framed by dark green foliage against a warm yellow background.

**VOCES DE LA TIERRA**  
Ecologías feministas

# REVISTA LÜVO

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# EDITORIAL

**Ashish Kothari**

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## VOICES FROM THE EARTH: FEMINIST ECOLOGIES

***Ashish Kothari has been working on environment and development since the 1970s. He is one of the founders of Kalpavriksh, an NGO on environmental and social issues. Kothari has taught at several universities and he is actively involved in social movements in India. Successfully engaged in both academia and activism, Kothari has written and edited several books on post-development, the pluriverse and alternatives futures. We are more than happy to share with you this insightful discussion.***

*One of the main contributions of Ashish Kothari has been his proposal of alternatives to the dominant economic and political global regime; alternatives that would contest capitalist, patriarchal, racist, statist and anthropocentric forces. With his colleagues, he developed the concept of Radical Ecological Democracy (RED), which brilliantly brings together concepts of democracy, ecological sustainability and social equity. Ashish, can you elaborate about the concept of RED?*

The concept of RED is rooted in several Indian social movements and community initiatives. I started working on environmental issues when I was in high school, more than four decades ago. At that moment, some colleagues and I started discussing topics such as conservation of nature and the protection of forests. We were based in Delhi, the capital of India. There are several urban forests in this area and, especially, it is the home to one of the world's largest urban forests. It was being destroyed so we mobilized young people to protest against the destruction. Fortunately, we ultimately managed to save it.

From that point onwards, we began getting in touch with a lot of people's movements fighting for livelihood rights, such as the Himalayan communities that were protesting against the destruction of their forests. Women were particularly active in those protests. I realized that environment is very closely related to economy, politics, culture and to relationships of gender, caste, class, etc. For the first 30 years of my life, I have actively participated in many resistances by local movements against hydroelectricity projects, mining, or any other kind of destructive development in the country and that is imposed also globally.

In the last 10 years, I have felt a little bit dissatisfied with working only within the framework of resistance. I felt that we should also propose something on what could be the way forward. For example, if we do not want large hydroelectricity projects and nuclear power, what sort of energy models do we want? If we do not want chemical farming, then what sort of models of agriculture do we want? If we do not want democracy that depends only on elections, then, what kind of democracy or what kind of governments do we want? These are really the core questions which have troubled not just me but a lot of people. In fact, you can see on the ground how

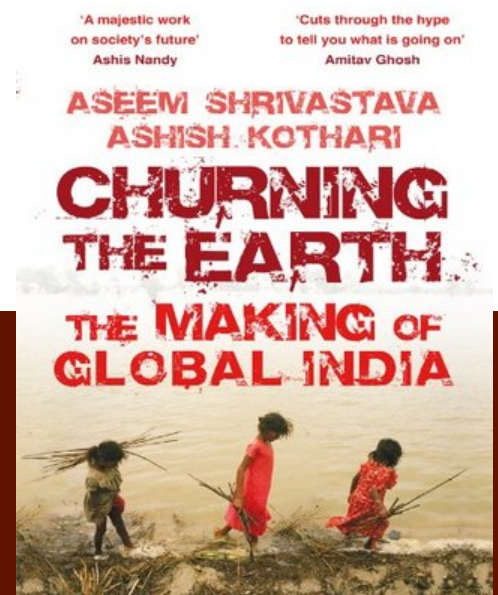
communities themselves have been actively looking to find solutions, even if they are facing problems, and especially without the support of the State. How do they achieve better food security? Or better governance for themselves as well as increased participation in decision-making? How do they move towards gender equality?

It was this quest for alternatives as well as the existing but ignored alternatives already active all over the country that motivated my further activism and research. The media does not cover them. Researchers do not study them. So the objective was to learn from those grounded initiatives, some of which we have known about for the last 30 years in community-led conservation and that we encountered in resistances against the Green Revolution, where we came across farmer organizations that were practicing sustainable agroecology. When we started to dig deeper in these kind of initiatives as well as a whole range of others related issues, in environment, justice, education, health, etc., we started to develop the idea of RED.

With my colleague Aseem Shrivastava, I wrote the book *Churning the Earth : the Making of Global India*, which analyzes the impacts of globalization in India since 1991. We developed this theoretical approach, which I later named Ecological Swaraj (or Eco-Swaraj; my co-author Aseem calls it) the concept of Swaraj being a very ancient one in India that was brought back into public memory by Gandhi during the independent struggles. For him, the struggle was not only about India's independence from British colonial rule, it was also a matter of autonomy and freedom for individuals and communities in a way that does not undermine anybody else's autonomy and freedom, where everyone assumes rights and responsibilities, constraints on their behavior, on consumption patterns and so on. This concept can also be extended to all species, not just human beings, and it was precisely to emphasize this that I added the "eco" prefix to the concept of Swaraj.

*How do you see the relationship between humans and nature?*

I usually try not to mark the difference between "us" and "nature" because we are part of the nature. In my own trajectory, I actually began as an animal rights activist in high school. What happens to other species and the rest of nature is something that is deeply important to me. Even if I am sitting at my home and I am looking out at a tree, I feel a connective bond. These are feelings that are naturally born in us. However, because of our urban lives, we are alienated from the rest of the nature. We do not have to be living inside the forest to feel it: I really think it is possible to find alternative ways of life by which we can reconnect with, for example, a bird that visits us in the morning, a tree outside our house, a plant in on my balcony or an insect at the dining table. I think it is this ability to connect with the rest of nature that we have to rediscover. It is an ability that indigenous peoples, for instance, find very natural. However, for some of us, most of the time, it has to be a more conscious effort. That is very much a part of the Eco Swaraj philosophy.



*Radical Ecological Democracy or Ecological Swaraj proposes an ecological, social, structural and political transformation. It includes the transformation of governance through ecological sensitivity, but it also questions local patriarchal practices.*

Forty-one years ago, I and others in Kalpavriksh went on a trip to the region of the Chipko movement, which is known globally as a people's movement in the 1970s, mostly comprising women protecting the forests by hugging them – actually, the Chipko means "to hug". In 1980 and 1981, we went from village to village and had meetings with the women. It was at that moment particularly that it became apparent to me that environmental issues are deeply embedded in gender and power relations and that patriarchal relationships – deeply rooted in India – are a huge and fundamental part of the problem.

I want to point out two examples to explain that. The first one is related to the conception and significance of "tree". In talking with people from many communities, we realized that the men in the villages were much more amenable to selling the timber, because they were dealing with the outside commercial world. The women, on the other hand, were the ones who were saying no to selling, because they considered trees as central to their livelihoods and also because they considered trees as their brothers (from a spiritual point of view). From this comparison, it was enlightening that where men were dominant, they were able to sell off the trees and forest, but where the women were able to assert their rights and their voices, they were able to protect the forest. The second example concerns the agricultural sector. One of the movements I have been very deeply inspired by is that of Dalit women farmers – Dalits are the so-called 'outcastes' or 'untouchables' in the Hindu caste system – in the state of Telangana in India. These women, belonging to the group Deccan Development Society, have revived the traditional diversity of seeds in their area, by going completely organic and local while having a total control over food sovereignty – not only food security. Their movement was deeply feminist: the soils were classified between female and male soils.

The female soils are the ones where they grow food for themselves (domestic consumption). The male soils are the ones where cash crops for the market are grown. These types of movements helps us to understand the interface between economy, culture, social relations and ecology. From that point of departure, it is clear that radical equality and democracy would need to have gender justice and gender equality as a pillar. It needs to be openly against patriarchy. I am conscious of the fact that I cannot fully articulate it as a man, but at least, I try to understand it and gender justice is an integral part of the idea behind RED.

*Many feminist critiques have warned about the slippery tendency of reifying deep structural inequalities under the new banner of diversity. Ashish you explain that diversity is also the very condition of humankind and nature. What does it mean for you?*

Diversity is one of the values at the core of the RED worldview because of the relations and the significance of both biodiversity and cultural diversity. The diversity of nature is essential because it is a part of how things have evolved and provides resilience to natural systems. It is at the center of our own human existence. Along with that evolved human diversity, culture, food, language, ways of being, ways of knowing, ways of talking, ways of dreaming. Everything is so incredibly diversified.

We had at some point at least 50,000 varieties of rice. This amount of variety did not come only from nature; it is also the product of farmers' creativity, in response to different agro-climatic soil conditions and to different human needs. Some were for productivity, some were for ritual, some were for health, etc.



THAT IS AT THIS MOMENT WHEN IT BECAME APPARENT TO ME THAT ENVIRONMENT IS A GENDER ISSUE, THAT IT IS DEEPLY EMBEDDED IN GENDER RELATIONSHIPS, AND THAT PATRIARCHAL RELATIONSHIPS ARE – WHICH ARE SO DEEP IN INDIA – ESSENTIALLY A PART OF THE PROBLEM."



this according to me is the interface of biocultural diversity. Without it we are doomed: if we build monocultural worlds, whether in biological terms, or in social and cultural terms, we do not have the resilience to withstand shocks and crises. For instance, if we take the pandemic of Covid-19, one of the interesting lessons from it is that where communities had access to greater diversity, both biological and social as well as cultural and economic, they were able to be more resilient to the crisis than where homogenization had taken place, and where consequently things collapsed.

Furthermore, the concept of diversity – or pluralism – is mainly related to what some colleagues and I call the pluriverse in a book on worldviews [1] about ways of relating to each other and relating to the rest of nature, or to the cosmos. How do we view all of this ? Again, we have had through history an incredible diversity of this and we still have a lot of it, even though a large part of this has been lost. To me, any movement towards it has to be able to respect what sustains it. Maybe even, increase it or bring back some of the older cultural forms that have been lost, such as languages.

[1] The book *Pluriverse : A Post-Development Dictionary* (2019) has been written by Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Artura Escobar, Federico Demaria and Alberto Acosta.

Therefore, it is not just a struggle against the homogenising nation-state and monocultures of the Western modernization advanced across the world by globalized development model, it is also against any imposition of a single alternative. You might come up with a wonderful alternative in one part of the world, find it fantastic and want to apply it everywhere. The whole idea of pluriverse is that: each alternative is relevant in its own economic, ecological, social and political context. From there, let us find ways to relate with each other and let us find common values such as solidarity, the commons, generosity and love, autonomy and interconnectedness. These could be the common threads in an otherwise extremely diverse range of worldviews that are relevant today. All of them in opposition to the dominant system.

FROM THERE, LET'S FIND WAYS TO RELATE WITH EACH OTHER AND LET'S FIND COMMON VALUES SUCH AS SOLIDARITY, THE COMMONS, GENEROSITY AND LOVE, AUTONOMY AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS. THESE COULD BE THE COMMON THREADS IN AN OTHERWISE EXTREMELY DIVERSE RANGE OF WORLDVIEWS THAT ARE RELEVANT TODAY. ALL OF THEM IN OPPOSITION TO THE DOMINANT SYSTEM.



Photo credit : Ashish Kothari

