

# A manifesto for justice

Solutions to contemporary crises in India

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Windmill complex, Kerala (India) - even renewable energy without curbing elite energy demand is unsustainable @ Ashish Kothari

Like much of the rest of the world, India is facing multiple crises: the rise of authoritarian political forces, religious and ethnic repression and strife, ecological collapse, serious unemployment and underemployment, and more. While this has been developing over many decades of centralized state rule and neoliberal capitalist economic policies, it has become noticeably worse in the last few years.

Almost every day in 2023 there has been news of some calamity or alarming event. In January, the sinking of a western Himalayan town, Joshimath, was revealed, most likely linked to intense blasting and construction in the fragile mountains. In May, violent inter-ethnic conflicts broke out in the state of Manipur (north-east India), and are still ongoing, fueled by governmental neglect. In October, a glacial lake breach caused floods that broke a dam in Sikkim (again, north-east India). In November, 41 workers got trapped in a tunnel collapse while working on a heavily criticized highway project in the Himalayas (they were rescued, more fortunate than many others who are killed in such accidents). Meanwhile, the Indian government continues trying to stifle democratic voices by slapping false cases against activists, journalists, and lawyers who are critical of its policies and programmes, or, most recently in December, by suspending opposition Members of Parliament en masse.

India, however, has a very long history of civil dissent including the Independence movement against the British colonial power, many people's movements to protect land, forests, water, and livelihoods against land grabbing in the name of 'development', and struggles to protect human rights of marginalized sections including women, sexual and gender minorities, religious minorities, people with disability, and others. Even though these movements appear to be on the back foot against the combined might of the Indian state, private corporations, and the religious right wing, they continue to provide hope. They are complemented by thousands of initiatives constructing alternative pathways for meeting human needs and aspirations that are ecologically and socially sensitive. Some come from governments and businesses, but many are from communities and worker collectives. There is also a growing demand for basic policy-level shifts to support such alternative approaches, away from models promoted by state-centered, capitalist, patriarchal, or casteist forces.

## A people's manifesto

In the above context, 85 people's movements and civil society organizations have made a significant effort to frame a 'People's Manifesto for a Just, Equitable and Sustainable India'. This was released in New Delhi on 18 December. These groups are gathered under a decade-old national platform [Vikalp Sangam \(Alternatives Confluence\)](#), which has been bringing together such initiatives to share, collaborate, create a more critical mass for advocacy, and do collective envisioning of the kind of India they want. These groups represent hundreds of initiatives working on ecological food production, decentralized water harvesting and management, community-based energy production, dignified housing and settlements, meaningful education and health security, locally empowered decision-making, and resistance against destructive projects. Since 2014, Vikalp Sangam has convened over 30 physical assemblies, documenting or publishing over 1500 stories of positive change, bringing out an evolving collective vision of radical transformation, and advocating for policy changes.

[The People's Manifesto](#) has multiple aims.

A crucial target is the upcoming national elections in India (early or mid-2024), which civil society feels are key to bringing up the above issues and making a dent in the enormous concentration of power that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a very religiously and economically right-wing party, has achieved. But it is also aimed at various local to national institutions (within and outside government) and processes, including civil society itself. While a substantial number of the recommendations or demands in the Manifesto are focused on those in political power or aspiring to it, many are also self-oriented. The first section is titled "The Commitments We Make and Seek", containing a pledge to do all we can toward making India more just, equitable, and sustainable.

The Manifesto goes on to give detailed recommendations or demands on economic, social, cultural, ecological, and political aspects. Before that, however, it provides a sort of summary, in which key 'talismans' are laid out against which actions can be judged. As an example, for recommendations relating to livelihoods, it asks of every action undertaken:

*Does it enhance and secure the livelihoods of the vulnerable and marginalized, does it accord respect to all sources of livelihood that are dignified?*

This format emanates from Mahatma Gandhi's way of proposing and promoting action, and his famous talisman:

*Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to control over his [her] own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.*

## Transforming the economy

Noting the very serious crises of unemployment (up from about 5.5% in the early 2000s, to about 9% in late 2023, according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy), the Manifesto urges priority attention to small manufacturing, crafts, value-added produce from agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and pastoralism, and decentralized services, all of which can provide dignified and productive livelihoods. To make these viable, it asks that all goods and services that can be produced through handmade and small manufacturing should be reserved for these, rather than big industries and institutions that have tended to decrease net employment due to automation and mechanization. Much of the economy can also be run by producer collectives rather than by the state or private corporations, and responsible consumption has to be part of the equation. Also noted is the need to recognize and account for invisible care work, such as what women provide in homes and elsewhere. The special needs of youth, amongst whom unemployment is very high, are also stressed.

The Manifesto suggests that the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which offers a minimum of 100 days of employment with a fixed minimum wage, be extended to urban areas. Several other suggestions for dignified livelihoods are given, and stress is laid on localized, self-reliant economies that break the debilitating dependence created by economic globalization (as became evident in the COVID-19 pandemic period).

The Vikalp Sangam process has compiled hundreds of practical examples of these approaches on its website. Some of the most inspiring are stories of rural revival that have led to reduced outmigration (which is otherwise a chronic issue across India), and in many cases even reverse migration from cities and large industries to villages and small manufacturing or crafts occurs. There are dozens of stories of agriculture or other land-based occupations, sometimes combined with new ones like homestay-based tourism, becoming remunerative, and providing dignified lives. There are examples of young entrepreneurs combining traditional and modern knowledge and technologies, in *hybrid systems*, to escape having to enter the mechanized, uncreative rat race of mass industrial production.

However such examples remain limited in heavy subsidy for many reasons. One is the continued domination of perverse macro-economic policies, including heavy subsidies to large industries and few attempts to create an even playing ground for small-scale or handmade production. Opportunities to obtain or generate enough investment, reach appropriate markets, or collectively reach economies of scale are also severely limited for the small producer and service provider. Economic inequality in India has also risen significantly in the last few decades. According to the World Inequality Report, 2022, the richest 10% own 57% of its wealth (while before the so-called 'economic reforms' in 1991, its share was less than 40%), while the 'bottom' 50% have just 13%. A humungous "black economy", in which the rich get richer without paying due taxes or appropriate prices, adds to this problem. So, the Manifesto also demands changes in these, such as curbs on the black economy, reduction in the ratio of highest and lowest salaries, greater wealth and inheritance taxation of the rich, and basic income and pension for all workers.

## Deepening democracy

Constituents of the Vikalp Sangam process realize that economic localization, self-reliance, dignified livelihoods, and collective producer enterprises can be achieved in full only with concurrent political transformations. Noting the increasing authoritarian tendencies of the Indian state, noting also that some progressive Constitutional and legal changes towards political decentralization over three decades back had been left unfinished, the Manifesto seeks some key steps to move towards a real swaraj (deep democracy and autonomy, or self-rule, with responsibilities towards the rights and welfare of all).

Of particular importance is fuller implementation of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments that devolved certain powers to village and urban assemblies; but going beyond, the devolution of financial and legal powers, too, can help achieve more radical or direct forms of democracy. Collective community governance and management of the commons – land, nature, knowledge, and technology – are also crucial for this. Also recommended is consideration of political decision-making at the scale of bioregions, or biocultural regions such as river basins.

Urgently needed is a comprehensive law on accountability of state agencies and others like political parties and mandatory public audits of government actions. Meaningful public participation in the framing of laws and policies from the start of the process is necessary, which means the availability of relevant information in local languages, accessible forums for public input, and enabling the capacities and agency of marginalized voices in all forums.

In view of the blatant infiltration and interference in the working of what are supposed to be independent institutions, such as the Election Commission, investigation agencies, and the media, steps to distance them from the state are demanded. Remarking also on the illegitimate crackdown on peaceful dissent over the last few years, the Manifesto seeks the repeal of repeatedly misused laws like the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and the National Security Act.

As in other sectors, civil society groups have also pointed at themselves in the Manifesto, seeking to promote internal democracy and transparency in their own organizations.

## Socio-cultural transformations

Economics and politics are intricately connected to the prevailing social and cultural milieu. India has been racked with inter-faith and inter-ethnic conflicts, hate speech, and religious intolerance, building on traditional and new vulnerabilities of various kinds of minority populations (especially, in the current situation, Muslims, Christians, and Adivasis or tribal peoples). The Manifesto urges setting up forums of dialogue and restoring co-existence, reviving or sustaining long-standing syncretic traditions such as people of every religion joining in special occasions of other religions.

India has always been famed for its cultural diversity – languages, cuisines, faiths, clothing, and so much more. During colonial times and in more recent times, there have been forces of homogenization, much like in the sphere of ecology and agriculture. The Manifesto urges the recognition, continuation, and revival of cultural diversity in all its forms. For this, it also suggests changes in the educational system, which has unfortunately become a strong force for homogenization (e.g. in languages, since a couple of dozen dominate most teaching state-recognized tongues instead of enabling the 780 living languages of India). It recommends mother-tongue-based, activity-focused, culturally and ecologically rooted learning and seeks to reserve 6% of the GDP for education.

The majority of Indians face health issues of various kinds, from those related to poverty malnutrition, and poor working-living conditions to those of affluence, including serious levels of mental illness. The Manifesto notes that people are increasingly forced to resort to private medical attention and that this is a big strain on household expenditure. It urges that at least 3% of the GDP be devoted to health, including bringing back a robust public sector, promoting community capacities, and the multiple traditional and new health systems that India has. It also asks for prioritizing the prevention of ill health through adequate nutrition, safe water, and other determinants of a healthy life.

Given the long-standing deprivations and inequalities based on caste, gender, and ability, and other features, the Manifesto demands priority – in all public and private institutions and all the actions recommended – to the most marginalized sections (women, Dalits, Adivasis, religious and sexual minorities including LGBTQIA+, persons with disability, etc).

## Towards ecological sanity

All signs point to a worsening ecological situation in India – hundreds of species under threat of extinction, over 65% of land degraded, most waterbodies badly polluted, several of the world's most air-polluted cities, a huge garbage problem, toxins like pesticides in food and water well above human safety levels, and impacts of climate change already affecting tens of millions of people. Ecological governance, too, seems to be at its lowest since people's struggles and some progressive elements within government had initiated positive changes from the 1970s. Many of the laws and policies that were brought in then are being systematically weakened now to enable corporations to grab lands, forests, water, and other resources.

In view of this, the Manifesto urges actions to reverse ecological degradation and safeguard nature. This includes a national land and water policy that protects important ecological components (such as water and soil), which has been a long-standing demand of environmental groups. It seeks effective and community-led conservation of wildlife and biodiversity through collective rights over ecosystems such as those provided by the Forest Rights Act. Moving away from a human-centered view, it also seeks to extend rights to natural ecosystems and species. It urges the complete conversion of India's farming to organic, biologically diverse methods by 2040, phasing out of dangerous toxic products, and drastic cuts in the production and use of plastics and other non-biodegradable materials, replacing them with eco-sensitive materials. Decentralized water harvesting and management, managed by communities, are suggested. It is also a priority to decentralize renewable energy, phase out fossil fuels and nuclear power by 2030, and curb luxury and wasteful consumption. As in the case of alternative economic options, in all the above, many successful examples have been documented by Vikalp Sangam.

The Manifesto asks to roll back the weakening of environmental impact assessment and forest clearance processes and introduce impact assessment of sectors (e.g. energy) as a whole, rather than only individual projects (e.g. a hydroelectricity dam). A National Environment Commissioner, with an independent Constitutional status like that of the Election Commissioner, the National Human Rights Commission, or the Comptroller and Auditor General is recommended

The climate crisis, already bearing down on tens of millions of Indians in the form of erratic weather, extreme heat, and drying up of water sources including glaciers, needs much greater attention than so far given. This includes, among other demands, much greater allocation for helping communities adapt to these impacts.

## Is anyone listening?

The Vikalp Sangam Manifesto is a detailed, 25-page document. Realizing that not all politicians and others in decision-making positions, or even the general "interested" public is unlikely to read such a long document in one go, the Sangam groups have also put out a sort of summary in the form of a [21-point charter](#). The Manifesto is also being translated into several Indian languages to reach audiences not comfortable with English.

Backed by solid, documented examples available on Vikalp Sangam's website, this is not simply an exercise in abstract, wishful thinking. Nearly every recommendation or demand made can be illustrated with initiatives on the ground.

In the 1970s, the women of Garhwal, in what is now the state of Uttarakhand in the western Himalaya, led a movement to protect trees by stating that their main role was to provide soil, air, fodder, and cultural sustenance, not timber. Not long after, the Adivasi village Mendha Lekha of Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, western India, stated: "We elect the government in Delhi, but in our village, we are the government". Dalit women farmers of Deccan Development Society in Telangana state, southern India, have for over three decades asserted food sovereignty, or complete control over seeds, knowledge, water, and land to achieve nutritional security. Residents associations in Bhuj town of Kachchh have demanded and achieved local decision-making as part of urban planning in a program called "Homes in the City".

The Manifesto is infused with the notions of direct and accountable democracy, economic self-reliance, ecological responsibility, and socio-cultural equality emerging from such grounded history and ongoing struggles.

But is anyone listening? In particular, are those who currently hold inordinate, centralized power in their hands willing, or able, to listen and understand? Will the Manifesto change anything in the currently dismal, seemingly hopeless political and economic picture? Frankly, by itself, likely not.

In 2019, in advance of the last national elections in India, Vikalp Sangam came out with a similar People's Manifesto. It resulted in some parties including some recommendations in their election manifestos. Unfortunately, the BJP, which came back to power, had completely ignored the Manifesto, at least if its own [election manifesto](#) was any indication. And even if parties accepted and incorporate some crucial points, they may not implement them; we are all too familiar with the phenomenon of broken promises, whichever political party may come to power.

As citizens of India, we need to be much more alert and proactive, demanding that elected representatives do what they are supposed to do, but also assert our own voice in all decisions affecting our lives. We have to continue to strengthen people's voices at the ground level and continue struggling for real, radical, and direct democracy or true swaraj. We need to enable the voices of the country's large youth population, making alternative pathways available and supporting them to end the rat race they are otherwise condemned or enticed into joining. For this reason, the Manifesto has a special section on youth perspectives.

On their own, political parties, government agencies, and businesses are unlikely to adopt the fundamental, systemic changes needed to move towards a just society. People's movements and civil society organizations have to continue promoting such changes through advocacy for policy shifts and ground action by and with communities. This includes the groups forming Vikalp Sangam and other platforms that have put out demands in view of the 2024 elections. These may, for example, include Citizens for Democracy, LokTantrik Rashtrianin Abhiyan, ICAN, the Process Group, and Campaign to Defend Nature and People.

In this lies hope for the future of India, and, in conjunction with similar struggles elsewhere, the world.

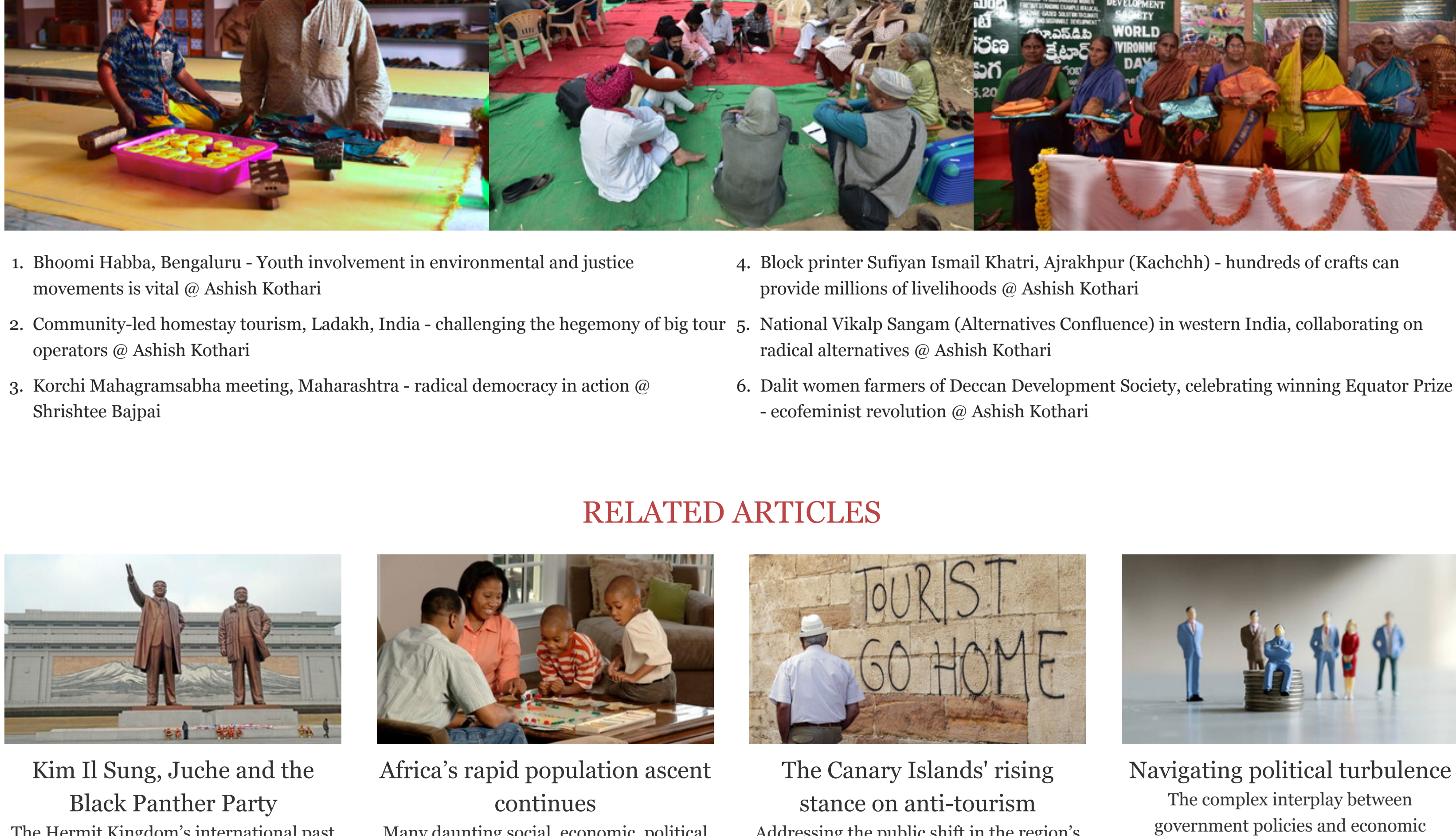
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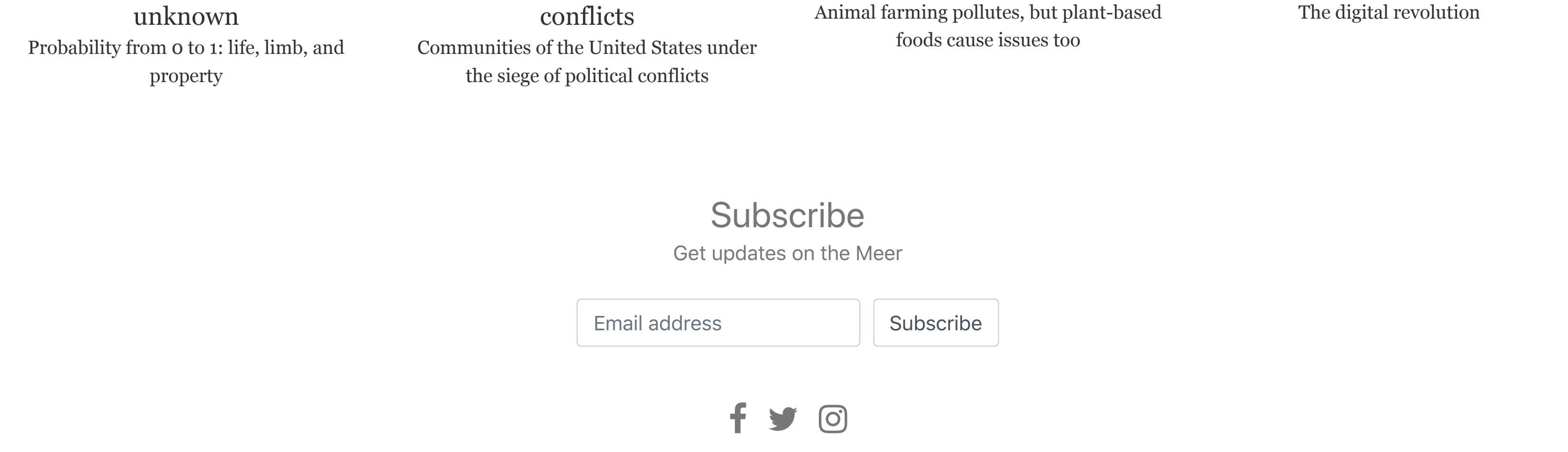
An environmentalist and network in India, Ashish has helped found several national and global organisations and based. Views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent the views of any of these.

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