

**VIKALP SANGAM CORE GROUP****STATEMENT TO BHARAT JODO YATRA,  
ON THE NEED FOR INNOVATIVE, FUNDAMENTAL ALTERNATIVES TO  
CURRENTLY DOMINANT ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL SYSTEM****6 December 2022**

We appreciate the attempt by participants of the Bharat Jodo Yatra to create a platform for people's voices to be heard, and especially for healing rifts created by communal politics and the increasingly fascist-like situation in India. In many ways this is a courageous attempt to connect with people across the country, and listen to the problems that millions of 'ordinary' people face. We hope that this effort can be sustained *beyond* party and electoral politics, and stress that in sending you this message, we are not aligning ourselves with any political party.

Although we appreciate that the main purpose of the yatra is to save democracy, we trust that the yatris are also taking this opportunity to reflect on the weak links of India's democratic experiment, which has enabled the rise of corporate impunity and the ascendancy of the cultural right wing in recent years, leading to fascist-like rule. If we reflect on this sincerely, and if India as a pluralistic society is to be saved, then it needs India's secular, liberal and progressive movements to revisit the very idea and form of representative democracy that India adopted, and explore how it can become more substantive, deep rooted, egalitarian, and direct. It requires us to look at the justice from a multipronged approach that integrates the economic, social, cultural, political, ecological and spiritual, with the central role of women, Dalits, Adivasis, small agriculturists and other marginalised sections.

Knowing that the process to a more genuine democracy and sustainable society is a struggle, we wish to showcase some of our thinking below. We believe these are crucial imperatives for the survival of India and its people and ecosystems, which our 80+ member organisations been working on for many decades. All the points made below are based on the experience of hundreds of live examples being practiced on the ground by, to quote the Constitution, 'we the people'.

India and the world face multiple crises – ecological (including climate) collapse, socio-economic inequalities, conflicts and war, the rise of authoritarian and fascist forces, cultural/religious imposition, and others. In such a situation, we need both immediate and short-term measures especially to help affected people cope with the impacts on their lives and livelihoods, as also medium and long-term measures that help prevent further manifestations of these crises and strengthen the resilience of communities.

This has been a crucial lesson of the COVID19 period – the strong connection between environmental and human health, the vulnerability of tens of millions of people to its health and economic impacts, the effects of a weak public health system, and the importance of localised food and economic exchanges through which several communities were able to cope much better because of resilient local economies and social structures (as documented by Vikalp Sangam, see <https://vikalpsangam.org/extraordinary-work-of-ordinary-people-a-series/>). Similar lessons are being learnt in response to the other crises that we face.

The impacts of ecosystem collapse and climate change are likely to make COVID19-like pandemics more frequent in the coming decades, along with physical and livelihood displacement due to weather extremes, glacier recession, sea level rise, and so on. **The full focus of economic activities in the name of ‘development’ from now on must be on human and environmental health and well-being, especially for the most marginalized sections of our society, and on threatened wildlife and biodiversity.** Indicators that reflect these, beyond GDP, must guide economic planning.

**We urge the participants of the Bharat Jodo yatra to consider, in all their advocacy and actions, a number of measures that enable communities to empower themselves to be at the centre of decision-making and implementation – a real swaraj, not the co-opted kind that many political leaders only talk about.** This should especially include the elderly, children, people with disability, women, informal and domestic sector workers, street vendors, transgender people, sex workers, independent artists and entertainers, Dalits and other oppressed castes, and small farmers, pastoralists, fishers, and forest-dwellers including Adivasis. **We need a massive people’s movement to envision and make India a thriving society and economy based on the foundations of justice, ecological wisdom, and equality.** Youth, in particular, must be enabled to be at the centre of such a movement.

In particular, highest priority must be given to generating secure livelihoods, while strengthening self-reliance of communities based on the values of dignity, equality and justice from an inter-sectional lens that includes gender, caste and disability, with a core emphasis on ecological sustainability. This in turn has to be placed within swaraj, a direct democracy that recognises communities as the true holders of power, with institutions of the state fully accountable to them – taking the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments to their logical conclusion.

Also attached is a summary of the People’s Manifesto For a Just, Equitable, and Sustainable India, that was issued by Vikalp Sangam in 2019; the full Manifesto with detailed actions in several sectors, is available at <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/peoples-manifesto-for-a-just-equitable-and-sustainable-india-2019/>).

**Measures needed to make India more resilient to multiple crises include the following** (for practical examples demonstrating the feasibility of these, see nearly 2000 stories at [www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org)):

- 1. Increasing local, dignified livelihood options, reducing rural-urban migration:**  
The second wave of Covid-19 has once again highlighted the precarious and vulnerable nature of migrant and casual workers and many others in the informal economy. Outmigration occurs due to lack of livelihood opportunities and changing aspirations in the youth. It is important to generate dignified, remunerative livelihoods in every rural settlement and small town to reduce the factors causing outmigration. This would include dealing with caste, gender, ethnic and other forms of discrimination and inequality. This is what true self-reliance is about.  
In general, livelihoods that are self-reliant based on local food, water, energy security, access to productive resources with collective rights and responsibilities, and local exchange have been more resilient in such times of crises, providing at least basic needs. This can be seen in several dozen examples documented by Vikalp Sangam (<https://vikalpsangam.org/article/extraordinary-work-of-ordinary-people-in->

[multi-language-translation/](#)). These also provide opportunities to build on local knowledge, skills and technologies, with relevant and appropriate inputs from outside.

2. **Strengthening local economic systems:** There is an urgent need for policies and programmes that support and incentivise self-reliance. This includes promoting organic, biologically diverse farming, a range of local small and medium manufacturing such as agro-processing and crafts, producer cooperatives with strong local networking and producer-consumer links (rather than tying them into larger corporate chains through schemes such as contract farming). We need to promote decentralised sources of energy including solar, wind, biomass amongst others; India's large renewable energy push needs to focus essentially on this rather than mega-solar and wind parks which have serious ecological and social impacts.
3. **Improving public health system and focusing on determinants of health:** For decades health activists have been demanding much higher allocation for public health facilities and infrastructure; the abysmal state of our public health system was sharply exposed by the second wave of COVID19. Substantial increase in budgetary allocation, ensuring universal access to free emergency and primary health services, filling of vacant posts at all levels of healthcare, regularising contractual workers under National Health Mission, widespread training of paramedics, operationalising of the promised Health and Wellness Centres, and provision of multiple (including traditional) health system facilities in all community health centres. Measures should also include destigmatising mental health issues and enhancing holistic support to affected people. Additionally, greater stress must be given to improving critical social determinants of health like access to clean water, clean air, nutritious and safe (organic) food, creative work, and opportunities for recreation and enjoyment. Overall, highest priority is needed to preventing illness and disease in the first place, so far sorely lacking in India's health system.
4. **Prioritising restoration and conservation of natural ecosystems:** We need to regenerate and conserve natural ecosystems, including wetlands and water systems, that support India's vast wildlife and biodiversity as well as the lives and livelihoods of several hundred million people. We can no longer afford to sacrifice these for so-called development projects like mega-dams and mining, especially given the evidence that diseases like COVID19 are a result of ecological destruction and overexploitation of nature. Cases in point at the moment are the proposed mining in Hasdeo Arand (Chhattisgarh) and the shipment-power project in Great Nicobar Island, both threatening invaluable forests and sensitive adivasi communities.
5. **Recognising and empowering local governance systems:** Empowerment of gram sabhas and panchayats, and urban bodies of self-governance, including collective control over commons (land, natural ecosystems and resources, and knowledge), and local decision-making on issues like water, energy, waste, forests, etc. Vikalp Sangam's documentation shows that there was greater resilience and local economic and health security during Covid19 where communities had agency over their surrounds, e.g. where collective rights (and related responsibilities) had been secured through the Forest Rights Act ([https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/migrate/Perspectives/cfr\\_and\\_the\\_pandemic\\_gs\\_lead\\_the\\_way\\_bulletin\\_5\\_oct2020.pdf](https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/migrate/Perspectives/cfr_and_the_pandemic_gs_lead_the_way_bulletin_5_oct2020.pdf)). There are also many examples of more secure livelihoods, better conservation of nature, and greater dignity where gram sabhas, tribal village

assemblies, urban neighbourhoods, and other such local institutions have taken the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments to their logical conclusion.

6. **Creating inter-faith dialogue forums:** In view of the increasing incidents of inter-faith conflict, religious hatred, oppression of religious minorities, and of the rise of dogmatic religious intolerance in general, forums of dialogue, mutual understanding, actions for peace and harmony, and the recognition of diverse traditions of spirituality and sacredness are urgently needed across India, as also between peoples of India and neighbouring countries.

All of the above should focus on creating thriving local economies with social justice and equity in villages and towns of India, so that people don't have to go out for work, and may even feel like returning; **many migrants who went back home in the first or second COVID19 waves, may have stayed back if such options were available.**

Some of these and other related measures have been laid out in more detail in the *People's Manifesto for a Just, Equitable and Sustainable India*, issued by the Vikalp Sangam process in early 2019 (Summary attached below, and full version available at <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/peoples-manifesto-for-a-just-equitable-and-sustainable-india-2019/>). We urge its full consideration as a context for the above recommendations.

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*Endorsed by members of the Vikalp Sangam Core Group, listed below alphabetically. The Vikalp Sangam process is a platform to bring together movements, groups and individuals working on just, equitable and sustainable pathways for human and ecological well-being. We reject the current model of development and the structures of inequality and injustice underlying it, and promote alternatives in practice and vision. Over 80 movements and organisations across India are members. For more information, pl. see <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/>*

Action for Community Organisation,  
Rehabilitation & Development (ACCORD)  
Aragamee  
Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic  
Agriculture (ASHA)  
Alternative Law Forum (ALF)  
Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the  
Environment (ATREE)  
Bhoomi College  
Blue Ribbon Movement (BRM)  
Centre for Education & Documentation (CED)  
Centre for Environment Education (CEE)  
Centre for Equity Studies (CES)  
Centre for Financial Accountability (CFA)  
CGNetSwara  
Chalakupuzha Samrakshana Samithi / River  
Research Centre  
Chetna  
Dakshin Foundation  
Deccan Development Society (DDS)  
Deer Park  
Development Alternatives (DA)  
Desert Resource Centre (DRC)  
Dharamitra

Ektha  
EQUATIONS  
Fridays For Future (FFF)  
Gene Campaign  
Goonj  
Greenpeace India  
Health Swaraj Samvaad  
Ideosync  
India and Bharat Together (IABT)  
Jagori Rural  
Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat  
(KKPKP)  
Kalpavriksh  
Kriti Team  
Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO)  
Let India Breathe (LIB)  
Local Futures  
Maadhyam  
Maati  
Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM)  
Mahalir Association for Literacy Awareness  
and Rights (MALAR)  
Movement for Advancing Understanding on  
Sustainability And Mutuality (MAUSAM)



Alternatives India

**VIKALP** sangam

Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)  
National Alliance of People's Movements  
(NAPM)  
National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights  
(NCDHR)  
National Coalition for Natural Farming  
(NCNF)  
Nirangal  
Non-timber Forest Produce Exchange (NTFP-  
EP)  
North East Network (NEN)  
North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity  
Society (NESFAS)  
People's Resource Centre (PRC)  
Peoples' Science Institute (PSI)  
Pune Zilla Gharkamgar Sanghatana (PZGS)  
reStore  
Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture Network  
(RRA)  
Rythu Swarajya Vedika  
Sahjeevan  
Sahodaya Trust  
Sambhaavnaa  
Samvedana  
Sangama  
School for Democracy (SfD)  
School for Rural Development and  
Environment (SRDE)  
Shikshantar  
Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-  
IT)

Sikkim Indigenous Lepcha Women's  
Association (SILWA)  
Social Entrepreneurship Association (SEA)  
Society for the Promotion of Participatory  
Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM)  
South Asian Dialogue on Ecological  
Democracy (SADED)  
Students' Environmental and Cultural  
Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL),  
Thanal  
The Himalaya Collective  
Timbaktu Collective  
Titli Trust  
Travellers' University  
Tribal Health Initiative (THI)  
URMUL  
Vrikshamitra  
Watershed Support Services and Activities  
Network (WASAN)  
Youth Alliance  
Yugma Network  
Yuva Ekta Foundation (YEF)  
  
Dinesh Abrol  
Ovais Sultan Khan  
Sehjo Singh  
Sushma Iyengar

## **People's Manifesto For a Just, Equitable, and Sustainable India**

by the constituents of the Vikalp Sangam process

February 2019

### **Summary**

(for full Manifesto, see <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/peoples-manifesto-for-a-just-equitable-and-sustainable-india-2019/>)

1. Steps to re-establish India's global role as a champion of human rights, peace and demilitarisation, and ecological wisdom, including through the revitalisation of the United Nations and support to people's democratic access to global decision-making, and advocacy to make trade and other economic agreements subservient to human rights and environment ones.

*Talisman for every public action: does it enhance global peace and justice?*

2. Highest priority in all plans, budgets, policies and programmes to the most vulnerable sections of society, including those discriminated against on the basis of caste, gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, faith/religion, 'race', ability/disability, literacy, location, and other such features.

*Talisman for every public action: does it benefit the vulnerable, does it reduce discrimination?*

3. Strong measures to tackle the gross economic inequalities facing Indian society, including caps on salary levels, high taxation on income, wealth and inheritance, basic minimum income and employment guarantee for the vulnerable, and pension for all workers in the primary sector.

*Talisman for every public action: does it reduce inequality, does it empower those who are currently deprived?*

4. Widespread programmes for re-establishing harmony amongst people of different faiths, ethnicities, languages, and so on, starting from school level upwards, and prompt action against those spreading misinformation, hatred, and enmity amongst various communities.

*Talisman for every public action: does it increase harmony, does it reduce social conflict and tension?*

5. Further democratisation of decision-making, empowering gram sabhas and urban area or mohalla sabhas with financial and legal powers apart from those already provided for in the Constitution and relevant laws, ensuring processes of prior informed consent of such bodies for activities in their territories, and initiating decision-making forums at landscape levels such as river basins and sub-basins.

*Talisman for every public action: does it increase meaningful participation of people, especially of the currently marginalised?*



6. A comprehensive policy and law on accountability and transparency of all institutions of the state, and of political parties; and repeal of laws/provisions that enable the state to stifle democratic dissent or provide draconian powers to police and armed forces.

*Talisman for every public action: is it fully transparent to the public, does it enhance accountability?*

7. A massive programme on livelihoods that combine traditional and modern skills and knowledge, with highest priority in all plans and budgets to the two biggest livelihood sectors of agriculture (including farming, pastoralism, fisheries, and forestry) and crafts/small manufacturing; this should include reserving all products and services that can be made or generated through small-scale and medium-scale for community-based, decentralised production, through measures such as the facilitation of democratically run producer collectives (cooperatives, companies, unions, etc).

*Talisman for every public action: does it enhance and secure livelihoods of the vulnerable and marginalised, does it accord respect to all sources of livelihood that are dignified?*

8. A national land/water use plan and policy, with steps for conservation of the most important ecosystems and ecological functions on which all our lives depend, and of the wildlife and biodiversity they contain; and initiate a country-wide programme of land/soil and water regeneration oriented at creating sustainable natural resource assets for local economies; all this through legal measures that empower and recognise rights of local communities akin to what is provided for in the Forest Rights Act, and Constitutional recognition of the rights of nature.

*Talisman for every public action: does it protect natural ecosystems and ecological functions?*

9. A comprehensive policy and legal regime to ensure that economic planning respects ecological limits at all levels, local to national, including through independently conducted, participatory, comprehensive environmental impact assessments of projects, programmes, schemes and sectors; and that all chemicals and substances harmful to human or ecosystem/animal health are replaced by ecologically sensitive substances.

*Talisman for every public action: does it sustain the natural environment and retain ecological health vital for people and wildlife?*

10. Programmes to bring back into prioritised public support all basic needs, including health, sanitation, housing, learning and education, water, food and energy, providing significantly higher budgetary allocations for these than currently given; actions to convert all food production into agroecological and safe processes with maximum support to small farmers, pastoralists and fishers and their full rights over land, seeds, and water; actions to produce most energy through decentralised renewable sources by 2030 while also undertaking measures to contain demand to what is essential and within ecological limits; and urgent actions to regenerate and conserve water sources with give priority to water use for essential life functions.

*Talisman for every public action: does it enhance, secure, and make accessible/affordable basic needs of everyone, and in particular of those currently deprived of these, in ways that are ecologically sustainable.*

11. Steps to make urban and rural settlements dignified, livable, and sustainable, as self-reliant for basic needs as possible, and with full rights of access to land, housing, and

other amenities for the vulnerable sections of society, and highest priority to public and non-motorable means of mobility/transportation.

*Talisman for every public action: is it leading to more livable and sustainable conditions of living for everyone, especially those currently deprived?*

12. Initiatives to transform all learning and education towards methods that are activity-based, enjoyable, culturally and ecologically rooted, enabling learners to imbibe the ethics of justice and responsibility, driven by self-learning processes, and able to instil respect for cultural diversity and ecological sustainability, including through relevant amendments of Right to Education Act, and community-based processes for both children and adults; dedicate at least 4% of national and state budgets to this sector.

*Talisman for every public action: is it leading to all-round learning opportunities for everyone, especially those currently deprived?*

13. A comprehensive policy and programmes on innovation, technology and knowledge, that encourages and supports public and informal processes of innovation, recognises the creativity of ‘ordinary’ people, maximises the availability of knowledge and information in the public and commons domain including through independent media, and puts all technological developments up for public review to gauge how responsible they are to the goals of justice, accessibility, and sustainability.

*Talisman for every public action: does it further democratise and make publicly accessible knowledge and technology?*

14. A comprehensive policy and relevant programmes to make conditions for healthy living and health services accessible to all, especially to vulnerable sections, including through the integrated use of multiple health systems, linkages with other determinants of health (food, social and physical environment, education, etc), community governance and monitoring; dedicate at least 10% of national and state budgets to this sector to ensure that the public sector reaches all.

*Talisman for every public action: is it enabling conditions of health for all, especially for those currently deprived of healthy conditions and health services?*

15. Initiatives to encourage the democratic flourishing of the arts (visual and performing), removing the caste, class and gender discriminations that are embedded in some of them, making them accessible to all, and converting public institutions promoting them into independent bodies.

*Talisman for every public action: does it support the arts to flourish in ways accessible to all?*

16. In all the above, give special attention to the empowerment and facilitation of India’s youth and women, and the enabling of their own voices in determining the present and the future. (Pl. see Part 3 on Youth).

*Talisman for every public action: does it empower the youth towards greater justice and self-determination?*