



YOUTH STORIES

OF HOPE, RESILIENCE &
COLLECTIVE DREAMING

Volume 5

of the Extraordinary Work of
'Ordinary' People:
Beyond Pandemics and
Lockdowns

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Introduction

Can we dream of a future where the youth in India have vibrant and secure lives? Where every young person would have equal opportunities to develop and build self-confidence and esteem; to learn practical life skills; have equal access to secure and meaningful livelihoods as well as health care services, nutrition and safe food; to take decisions about their life's choices and to chart out their dreams that would ensure their well-being?

Can we help inculcate values that would form the basis for a world that is democratic, sustainable and equitable, where those like caring, respect, empathy, generosity, compassion and integrity form the basis of all our relationships, including those with non-human species?

India's youth constitutes around 27.5%* of its population. The pressing need is to have policies and programmes in place, that not only strive to address issues that vulnerable sections of youth face (youth marginalized by economic situations, gender, class, caste, disabilities and so on), but to also be able to reach out to all youth to lay the foundation for a just world.

The year 2020 exposed our society's severe fault lines even more, with COVID-19 bringing the entire world to an almost grinding halt. Everyone felt the impacts, but the disprivileged sections of society were the hardest hit by the sudden loss of livelihoods and jobs.

The months during the lockdown saw a large number of youth get involved in relief work, distributing food and other essentials to migrant labourers in the cities they were stuck in or on their long and arduous journeys home. While these efforts were laudable and were sorely the need of the hour, there were some young people who worked within their communities to build on the resilience that helped to stem the impacts of the lockdown.

There were also efforts by youth collectives, youth organisations and individuals who used the pandemic period to extend psychological support to cope with the stresses that the period created. This was crucial as the lockdown created many sources of anxieties: social isolation, insecurity of livelihoods and fear of ill health (one's own and of loved one's).

** Youth defined as those in the age group 15 to 29 years of age according to the National Youth Policy, 2014.*

Some urban and rural youth networks and individuals used their digital connectedness to their advantage: offering and participating in on-line courses that sought to deepen meaningful dialogues over issues, enhancing skills or nascent interests, protesting against proposed environmental legislation, or proposed mining, dams or other big ticket projects.

There was a visible increase in interest in growing one's food, to whatever extent was possible for people in different situations, especially cities. In villages, one heard of many instances where youth who had migrated to cities went back to their villages to help in farming, as well as students who used their time during the lockdown to help with their homestead gardens, or even help parents start them.

This document attempts to capture glimpses of some of these efforts and is an offering to keep hope alive. The pandemic made many young people realize how deep the fissures in society are, how fragile our planet is, and how scary futures could be. These stories of hope, resilience and collective dreaming by youth show that another world is truly possible. The hashtags we should popularize and that should trend are ones that reflect this other world!



Moments of love and joy

Prantakatha

We live in a world that is ravaged by divisions, prejudices, hierarchies and irrational presumptions that serve to separate us from each other. Some people are marginalised in different ways – as sex workers, as speakers of a different language in a foreign land, as manual scavengers, as children living in an orphanage, as women at a hostile workplace, and so on.

Prantakatha, a non-governmental organisation established in 2006 in Kolkata, believes in engaging with narratives that emerge from the margins (*pranta*) and the transformative potential of these diverse stories (*katha*) towards promoting active citizenship, especially in the youth. Prantakatha has worked on curating healing spaces for people, especially youth from different cross sections of societal margins, including hundreds of youth leaders from the LGBTQIA+ community. Based out of Kolkata, it currently works across West Bengal. The architecture of these spaces is such that people from different walks of life could hang around, make friends, share intimate stories of their personal journeys and help heal themselves. This helps them to transform their pain into power, enabling them to take leadership roles in their own communities. Through their membership in ComMutiny - The Youth Collective and the vartaLeap coalition they are taking their narratives of hope to a multitude of stakeholders. Over the last 15 years, Prantakatha has been able to touch the lives of many thousands of people by helping curate 560 stories so far.

Ador - caring and compassion

One of the initiatives started by Prantakatha youth is *Ador* which in Bengali means deep affection, love and care combined. Rabindra Sarovar, or Dhakuria Lake as it is popularly known in Kolkata, has been a place where many elderly widows come to beg for a living. Mostly in their late 60s, these white saree-clad women did not attract much attention, until some young people from Prantakatha intervened in 2017. They made an emotive pitch on social media about caring for these women, most of whom were abandoned by their families. They suggested that people could take care of some part of the living expenses of these 'grandmothers' and could in return get not only their blessings, but also some love and warmth.

The appeal went viral, and soon support started pouring in. Within a few years, with a network of caring citizens, none of the 32 widows needed to beg for a living and *Ador* became a morning intergenerational *adda*! Beautiful friendships flowered, with the youngsters also getting much in return: the warmth of a grandmother that they always craved for, having grown up in nuclear families or having lost one's grandmother. *Ador* also helped break down barriers of economic class, as people who came forward to support were largely from upper middle to upper economic classes.

Ador and the pandemic

A day before the Janata Curfew announced by the government in March 2020, the team at Prantakatha met the grandmothers and supplied them with two months of ration, fearing a difficult period ahead. In return, the grandmothers made a commitment to not venture out till the situation improved. Over the next seven months, these grandmothers stayed safe and avoided getting infected with COVID-19. During this entire period, Prantakatha youth arranged medical assistance and also continued to supply them with rations. The team got the necessary support from local police stations, the municipality officials and also from Cabinet Ministers living in South Kolkata. A memorable story in the *Ador* compendium is of how a well known personality in Kolkata was very ill with COVID-19. When he finally recovered after 38 days of being on the ventilator, he shared that he believed that his recovery was because of the prayers and love he received from the grandmothers at *Ador*!

Of late, a few organisations that work with children and run care homes, and families with working parents have started contacting *Ador* with offers to host the women if they can in return help take care of the children. *Ador* is now hopeful that their dream to see a self-sustaining community of grandmothers does not seem too distant.

#love #compassion #care #togetherness

Lessons

The most powerful lesson learned in the Ador journey is that the values of care and compassion are powerful vehicles of change, and that such stories have transformative potential.

Establishing direct contact and loving interfaces between marginalised people and the privileged could lead to long-lasting relationships that could break down societal divides and make for a more inclusive and just society.

Getting marginalised voices heard, especially amongst the youth, can go a long way to break down the many divisions that separate people.

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Photos by Prantakatha



Selfie smiles

Chinhari

Strengthening relationships, finding hope



Cultivating indigenous vegetables



Making brood lac bundles

'Chinhari: The Young India' is a collective of largely young women (not to the exclusion of men though) that works towards reconstructive praxis in remote locations of Chhattisgarh. The work engages with approximately hundred young women and men in five villages in the districts of Dhamtari and Kanker. Chinhari has been working on learning from sustainable ways of living and works towards habitable village life. Chinhari finds its drive in democratic ways of functioning and aims to work with the help of collectives (rather than single individual heads). In the last few years, Chinhari has collectively worked on questions of:

- nutrition leading to indigenous vegetable cultivation by young women
- changes in women's bodies – menstruation, childbirth etc.
- hands-on practical education through forms of open-learning centres
- indigenous lac cultivation as part of the rejuvenation of one's relationship with forests and painting and embroidery as forms of creative expression.

Amidst the economic meltdown and the fear that COVID-19 brought about, Chinhari focused on exploring how transformation could be brought about and made efforts to engage with the consequences of the pandemic.

Chinhari's efforts during COVID-19

As in many other parts of the country, the villagers in Chhattisgarh were impacted by COVID-19 and the lockdown – both economically and psychologically. Their source of income had become limited. They were restricted to their households. Meeting friends and relatives from within and outside the village too had serious consequences. The fear of contamination, the scare of contracting the disease overwhelmed everyday life. Older associations and human connections now looked suspect.

In such a situation, Chinhari's young women found it difficult to meet. They waited for the pandemic to end. However, as months passed, they knew they needed to learn to live with the fear of this disease. One could not ignore the effects of the pandemic, including that of the lockdown on the people in the village. They started thinking of other ways of coming together to continue their learning sessions. Soon, they slowly started using one shared telephone on loudspeaker to have educational audio sessions and discussions with the young women. Through such a series, they got together to study history, the human body, rural economy, developmentalism etc. More than education this meant a reforging of lost bonds and broken communication. The young women started borrowing books from a small library created by Chinhari in each village. They read books like "Pracheenta ka Bhavishya" by Helena Norberg, "Hind Swaraj" by M. K. Gandhi and stories about adivasi life worlds by Mahashweta Devi.

As the lockdown extended and the number of COVID-19 cases kept rising the young women started to find activities to route their anxieties towards something creative. Some of them started to draw and paint; it was a kind of spontaneous expression. Painting during the pandemic made sense to the group for two important reasons:

- the young women could draw and paint at their own homes and yet participate in a process of communing through the sharing of the drawings and paintings; they connected with each other through lines and colours
- painting was a mode of expression, perhaps a way to vent out their anxiety

The 3rd Chinhari Newsletter carried some of their paintings. The turn to the art-form or art-praxis seems to be an important one, that made us rethink the art of human development (and not the science of goods and services). The misery of COVID-19 had accidentally opened them to the hope of rethinking human bonds. In the time of social distancing they had rekindled human intimacies through lines, curves, borders, shades and colours. The multiple shades of unconscious emotions in the lives of the young women found form in the paintings. Life was not all that shrivelled; there were sprouts of hope.

Besides the amateur exploration of the art form, the young women tried to share the economic burden in their households by cultivating indigenous vegetables in their backyard during the kharif season of 2020. This initiative took form in 2019. A health check-up in 2018 had revealed a condition of anaemia among most young women. This made them not only encourage their families to cultivate indigenous rice, but also decide to cultivate indigenous vegetables themselves as indigenous rice and vegetables carry greater nutritive content. Chinhari has intensively worked on reviving the food patterns of the forest societies it works in (with the help of [Basudha](#)).

#hope #womenstories #gramswaraj

During the same time the young women found inspiration and joy in learning about their forests. Forests are an intimate part of adivasi worlds. Chinhari found, with the youth of forest societies, a window to rethink the changing relationship between adivasis and the forests, especially when the capitalist market has been an important catalyst in this change. The young members researched the forest and its history. As they together researched the forest, they learnt about the variety of produce their forests had and had lost. One of these was lac (*Kerria lacca*). In July, 2020 the young women learnt about lac cultivation (with the help of the [Centre for Development Practice](#)) and started the process of cultivating indigenous lac. The young women collectively reared the organically nurtured lac insects.

The pandemic has paradoxically been a window of hope, one that has shown the world (especially the rural and the poor) the consequences of dependence on the State, the market and the cities. Chinhari has worked through the pandemic to spread the word of rural self-reliance (Gandhian Gram Swaraj).

Lessons

Nurturing relationships within communities (especially amongst women, men and nature) can become pillars of support in times of unexpected upheavals or crises. Community building is perhaps the primary need for a self-reliant village. Art can play a crucial role in not only expressing one's anxieties, but can also be a great tool for bringing communities together. A less anxious mind is more attentive towards the Other; and without the Other there can hardly be a community.

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See also:

'Hope in the Times of Pandemic' video story: <https://youtu.be/HbDPeuRf9SA>

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Photos by Amit Shehrawat

Channel 5

Online listening spaces



Online sessions of Channel 5

The Blue Ribbon Movement (BRM) is a Mumbai based youth-led movement that works on building youth leadership and connected communities for a better world. It believes in the principles of deep democracy, and practices 100% consent-based decision making.

As humans, we are innately social beings and seek belonging. The intense, fearful times of the crisis further deepened this need as well as the need for caring support systems. The primary aim of 'Channel 5: Online Listening Spaces' was to help people cope with the COVID-19 lockdown. It nurtured the socio-emotional wellbeing of individuals with support from the community as the world took its time to get back to normalcy. This need was high for people in urban areas, who are so disconnected and walled up in concrete buildings, often without any meaningful social relations.

In light of COVID-19 and the lockdown that was announced throughout the country, members of the Blue Ribbon Movement went into an inward inquiry which led them to the realization that they were among the more privileged people, and as technology users also had the capacity to convene online. The team was able to hold different kinds of conversational and listening spaces – some just for the younger fraternity to lighten up and let one's hair down, and some spaces for the adult community that were more intentional. Their ability to hold diverse relations and the collective's strength to facilitate spaces enabled them to come up with an online listening space for the community while also using the collective's strength to facilitate it.

#community #supportsystem #listeningspaces

On 27-28th of March 2020 the volunteers of BRM hosted the first edition of Channel 5: Online Listening Spaces. Sessions were facilitated by their young leaders on what challenges people are facing, how to make sense of the crisis, how to act together while also having loads of fun! Over 50 people joined in the different spaces that were offered and some of them continued beyond just one session. Participants joining these sessions were still trying to make sense of what was happening in the world around them, and found the space to be a peaceful corner that helped them pour out their hearts. Sitting in his car for hours, a participant started crying as he just couldn't put words to explain the complex emotions he was experiencing. He has been a regular participant ever since.

The month of April 2020 saw a brief second edition of Channel 5. It had around 60 participants across 3 days with various sessions on listening and sharing stories of life together. The power of these sessions was that no one was trying to offer any solutions to the problems. Channel 5 was just offering a space for the participants to be themselves, share their anxieties and be reassured that they were not alone.

By the end of the third edition in June 2020 they had over 150 participants from across the country, with more participants joining in as the word spread. The love and the warmth was just as deep. This edition saw sessions ranging from Listening, to Dialogue, to Self Care, to Midnight Conversations on Siblings and Love. It was rewarding when participants shared what these sessions meant to them. Some of them are quoted here.

"It's been fun being a part of Channel 5 since the start. I got to see a different aspect of life, all thanks to Channel 5." – Divya Rawal

"(Channel 5 is) a beautiful gathering. It was exactly something I needed." – Sid Kubavat.

In the month of September and October 2020, Channel 5 saw 3 sessions on topics ranging from love, to pop culture to summer vacations. It held a light, fun space for people to join in and share as the world around them started getting back to some degree of normalcy. What was amazing was the trust that people had in the space as they shared many different stories: Tinder stories, to stories of love gone sour, to how summer with their grandparents is a time they still miss as adults and so on. Puja, one of the participants, shares: *"Channel 5 has touched upon some unique topics that are not frequently talked about. The sessions were well managed. All the facilitators held a safe space for participants and made it possible for them to express their views."*

#community #supportsystem #listeningspaces

Aasana Shah, the anchor of this programme and one of the youngest in BRM shares: *"This space is really close to my heart. It was our way of offering to the world a way of reconnecting back to communities while nurturing young facilitators as they held these listening spaces."*

Lessons

The importance of preventive efforts to engage youth in a constructive way was amplified by the efforts of Channel 5, showing how these are so much more important than attempting curative efforts later.

Society is deeply conditioned to believe that good work costs money. However, efforts like this highlight that when a group of people feel the need and offer their energies voluntarily, very intense work can happen. And a group of genuinely concerned people that runs on volunteer energy could be far more valuable and deeply impacting.

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Shramik Sammaan

Facilitating rural livelihoods for migrant labourers



Cold press oil manufacturing plant installed in Bihar



Women in Faridabad making bamboo baskets

The national lockdown left the majority of the migrant labourers in the country stranded without basic support and left them undignified. The inequity that played out in the times of the pandemic was what prompted Bilal Khan, a young 29 year-old housing rights activist based in Mumbai, to address the issue. The initial phase starting from March 2020 was of firefighting, doing relief work that was required immediately and urgently. This included getting material resources including food and access to healthcare for the needy during the lockdown period.

The lockdown also forced lakhs of migrant workers to walk back hundreds and even thousands of kilometres barefoot to their native place once they lost their daily wage. And with the need to engage in more constructive work, the *Shramik Sammaan* (dignity of labour) project was initiated in August by Bilal along with his friends Lara Jesani (a human rights lawyer) and Anil Hebbar (an entrepreneur), with the objective to generate employment and provide livelihood and economic opportunities for the migrant workers. They reflected that migration was caused by the current model of development that concentrates opportunities and services in certain pockets like the cities alone.

Shramik Sammaan was envisioned keeping in mind M. K. Gandhi's idea of decentralised model of development, which could be achieved by supporting local livelihoods in smaller towns and villages. This would ensure that people are not forced to leave their homes in search of work and live under miserable conditions in big cities where their employment is neither protected nor guaranteed. A focus on localisation would mean that people have more say over their resources and its utilisation, and create further employment opportunities. Massive environment destruction can also be avoided by means of creating a local market base.

#livelihoods #localisation #gramswaraj

A [crowdfunding campaign](#) was initiated through Helping Hands Charitable Trust with actor Manoj Bajpayee and his wife Shabana Raza as promoters. 2020 being India's 74th year of independence, Shramik Sammaan aimed to fund 74 projects over the period of a year. 30 livelihood projects have been funded so far in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, Haryana, Tripura, Gujarat and Maharashtra. These have been supported with knowledge, guidance and resources.

Following were the criteria considered while selecting projects to be supported:

- Show integrity, fairness and transparency in the activity
- Do all dealings with no fraudulent intentions
- Provide employment to manual/unskilled/casual labourers
- Make use of local resources and knowledge
- Provide skill development, creating employability and new ventures
- Innovative and environment options friendly with low carbon footprint
- Sustainable and replicable

Training programmes were conducted on making bamboo products, self-care products such as soap, oils, etc. in Bihar, Tripura and Mumbai. One of the training programmes in Bihar was to help farmers to make their own compost to use in their farms so that they are not dependent on chemical fertilisers that are both expensive and toxic to the environment and crops. A *kachchi ghani* (cold press oil plant) was installed in Bihpur village of Bhagalpur district in Bihar, which provided job opportunities at the local level and also created a direct market for farmers.

Another project was for the women of the Banswara community in Faridabad who migrated from Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and traditionally used to make bamboo and cane products such as baskets, coasters, mats, etc. These women workers earned meagre amounts, lost everything during the COVID-19 lockdown and had no earnings to even take care of their daily food requirements. Shramik Sammaan came forward to help them restart the making of the bamboo products. 17 women artisans found employment and livelihood through this and these baskets and other bamboo products are now being sold in Faridabad and Delhi. Gulab Kali, Genda, Ram Kali and other women workers who have restarted work through this project, are happy to be doing what they love doing and are so good at, and to be making their livelihood through their traditional skills.

#livelihoods #localisation #gramswaraj

Other projects supported so far include poultry farms, food stalls, cloth shop, furniture shop, mask making, etc. More than 500 lives have been impacted so far through these 30 projects. They are in the process of funding more projects and creating an online platform to promote the sale of local products in their respective areas of production.

To facilitate the creation of local livelihoods, the Shramik Sammaan team is also working on understanding the different local issues that cause people to migrate. For example, they noticed that most of the migrant workers from Bihar they interacted with, owned their own land, but the annual floods made the dependence on farming unstable, hence pushing them to migrate to the city for work.

Lessons

It is important to find answers for the reasons behind people migrating, and address the cause and not just the effect. The vast number of proposals the Shramik Sammaan team received suggests that people want to become self-reliant and earn their living with dignity. But the environment at the local level has to be conducive for any local enterprise to thrive. Hence, it becomes even more important to invest greater energy in terms of creating livelihood opportunities in the interior parts of the country.

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See also:

<https://www.facebook.com/Shramik-Sammaan-108008767667503>

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Photos by Shramik Sammaan

Green Worms

Livelihoods in waste management



Haritha Karma Sena (SHG women) of Chaliyar Gram Panchayat taking waste to their Material Collection Facility

Green Worms is a social impact-oriented waste management organization based out of Kozhikode, Kerala, which functions on the principles of minimizing waste generation, diverting wastes from landfills and oceans and providing dignity to people working in the waste management sector. With a vision of 'zero waste' fuelling its works, Green Worms has been reaching out to provide a scientific system of waste management to government bodies, private companies, brand owners and community organizations. Green Worms has had very humble beginnings. Jabir Karat, a young man from a remote village in Kerala set out on a journey to learn about waste management from the very grassroots level. Jabir, the founder of Green Worms, worked for a few months as a waste picker in 2014, to understand deeply the issue that he wanted to work on.

As a waste management company, their journey begins and ends with waste. 85% of the waste they manage is non-biodegradable, non-recyclable waste. The main sources of these wastes include households, commercial establishments, industries and FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) brands and pharmaceutical companies. They have successfully recycled over 27,720 tonnes of waste in the past five years.

Green Worms also helps to organise zero waste events for their clients, where all the waste generated is reused, recycled and composted, so that none of it ends up in the landfill. Awareness and training programmes on zero waste are conducted for institutions, with the intention to reduce consumption patterns in the first place. They also support women to form self help groups (SHGs), train and handhold them to run waste management plants, making them 'wastepreneurs'.

Addressing COVID-19

With COVID-19, the consumption of single use and disposable items had increased, which meant more waste had to be managed. Major interventions were done by Green Worms by collaborating with Local Self-Government bodies for the end-to-end management of Municipal Solid Waste. They reached out to more Panchayats and Municipalities who were seeking waste management solutions and offered their services. Since April 2020, Greens Worms has collaborated with 19 Panchayats and Municipalities (ten in Kerala, five in Odisha, two in Tamil Nadu and one each in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana). This not only provided relief to these Panchayats and Municipalities in terms of managing their waste, it also created employment opportunities for passionate youth and livelihood opportunities for more than 200 women from SHGs. As their work expanded, Green worms recruited nine employees, one intern and four fellows, all young individuals in the age group of 20 to 31. This was at a time when most organisations and companies in other sectors were laying off their employees, following COVID-19.

One of the SHGs supported by Green Worms during COVID-19 times was in Chungathara Gram Panchayat in Malappuram district of Kerala. The women were earning only Rs. 2000 per month each, and the collection of waste from households was also disrupted due to the lockdown. At the same time, the previously collected waste had also piled up. That was when Green Worms intervened, supported them with training and guaranteed the buyback of waste. Earlier, 80% of their revenue came from household collection of waste, but 60% of the time went into segregation. Now with guaranteed buyback of the waste, their monthly revenue increased, with an assured earning of Rs. 350 per day for the women. This supported many households, as some of these women were the sole breadwinners of the family with their husbands having lost their work due to COVID-19.

Awareness sessions on safety standards were organised for the SHGs and employees, and all field workers were given hygiene and safety materials. This led to the restart of door-to-door waste collection from households. As the recyclers were reluctant to accept the waste from hospitals, the segregation standards were restructured, and the collected waste was even disinfected. All precautions during collection, segregation and transportation of the wastes were taken. With the rising demand for responsible management of waste, operations were started in Odisha, Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep. The work in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana was also expanded. 5000 MT of waste was managed by Green Worms between April to December 2020.

Lessons

It is important to find opportunities in times of crisis to stay resilient. Addressing the changed situation and new challenges that arise can thus have a positive social impact.

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See also a short video on the 5 years journey of Green Worms providing hope, dignity and employment: <https://youtu.be/u12SXD865LI>

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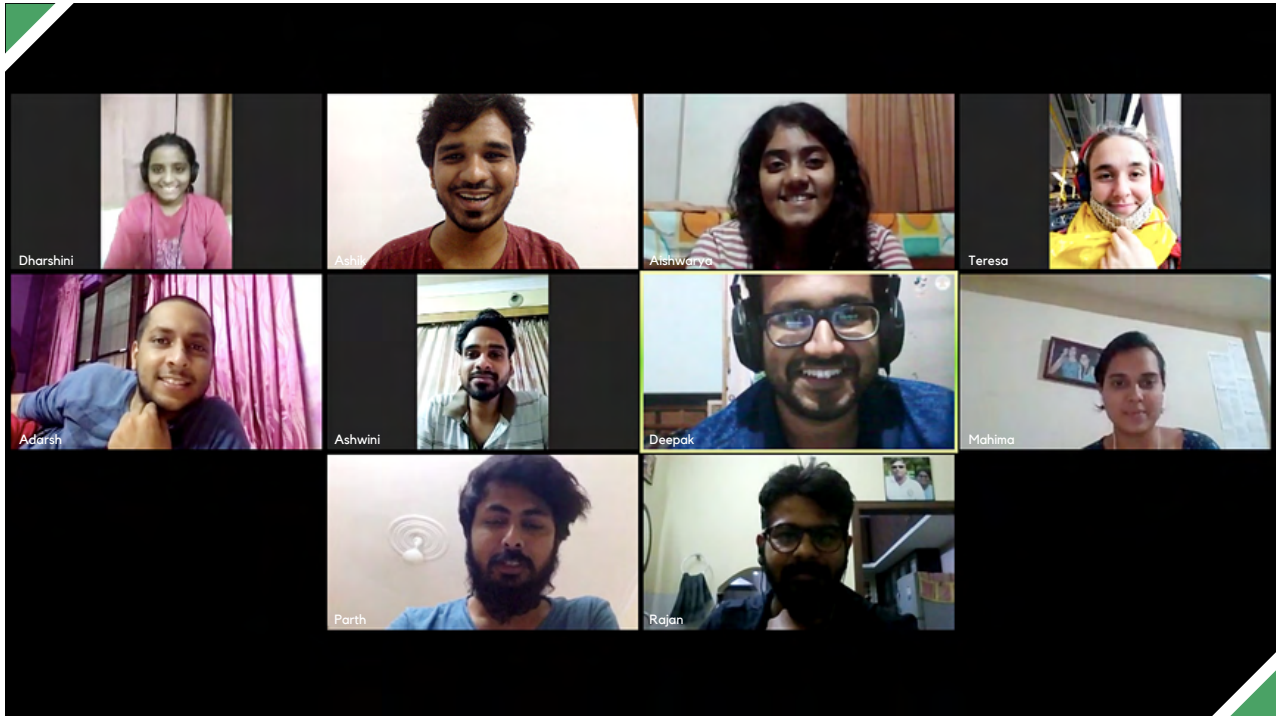
Photos by Dhineesh Verona



SHG women of Pulpatta Gram Panchayat segregating waste at their material collection facility

Exploring Swaraj

Dialoguing towards affirmative actions



From one of the Zoom sessions of Exploring Swaraj

As the nationwide lockdown was introduced in India on March 23rd 2020, Ashik Krishnan had an intuition that it would continue for long and that it would take time for the situation to return to normal. The idea of Swaraj, a concept he had been trying to understand, engage with, and incorporate in his life since the previous two years, became even more [alive within him](#). He believed the answer to the majority of the challenges he observed in the modern world — concentration of wealth and power, inequality in access to resources, degradation of natural ecosystems, hoarding of knowledge and information, centralized systems of operations, class struggles, and more — was in Swaraj. The plural aspects of Swaraj — self-rule/self-governance/self-reliance/sovereignty/autonomy/freedom — had to be explored, given the many restrictions COVID-19 brought along with it.

Through Travellers' University, the organisation he is a co-creator of, Ashik initiated an online study circle to explore the idea of Swaraj in both theory and practice. Travellers' University is a platform to facilitate those who are interested in travelling to deepen their knowledge and understanding of themselves and the world, and are looking for alternative choices in learning. Individuals are encouraged to venture outside their academic and work life to engage with questions that perturb them, and work together to find their answers. The study circle was planned as a series of 7 sessions, with the book 'Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule' by M.K. Gandhi as one of the tools to facilitate the discussion. The programme found 9 participants, all young individuals who were in the process of designing and defining their own paths.

Some of the common threads that connected all the participants were that they were all concerned and interested in the question of sustainability. They were either working on or exploring alternative education models, and they questioned mainstream ideas of development and progress. The programme slowly evolved into 19 sessions spread over 2 months.

'Exploring Swaraj' started with the participants discussing the plural crises they observed around themselves. The group collectively set the intention on the topics and questions they wanted to engage with. In the following days, they explored what the idea of Swaraj meant to them, and how they defined their own Swaraj, given the plural realities they were in.

Some of the common understandings aggregated were as follows:

- Awareness of one's own Self
- Awareness of one's needs and wants
- Taking ownership and responsibility of one's actions
- Self-reliant and self-sufficient communities
- Localisation – fostering local economies, knowledge systems, etc.
- Understanding one's relationship with Nature
- Understanding the interconnectedness of various systems and one's role in it
- Mechanisms and processes to facilitate a just world

The process involved dialoguing based on the content of 'Hind Swaraj' or on some reflective questions the participants posed, such as the 'extent of use of machinery' or 'the kind of future we envision for ourselves', etc., looking at the commonalities and differences in the sharings of the participants, arriving at a common ground, followed by collective dreaming.

They looked at their relationships with the various systems they were part of. Each individual took action steps they would incorporate in their day-to-day life, to journey towards claiming or reclaiming their own Swaraj. This included action steps such as learning to cook, growing one's own vegetables, decluttering one's wardrobe, analysing one's consumption patterns, figuring out home remedies and herbs, etc. Progressively, space was created for participants to share the ideas they wanted to work on, that would enable them to journey closer towards their definitions of Swaraj, and receive support from the group for the same. This involved each participant presenting their project idea to the group, followed by critical questions being posed to the idea holder, and then support rendered to them by the group in terms of skills, resources and expertise.

#swaraj #studycircle #cocreation

Different participants found common ground and synergy with the ideas shared by others, and there also arose a collective intention to collaborate and co-create. As a result, three projects came alive through the programme. Three of the participants, Mahima Thakur, Aishwarya Pradip and Adarsh Mohandas came together to design '[Aatmana](#)', an initiative to act towards self-reliance by making sustainable, chemical-free, daily-use, self-care products such as hair oil, tooth powder, shampoo and bath powder. The programme was offered as a series of weekly webinars, which found 16 participants. As the first version was [successful](#), Aatmana was offered once again, with another 16 people participating this time. Mahima Thakur designed and facilitated '[Meeting Self](#)', a workshop to connect with oneself through questioning, mindfulness and journaling. Ashik initiated '[Learning City Thrissur](#)' along with Aishwarya Pradip and Adarsh Mohandas, an idea he had been pondering over for two years, that brings in the ideals of city-based, context based, lifelong learning and action. After the positive feedback 'Exploring Swaraj' garnered from its participants, it was offered once again. The second edition supported one of the participants Mina Jaleel to design and facilitate a context-based learning programme for children.

Lessons

For youth who are disgruntled with the status-quo and are questioning the current paradigms of progress and development and are seeking to chart paths that are different from the usual ones, having spaces where they can share, dialogue and draw strength from other co-travellers is very important. It is also important that these spaces are non-judgemental to encourage dialogue and personal sharing. If given the right opportunities, youth are inclined to work in collaboration, and have the capacity to take affirmative actions.

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See also:

<https://ashikk-krishnan.medium.com/exploring-swaraj-c482a6ce68a>

Community Connect Challenge

Building leadership and civic awareness in youth



The Blue Ribbon Movement (BRM) is a Mumbai based youth-led movement that works on building youth leadership and connected communities for a better world. It believes in principles of deep democracy and practices 100% consent based decision making. The Community Connect Fellowship (CCF) is BRM's flagship programme. It was started with the intention of engaging the youth of Mumbai in constructive action while increasing civic engagement and building interpersonal skills of the fellows.

Due to the pandemic the fellowship was put on hold in 2020 and this gave the team the opportunity to rethink, reflect, redesign and reinvent the fellowship. To continue their civic journey and to engage youth meaningfully with fun and learning, BRM came up with a two-week online civic challenge called 'Community Connect Challenge' (CCC) with the intent of building youth leadership and civic understanding for local action in Mumbai. The CCC journey was a fresh perspective for the participants as they came to see the city of Mumbai through a different lens. It looked at the city's history and culture, and helped reconnect participants with their identity as Mumbaikars. It also helped them to take the small steps required to be an active citizen.

#civicduties #civicrights #activecitizenry

CCC included four skill building sessions and 21 post session tasks. The focus of these sessions was to build an intentional relationship with Mumbai from a holistic lens beyond a geographical place they were born in or moved to. Through different activities, the participants connect to different aspects of the city: its food, its public spaces/places, its defining moments or events and so on. It also included understanding the civic system of Mumbai, citizens' rights and duties and building communication skills like listening and those required to work in a community.

The real "Challenge" however was the post session tasks. The 21 tasks gave the participants a hands-on experience of what they learnt in the sessions. Some of the tasks included talking to one's house help to understand how COVID-19 had affected them, filing a civic complaint, understanding the local Municipal ward amenities or simply doing a random act of kindness.

A fellow taught her domestic help, driver and their families how to file a civic complaint. She helped them file a complaint about their water supply, which they had been facing for a long time. Their children also got involved, and had an opportunity to learn something new and helpful while in lockdown.

The first batch of CCC started in the month of July 2020. By December, 4 batches of 63 participants completed the programme and had worked on a wide range of tasks. The programme gave hope and confidence to the young participants that they could bring about change. At times when they were feeling lost and alone in their homes, CCC became a platform for them to share their thoughts and interact with like minded people. The hope is that this short journey will ignite in the youth a larger sense of belonging to the city and a wish to give back to the communities that have nourished them.

#civicduties #civicrights #activecitizenry

Lessons

In diverse large metropolitan cities like Mumbai and even in towns, it is important to build connections with where one lives, learn about and take ownership and responsibility for one's immediate surroundings.

Building civic awareness in a practical manner is important for building active citizenship. Getting youth involved in civic issues is a crucial step towards fulfilling one's responsibilities and bringing about desired change.

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The image is a screenshot of a presentation slide titled "Mumbai: A city of diverse cultures" with two heart icons. Below the title is a yellow banner that says "Me and others in the city". The main content area features a collage of images: a large crowd celebrating with a deity, people throwing colored powder, a large crowd at night, a man in a white turban, a night view of The Shalimar Hotel with fireworks, and a large crowd at a festival. Overlaid on the right side of the slide is a video call window showing four participants: Kejal Savia, Prathamesh M, Pankhuri, and Chirag Nagpal. At the bottom of the slide, there is a navigation bar with icons for back, forward, search, notes, printer, captions, text, and exit, along with the text "Slide 12".

Beejotsav

Strengthening relations between farmers and consumers



The makeshift vegetable shop on the pavement set up following COVID-19

'Beejotsav Nagpur' is an attempt to directly connect organic and natural farm producers with consumers to reduce the exploitation and adulteration in the food value chain. Started in 2013 as a response to the degradation in the food value chain in Vidarbha region, it has grown by leaps and bounds in the last eight years. It is a voluntary movement consisting of organic farmers, seed savers, urban farmers, and consumers. They believe that safe, chemical-free food and healthy biodiversity is the right of every citizen and their movement is a step towards making it available to the people.

Akash Naoghare started his journey with Beejotsav at the age of 21 as a volunteer for the first seed festival in 2013. He became one of its core team members the following year. The seed festival has been organized in Nagpur every year to celebrate seed diversity, organic farming and sustainable lifestyle choices. In 2019, the festival marked the participation of around 20,000 people from all over India. The sharing of indigenous seeds, agricultural experiences and organic food during the festival has led to the building of networks among the producers as well as strengthening the producer-consumer relationships. This is one of the main events organized by Beejotsav Nagpur. Apart from this, they organize awareness programmes, kitchen garden workshops, seed exchanges, farm exposure programmes and safe food conferences with communities, schools, colleges and other groups. They are also involved in policy advocacy work in the area of organic farming and seed sovereignty.

#farming #food #relationships

'Beejotsav Nagpur 2020' which was to have been organized in March could not happen due to the COVID-19 related lockdown. The group continued their awareness work and workshops using the online mode. However, the strong connection of the Beejotsav community with the farmers and the consumers of Nagpur led to an on-ground initiative during the lockdown. Akash, along with his friends Devendra Thakre, Vikram Padole and Ashwini Aurangabadkar Tai (a farmer associated with Beejotsav), organized a vegetable market from July till the first week of December connecting around 15 farmers and 30-35 consumers every Saturday. It all started with a call for help from some farmers around Nagpur who were part of the network and were not able to sell their produce due to the COVID-19 restrictions. At the same time, consumers were also not able to get fresh farm produce at a reasonable price. This led to the idea of procuring vegetables, pulses, cereals and other food items and making them available to consumers at a makeshift shop on a pavement.

The modus operandi of the initiative consisted of calling up the farmer groups, checking to see what produce was available and making a list of the same. Saturday was harvesting day. Akash and his friends would travel on their two-wheelers to the farms, which were at a distance of 60-70 kilometers. They would then help to harvest the vegetable produce and bring it back to Nagpur. The farmers would bring cereals, pulses and other groceries periodically and these would be stored at Ashwini Tai's place. The team paid a fixed price of Rs. 35 per kg for all the vegetables after discussions with the farmers and coming to a consensus. This price was decided on the basis that it was more than what the farmers were getting from wholesale dealers and it would also make the farm produce accessible to more consumers.

The market was organized every Saturday from 3:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., and the produce sold out completely. The consumers were informed about the market through different social media platforms. The trust and confidence among people of Nagpur built through Beejotsav's work over the years led to spreading the word easily about the market among consumers. The initiative was well received, and on an average, they were able to sell vegetables and grocery worth Rs.15,000 every Saturday. Occasionally, some of the farmers managed to come to the market to interact with the consumers, which helped them to know how their products were being received. The market was discontinued in December 2020 when the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. However, Akash and his team continued to cater to a few consumers, delivering some food products like honey, jaggery, etc. available with them.

#farming #food #relationships

Having tried out this weekly market, Akash now has plans of setting up a fair share shop with the Beejotsav team, which will provide organic produce to the people of Nagpur on a regular basis. They plan to buy the produce from the farmers at a fixed MSP throughout the year, which will provide the farmers with basic assured support. Akash realised through his work at Beejotsav that the awareness that they created about eating safe food had a negative spin-off. Fake products started to appear in their markets in the name of "Organic". He intends to address this issue by providing authentic organic produce through this shop.

Lessons

Farmers can be connected to nearby cities, towns and villages and helped to sell their organic produce directly to consumers, thereby avoiding big companies and middle-persons who exploit them. But it is imperative in this process to build consumer-farmer relationships and connections which leads to trust. These relationships can be mutually beneficial not just in times of crises, but at all times.

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See also:

<https://www.facebook.com/nagpurbeejotsav/>

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Photos by Beejotsav team

Farm2Food Foundation

Farming for future, farming for resilience



Work and Study at Alengmora High School



Home garden

Innovative programmes for young students

Farm2Food Foundation is a non-profit social enterprise that has, since its inception in 2011, imparted life skills through nutrition gardens that it helped set up in over 446 government schools across several districts of Assam. The food gardens act as Science and Mathematics laboratories, as many concepts learnt in the classroom see practical applications in these gardens. More importantly, students learn about growing food crops organically, tilling the land, nutrition, and wild biodiversity in their food gardens, resulting in a rich learning for life. Village elders share traditional knowledge during *beej and gyaan daan yatras* where seeds of indigenous crops are shared, while parents participate in *shram daan* by providing voluntary labour when needed. The harvests from the gardens are used in the schools' mid-day meals.

Additionally, a programme called 'Solve Ninjas' is being conducted with adolescents to make them responsible for their environment, build leadership and active citizenship skills to help them become change-makers in their own schools and communities. They have also been running the 'Be a Jagrik' programme to enhance constitutional literacy and active citizenship through a lived experience of fundamental rights and duties. Furthermore, there are activities to fight discrimination in society and help children develop more inclusive attitudes.

Farm2Food's own work is amplified and deepened through its membership of communities such as ComMutiny - The Youth Collective, the vartaLeap Coalition and the Ashoka Fellows community, among others.

Support during COVID-19

COVID-19 impacted the lives of children of tea garden communities in Assam. Jorhat and Golaghat districts have approximately 200 gardens, big and small. Farm2Food Foundation reached out to 3000 extremely vulnerable households during this phase. In the absence of regular schooling, several girl children in the community had been or were on the verge of being married off. There were also dangers of child trafficking due to the desperate financial situations in some families.

There was considerable cooperation between Farm2Food volunteers, panchayat leaders, ASHA and ANM workers, schoolteachers and community leaders for relief work. During this period the volunteers spent a considerable amount of time interacting with family members and sharing correct information about the virus. This enabled them to notice any sign of abuse or mental stress on women or children.

Farm2Food bought nearly 600 quintals of fresh vegetables from farmers in the villages and distributed it among the tea garden communities. This helped the farmers as well as those who received the relief rations. Also, more than 3000 children received kits containing colour pencils and craft material.

Farm2Food Foundation engaged intensively with about 500 young leaders. These Jagrik Farmpreneurs created their own social action projects. Some of them helped neighbours in the community to set up homestead gardens. This ensured that the family had access to vegetables throughout the lockdown. From identifying the right vegetables to preparing biointensive raised beds and management of crops through organic methods, young people took the lead. They also shared information about right nutrition with the families.

A group of Jagrik Farmpreneurs provided academic support to children in their neighbourhood. Some others created posters and/or video messages on organic farming, nutrition, yoga, and COVID-19 safety protocols. These were shared or displayed widely to raise awareness amongst the community members.

#farminginschools #foodgardens #resilience

Lessons

Hands-on learning linked to farming, food, and nutrition will equip children in their future years in far more resilient ways by its links to livelihood and self-sufficiency than any bookish knowledge. Besides, farms and gardens are wonderful outdoor laboratories for environmental science classes.

The multiple crises that the world is facing and will face in future means that it is important to prepare children and young people. Creating enabling spaces for and adequate capacity and agency in young people will help them to take leadership roles in present and future challenges.

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See also:

<https://vikalpsangam.org/article/farm-and-food-entrepreneurship-rebuilding-assams-fragile-economy-and-ecology/>

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Photos by Farm2Food Foundation



Students of Mohanating High School tending their garden

Questions to reflect on

Do these stories inspire you to chart your life differently?

Which values would you hold central to bringing about transformation in society?

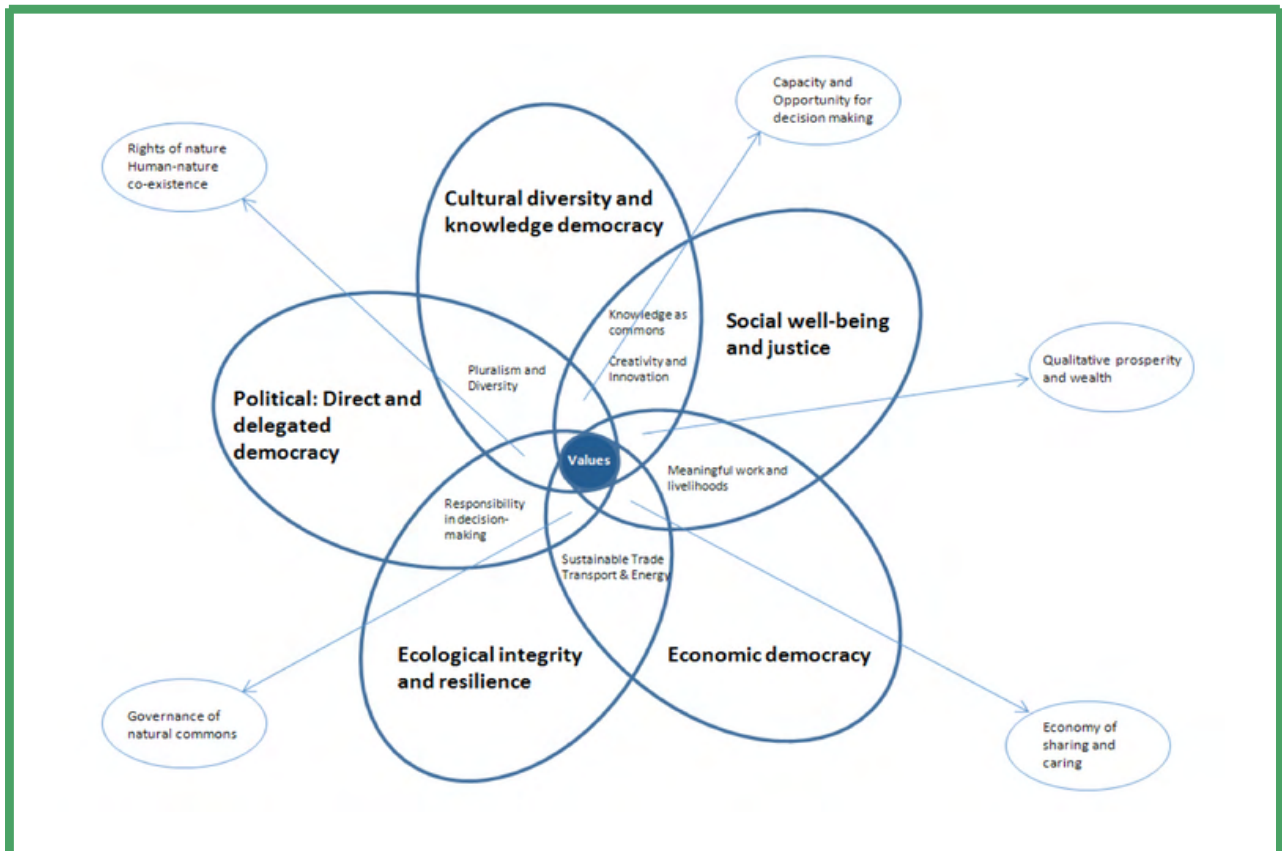
What is the alternative future that you envision for yourself and for society?

What is the kind of change you wish to see around you?

What actions and roles are you willing to take up to make it happen?

How do you think co-creation and collaboration could enable this change?

Write in with your thoughts; we would love to hear from you. If you have any stories of transformation, do share those with us too. Send them to Ashik Krishnan, ashikkrishnank@gmail.com



Spheres of Alternative Transformation | Credits: Vikalp Sangam

Read more: <https://vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/>



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Ashik Krishnan – Exploring Swaraj

Pankhuri Jain, Kejal Savla, Aravind Natarajan – Community Connect Challenge

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Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People: Beyond Pandemics & Lockdowns

This is a series of documents being brought out by the Vikalp Sangam Core Group, showcasing stories of community resilience in the face of COVID-19 and the lockdowns imposed by the government. Across India, while a vast number of people suffered the consequences of food insecurity, loss of livelihoods, illnesses, and dislocation, several communities have been able to tide over the crises because they have built and sustained strategies of relative self-reliance in food, health, livelihoods, governance and other aspects.

The volumes so far

Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People: Beyond Pandemics and Lockdowns

[Volume 1](#) | [Graphic Novel](#)

Community Forest Rights and the Pandemic: Gram Sabhas Lead the Way

[Volume 2](#) | [Graphic Novel](#)

Pandemic Resilience in the Western Himalayas

[Volume 3](#)

Seeding Hope : Women's Collectives Create Pathways for Change

[Volume 4](#)

Vikalp Sangam is a platform to bring together movements, groups and individuals working on just, equitable and sustainable pathways to human and ecological well-being. It rejects the current model of development and the structures of inequality and injustice underlying it, and searches for alternatives in practice and vision. About 70 movements and organisations around the country are members of its Core Group (listed below).

For more information please see: <https://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/>

- ACCORD (Tamil Nadu)
- Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (national)
- Alternative Law Forum (Bengaluru)
- Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (Bengaluru)
- BHASHA (Gujarat)
- Bhoomi College (Bengaluru)
- Blue Ribbon Movement (Mumbai)
- Centre for Education and Documentation (Mumbai)
- Centre for Environment Education (Gujarat)
- Centre for Equity Studies (Delhi)
- CGNetSwara (Chhattisgarh)
- Chalakudy Puzha Samrakshana Samithi / River Research Centre (Kerala)
- ComMutiny: The Youth Collective (Delhi)
- Deccan Development Society (Telangana)
- Deer Park (Himachal Pradesh)
- Development Alternatives (Delhi)
- Dharamitra (Maharashtra)
- Dinesh Abrol
- Ekta Parishad (several states)
- Ektha (Chennai)
- EQUATIONS (Bengaluru)
- Extinction Rebellion India (national)
- Gene Campaign (Delhi)
- Goonj (Delhi)
- Greenpeace India (Bengaluru)
- Health Swaraaj Samvaad (national)
- Ideosync (Delhi)
- Jagori Rural (Himachal Pradesh)
- Kalpavriksh (Maharashtra)
- Knowledge in Civil Society (national)
- Kriti Team (Delhi)
- Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (Ladakh)
- Let India Breathe (national)
- Local Futures (Ladakh)
- Maadhyam (Delhi)
- Maati (Uttarakhand)
- Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (national)
- Mahalir Association for Literacy, Awareness and Rights (MALAR)
- Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (Rajasthan) Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture Network (national)
- National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (national)
- National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (national)
- Nirangal (Tamil Nadu)
- North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (Meghalaya)
- People's Resource Centre (Delhi)
- People's Science Institute (Uttarakhand)
- reStore (Chennai)
- Sahjeevan (Kachchh)
- Sambhaavnaa (Himachal Pradesh)
- Samvedana (Maharashtra)
- Sangama (Bengaluru)
- Sangat (Delhi)
- School for Democracy (Rajasthan)
- School for Rural Development and Environment (Kashmir)
- Shikshantar (Rajasthan)
- Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (Ladakh)
- Sikkim Indigenous Lepcha Women's Association
- Social Entrepreneurship Association (Tamil Nadu)
- SOPPECOM (Maharashtra)
- South Asian Dialogue on Ecological Democracy (Delhi)
- Students' Environmental and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (Ladakh)
- Sushma Iyengar
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- Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (Andhra Pradesh/Telangana)
- Youth Alliance (Delhi)
- Yugma Network (national)