

# The flower of transformation

Alternatives for justice, sustainability and equity

13 MARCH 2022, ASHISH KOTHARI



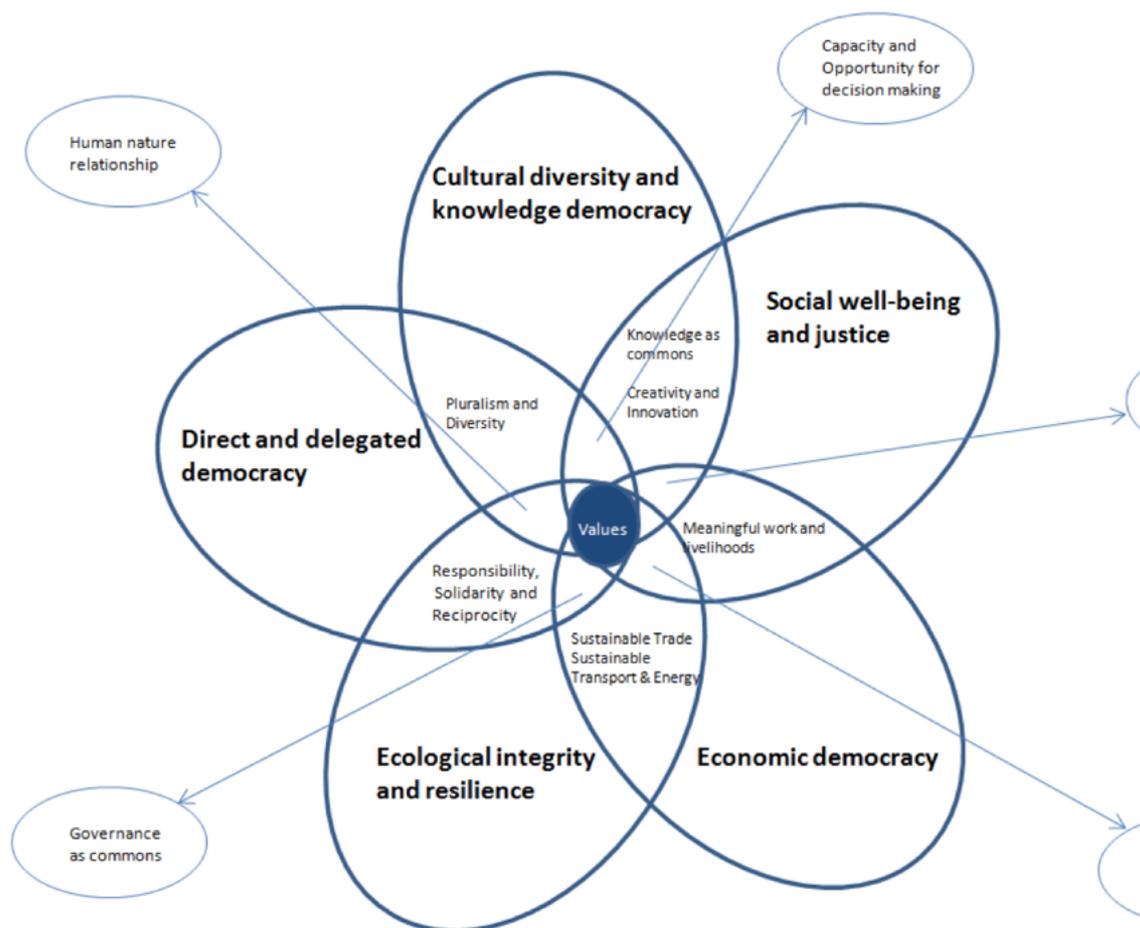
Nature has its own agency and rights, and must be respected for humanity to re-establish ecological harmony © Ashish Kothari

With growing news of war and conflict, ecological and climate catastrophe, stark inequalities, health crises related to both poverty and affluence, the authoritarianism of governments, and the increasing stranglehold of mega-corporations in all aspects of our lives, it is understandable that there is deep anxiety about the present and future of humanity. On the brighter side, there are two kinds of responses that provide hope: mass resistance to the structures creating and pushing these local-to-global crises, and grounded radical alternatives that demonstrate more just and sustainable alternatives to these structures.

On the basis of learnings from various such [initiatives](#) in India and other parts of the [world](#), there is a sense of what holistic transformations are beginning to take place and what more needs to be done. This framework on radical [alternatives](#) proposes that alternatives are built on the following key elements or spheres, interconnected and overlapping in a 'Flower of Transformation' (see figure below):

- ecological integrity and resilience, including the conservation of nature and natural diversity, maintenance of ecological functions, respect for ecological limits (local to global), and ecological ethics in all human actions;
- social well-being and justice, including fulfilling lives (physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually), equity between communities and individuals,

- communal and ethnic harmony; and erasure of hierarchies and divisions based on faith, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, ability, and other such attributes;
- direct and delegated democracy, with decision-making starting in spaces enabling every person to participate meaningfully, and building from this to larger levels of governance by downwardly accountable institutions; and all this respectful of the needs and rights of those currently marginalised;
- economic democracy, in which local communities and individuals have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets, based on the principle of localization for basic needs and trade built on this; central to this would be the replacement of private property by the commons;
- cultural diversity and knowledge democracy, with multiple co-existing knowledge systems in the commons, respect for a diversity of ways of living, ideas and ideologies, and encouragement for creativity and innovation.



## Grounded manifestations

Each of the above spheres can be illustrated by grounded initiatives in various parts of the world. For instance...

## Radical democracy

The Kurdish Rojava and Zapatista autonomous regions in western Asia and Mexico, respectively, have asserted complete regional [autonomy](#) from nation-states they are contained in, and direct, radical democracy or [democratic confederalism](#) for the communes and

settlements that are encompassed in these regions. Indigenous peoples in many parts of Latin America, North America, and Australia have similarly struggled for and achieved self-determination, not necessarily as autonomous as the first two mentioned, but with most or all key decision-making vesting in them rather than in the governments of the countries they are located in. In central India, beginning with the village Mendha-Lekha and expanding to a federation of nearly 90 nearby villages, the [Korchi Maha Gramsabha](#), there is an assertion of 'swaraj' or self-rule with slogans like 'we elect the government in Mumbai and Delhi, but in our village we are the government'. The 'freetown' commune of [Christiania](#) in Copenhagen city, Denmark, also claims self-governance, and many neighbourhood assemblies in many other cities in Europe stress that they should be at the core of any urban decision-making.

While some of these (famously, the Kurdish Rojava and Zapatista) do not engage with the nation-state, most others do, to demand recognition, claim what is due to them from the state's schemes, safeguard against corporate or other abuses, and/or other such support which they feel is the duty of any government to provide (not as charity). In one way or the other they illustrate a [Radical Ecological Democracy](#) or eco-swaraj, asserting local decision-making while also embodying responsibility for other people and for the rest of nature.

## Economic democracy

Encompassed in all the above initiatives is also the ability to claim governance and management rights over resources important for economic survival and security. This could be collective rights to land, forests, water, seeds, and biodiversity, as for instance in the food sovereignty movements of several million small-holders who are members of the global platform [La Via Campesina](#). Or it could be democratic control over industrial or craft-based means of production, such as worker-led production in Greece, Argentina and elsewhere. Then there is a social and solidarity economy in Europe and North America, or [community economies](#) across the world, showing how non-capitalist businesses can thrive as economic units while ensuring that marginalised sections like refugees or people with disabilities get dignified livelihoods in them. And there are movements for re-establishing [the commons](#) where spaces and knowledge have been privatised.

But economic democracy is also about trying to get relative independence from centralised monetary systems, e.g. through alternative or [community currencies](#) and [time-banking](#). More than 6 million hours have been exchanged, without money, in [Timebanking UK](#) which runs across the United Kingdom. And it is about bringing back recognition to the enormous economic contribution of women and the elderly which are invisibilised in conventional calculations of GDP, but are so important as the 'caring and sharing' basis of any society. As argued in a recent book by Anitra Nelson, it is eminently possible to move [beyond money](#) in these and other post-capitalist ways.

Movements for alternative economies are also challenging GDP and economic growth rates as indicators of development, and proposing a series of well-being models and indicators that could provide a much more robust, and locally relevant, idea of whether people are satisfied, happy, secure, and contented. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness model is well-known (with all its flaws, still a bold experiment at moving away from GDP) and more recently, New Zealand, Finland, Iceland, Wales and Scotland have formed a Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGO) partnership to build in more [wellbeing](#) indicators in their planning.

## Social justice and equality

Arguments for political and economic self-determination can also go horribly wrong, if they are driven by narrow, xenophobic considerations such as those pushed by extreme right-wing movements in Europe, or continue local relations of inequality based on gender, class, caste, race, ability and other marginalisations. So, as important as the above two spheres of transformation, are struggles for more equality and equity, away from traditional or modern discriminations of various kinds, such as the movements for respecting the human rights of Dalits in India, feminist and LGBTQ+ struggles across the world, and the Black Lives Matter anti-racism movement in USA.

## Cultural and knowledge diversity

As threatened as the earth's biological diversity, is its diversity of languages, with several hundred already lost or on the verge of extinction. Several indigenous peoples or other local communities are now trying to sustain their mother tongue, or revive it where it has all but disappeared. The group Terralingua helps document and support such initiatives across the world through its [Voices of the Earth project](#). In India the organisation Bhasha (= language in Hindi), started by linguist Ganesh Devy, has helped document language diversity across India in the People's Linguistic Survey of India which described [780 languages](#).

Decolonisation – the attempt to shake off the domination of colonial languages, cultures, cuisines, knowledge, cartography, and much else - is part of these initiatives. For instance there are several initiatives at re-mapping or [decolonial mapmaking](#), to bring back depictions of the landscapes and of nations from the point of view of [Indigenous peoples](#) or other local communities whose mental and physical maps have been erased or drastically changed by colonial powers and nation-states. Similarly movements for asserting the importance and validity of traditional knowledge systems, in themselves or in partnership with modern ones, are making headway in many movements as also in some official governmental or UN institutions. In the case of the climate crisis, the [Indigenous People's Biocultural Climate Change Assessment Initiative](#) produced valuable analysis based on Indigenous knowledge. It is also increasingly recognised that the complementary use of multiple knowledges is necessary to understand what is taking place and to deal with it, such as for instance the collaboration between Indigenous peoples of the Arctic circle and modern scientific institutions in the project [Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna](#).

## Ecological wisdom and resilience

Several movements for territorial self-determination or collective rights are also focused on, or leading to, the conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems, wildlife populations and biodiversity. The global network, ICCA Consortium, has brought attention to the fact that such local stewardship of [Territories of Life](#) may be as or more powerful a mechanism for conservation than official protected areas, the westernised model of which has been very top-down, undemocratic, and alienating for local communities. In a broader sense, what such communities have enshrined for millennia – living life within nature rather than apart from it, and thinking of nature as a circle of life rather than as a pyramid with humans on top – is also sinking in to people in the highly industrialised parts of the world. In these, as a result, there are movements for [Rights of Nature](#), or of its components such as rivers, mountains, species. It is important however that this is seen only as a first step towards a more general respectful reintegration within nature, akin to ways of life many Indigenous peoples have lived for millennia, and not remain limited to formal statutory law.

## Intersectionality

Discrimination and marginalisation can be intersectional, e.g. environmentally poor working and living conditions are most pronounced for those who are marginalised in race, caste or class terms, or inadequate access to nutritious food can build on other discriminations against women. And so the responses to these, in many of the above initiatives, are also intersectional or cutting across the five spheres. This may be explicitly a part of the initiative, or happen as an unintended consequence.

At the Parque de la Papa in Peru, for instance, the Quechua Indigenous peoples have established political self-determination, control over crucial economic resources, and the [continued celebration and use](#) of cultural and spiritual traditions while also learning elements of modernity, and custodianship of natural ecosystems and biodiversity. In the Korchi Maha Gramsabha in central India, some of these elements also intersect with the assertion by women of their equal right to decision-making, and an attempt to help local youth retain some roots in their own indigenous culture while learning from outside. At Christiania, local self-governance goes hand-in-hand with holding most economic resources in the commons (no private property), running of many services by worker cooperatives, and constant collective cultural activity. The Dalit women farmers of [Deccan Development Society](#) in southern India have challenged gender and caste discrimination while moving towards food sovereignty and sustaining a respectful, spiritual relationship with the earth and with seeds. Also in southern India, the [Dharani Farming and Marketing Cooperative](#), set up by Timbaktu Collective, ensures fair remuneration to farmers who commit to organic production, combining the economic and ecological spheres.

One of the most interesting, though very under-developed, movement of intersectionality is bioregionalism (or biocultural regionalism). In many parts of the world, political boundaries intersect and interrupt the flows of nature (e.g. a national boundary cutting a river basin), or cultural connections (e.g. fences and armies blocking traditional routes of nomadic pastoralists). This is especially (but not only) the case with colonised areas of the world, such as South Asia, large parts of Africa, and many regions of Latin America, and Indigenous territories of the so-called 'developed' world. This kind of interruption or blockage has many negative ecological, economic and socio-cultural consequences. The bioregionalism movement attempts to interrogate such political boundaries, and imagine as also plan and implement policies and practices that can re-establish flows and connectivity across these boundaries. For instance, the [Amazon Sacred Headwaters Initiative](#) involves Indigenous nations and civil society groups in an attempt to envision and plan for a large part of the Amazon that straddles the Ecuador-Peru border. John Lennon's vision – "imagine, there's no country" – may seem very far off, but let's keep in mind that nation-state borders are also pretty recent in human history, and there is nothing sacrosanct about them.

One thing is very clear. Life is not lived in silos, the kind of silos that governments are made of, or which corporations divide up the economy into. It is lived in complex intersectionality, which plays itself out in everyday life, at the level of whatever interactions each of us has in various collectives and with the rest of nature. It is therefore crucial to realise what strongly emerges from these alternative initiatives, as expressed in the Vikalp Sangam framework cited above, that the "centre of human activity is neither the state nor the corporation, but the community, a self-defined collection of people with some strong common or cohesive social interest. The community could be of various forms, from the ancient village to the urban neighbourhood to the student body of an institution to even the more 'virtual' networks of common interest." The community also extends to the rest of life, the species of plants and animals around us, for long a central tenet of worldviews like buen vivir, sumac kawsay, ubuntu, and 'country'. And while no means perfect, and with their own internal challenges, it is such collectives that form the fulcrum of holistic transformation.

Changes envisaged in the Flower of Transformation are going to involve difficult, long-term struggles. But many are already here in what some have called ‘nowtopias’, and many more are visible on the horizon, a veritable [Pluriverse](#) of practices and worldviews. While not in any way belittling the enormous challenges posed by a world that is dominated by the military-industrial-capitalist-statist system, and continuing forms of patriarchy, racism and anthropocentrism, these inspirational pinpricks in the darkness provide hope for a saner, more just world.

2 Shares

Email

Share

Tweet

Share

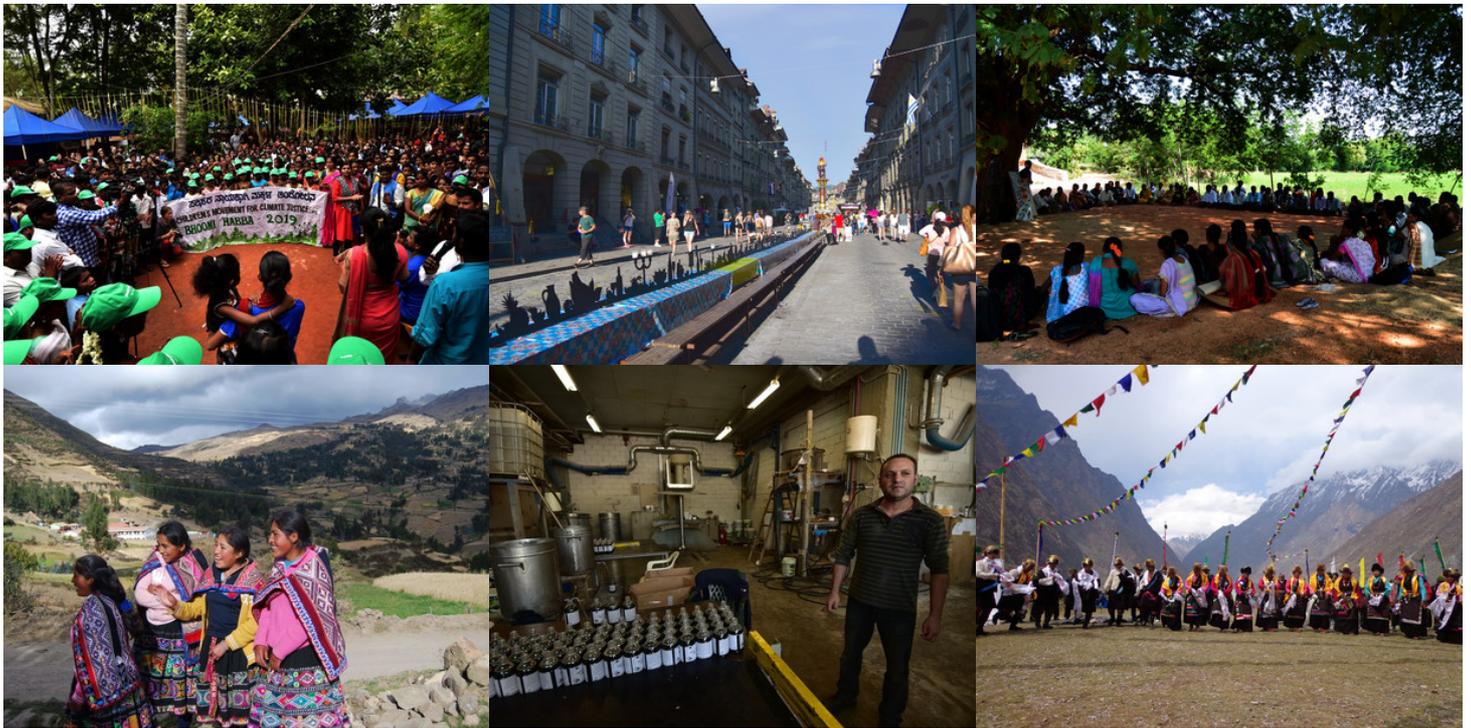
Pin



## Ashish Kothari

Founder-member of Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh, Ashish taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, coordinated India's Biodiversity Strategy & Action Plan process, was on Greenpeace International & India Boards, and helps coordinate Vikalp Sangam and Global Tapestry of Alternatives.

[Author profile](#)



1. Bhoomi Habba, Bengaluru (India) - Youth involvement in environmental and justice movements is vital to the Flower of Transformation
2. Pedestrianised street, Bern (Switzerland) - encouraging public transport, cycling and walking are meaningful emission-reduction strategies © Ashish Kothari
3. Assembly of Timbaktu Collective, Andhra Pradesh (India) - democratic processes within institutions are as crucial as in society in general © Ashish Kothari
4. Quechua indigenous women, Parque de la Papa, near Cusco (Peru) - culture, landscape conservation, and radical democracy integrated © Ashish Kothari
5. VioMe worker-governed cleaning agents factory, Thessolniki (Greece) © Ashish Kothari
6. Tumba people performing cultural dances in Shyagya festival, Upper Tsum community conserved area (Nepal) © Madhu Chhetry

## RELATED ARTICLES



Looking at public health

The Covid code has been cracked



The second healthcare market

What will be the fiscal impact of technical and social developments in the health sector?



Helpless politics

The world does not suffer a lack of resources, but of political and social organization



Attacks on democracy in the United States

The Republican Party has become irresponsible



The triangle of disaster

The BIMS three-state response



The demise of the World Social Forum

The International Renewal Group denounces the WSF's irrelevance due to being unable to adapt to changes



Europe: weapons, war and peace

History reminds us that peace is short-lived



European integration of Western Balkans

If this is not going to happen, Europe will become in 10-15 years a third-ranking, ex-global player

Subscribe

Get updates on the Wall Street International Magazine

Email address

Subscribe

