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## The Journey of an Environmentalist

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MY JOURNEY AS AN ENVIRONMENTALIST HAS BEEN A BIT LIKE looking into a kaleidoscope: the more you travel, turning new corners, the more shapes, colours and sequences you see. You realize that what you saw as a single picture has many dimensions, widths and depths.

It has now been over four decades, so memory is somewhat fuzzy, but I think my earliest interest in environmental issues started with animal rights. I was fond of animals and read something about horrible experimentation being done on monkeys. Around the same time, I joined the Nature Club in my school, attracted more by the fact that it took students out on trips than by the 'nature' part of it, but soon I got hooked onto birding and other forms of nature-related adventure. This is also when



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some of us in school or college ‘discovered’ the forest on Delhi Ridge, the last stretch of the Aravallis descending to the River Yamuna and began enjoying strolls through the unique green oasis.

It was a time of increasing news about ecological devastation: deforestation in the Himalayas, big dams on rivers threatening to drown out a rainforest such as Silent Valley and several wildlife species slipping towards extinction; and in our own backyard, increasing water and air pollution, and the destruction of the Ridge Forest for various urban projects.

My earliest involvements in the environmental movement space were actions against the export of monkeys to the USA (or rather, urging the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai not to re-open export), a demonstration outside the Saudi Arabian embassy against its princes coming to hunt floricans and bustards (just a dozen of us made enough noise to embarrass the Indian government into requesting the royals to go back), a cycle rally against pollution of the Yamuna and the horrendously smoky Indraprastha Power Station, and a rally against deforestation on the Ridge. Around this last one, which involved lots of school students (I was then finishing high school), we decided to set up Kalpavriksh as an organization that could regularly take up environmental action.

Then began a steep learning curve from the late 1970s to early 1980s, as we travelled to the Chipko Movement villages in Tehri Garhwal, visited mining sites in Goa against which the Goa Foundation and others were campaigning, studied impacts of thermal air pollution on a village near Delhi, carried out a spot investigation of police firing on

villagers in Bharatpur National Park, and in 1983, took a fifty-day walking-busing-boating trip from the mouth to the origin of the Narmada river to look into impacts of the proposed mega-dam projects.

Why do I say it was a steep learning curve? Because it brought to my colleagues and me the understanding that environmental issues were also profoundly social, political, economic and cultural. Chipko's women were fighting deforestation and a patriarchal order in which men decided what was to be done with the area's trees. In supporting the protest of Molad Bund villagers against the Badarpur Power Station and visiting the mined-out craters in Goa, we understood the injustice of an economy that produces for the consumption of the urban rich at the cost of the poor. The complex issues brought up by our understanding of the Bharatpur incident brought home the shortsightedness and unfairness of top-down wildlife conservation policies that disadvantaged local communities. And the Narmada project drove home the biggest question of them all: what really is development?

In those early years, we spent time with people from movements and some of our elders already active in ecological and human rights issues as much as we could outside our study schedules. We learnt from the village women of Garhwal, from seasoned activists of Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad, Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Anupam Mishra, Vandana Shiva, Jayanta Bandyopadhyay, Claude Alvares, Ram Guha, the movement of traditional fishers against the commercialization of fisheries, movements against big dams in central India, and many others.

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Of course, we continued learning from nature as a part of a research project at the Indian Institute of Public Administration. I travelled to many protected areas, and who can fail to be inspired by its many wonders (I retained a keen interest in birding, and immensely enjoyed writing the book *Birds in Our Lives*)?

I consider myself very lucky for having had these opportunities, not only because they gave me a wider, deeper, more nuanced perspective, but also because they gave me an orientation of combining activism and research, a grounding in issues of justice, an integration of human rights and respect for the rest of nature in their own right.

Fast forward to the last decade or so. In 2012, I wrote a book, *Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India* with Aseem Shrivastava. We analysed in great detail (over 300 pages) the ecological, social and economic costs of development in India, especially since 1991 when India moved towards globalization. Since then the pace of ecological devastation has accelerated, hard-fought environmental standards and laws have been systematically diluted or sidestepped, civil society spaces for participation in environmental governance have shrunk, nature-based livelihoods have been increasingly displaced or made unviable, inequality is rapidly increasing, and so on.

But we also wrote in the second part of the book about the radical alternatives that were emerging as a response to destructive development. A year or two before the book came out, I was already turning to a greater focus – on the question of not only what we are against, but what we are for. We say ‘no’ to mining, mega-dams, consumerism, etc., but what are we saying ‘yes’ to? What is our vision

of a more just world? I'd started talking about 'radical ecological democracy', which we later labelled 'eco-swaraj' or 'Prakritik Swaraj'.

This has now been my journey over the last decade: the search for alternatives to the currently dominant system. To an extent, this has been a feature of all our work over four decades – in pushing for community-based and community-led conservation or advocating biologically diverse, sustainable farming based on examples we have known from various parts of India. I got a chance to go into such solutions more widely in coordinating India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan process in the early 2000s.

But it has been only in the last few years that this has become a predominant focus, with multiple dimensions and activities. This has included helping document and make known a diversity of alternative initiatives, especially in India but also some outside, beginning a process called Vikalp Sangam as a platform for sharing, collaboration, collective visioning and advocacy in India, and one called Global Tapestry of Alternatives to do the same at a global level, and in general, integrate the idea and practice of radical alternatives into neoliberal economic development, centralized governance, social injustice and ecological devastation.

In this, the main inspiration has remained the grounded struggles, innovations and joys of 'ordinary' people: Dalit women farmers of Deccan Development Society (DDS) who have overcome deep-rooted socio-cultural and economic marginalization to achieve food sovereignty and dignified livelihoods; Adivasis in central India who



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have taken back collective control over their forests and moved towards self-governance ('we are the government in our village': Mendha-Lekha village, Maharashtra); 'slum' colonies in Bhuj, Kachchh, who have organized themselves with civil society help to claim their right to the city and the planning of their neighbourhoods; and many more.

Over these last five to six years, we have put up over 1,500 stories of hope, resilience and innovation in India on the Vikalp Sangam and Radical Ecological Democracy websites.

From these experiences, we have also worked on radical and systemic change frameworks, developing something we like to call 'the flower of transformation'. This posits that fundamental change has to happen in four significant spheres of life: political, towards radical democracy or swaraj; economic, towards democratization of the means of production and consumption and bringing back relations of caring and sharing as the core; social, towards justice for all peoples and equality between genders, sexualities, ethnicities and moving towards caste-class free society; and cultural, towards respecting diversity and asserting knowledge to be in the commons.

Underpinning all this is, of course, the need to re-insert ourselves within nature (learning from indigenous and other communities that have always considered that they are part of and now owners of nature), respect its own right to thrive, and live within ecological limits.

And while we may look at life from these multiple spheres as an aid to understand the changes taking place, we also, of course, realize that real life is messier, more complex,



more lived at the intersections between these spheres, and that the intersections themselves may sometimes conflict. At the core of this ‘flower of transformation’ are a set of values or ethical principles, such as solidarity, autonomy, rights and responsibilities, inclusivity, diversity, non-violence, love, the dignity of labour, and others, which are equally important. We can learn these values from successful initiatives of transformation and apply them in our own contexts, rather than trying to replicate or upscale those initiatives.

Because of this intricate and inextricable intersectionality, I have recently started talking about the need for a ‘rainbow new deal’ or recovery, not simply a ‘green new deal’ that is all the rage in the Global North right now. Pathways out of our global crises, including COVID-19–linked, have to be green, blue, red, pink, and of many other hues in that they must span ecological and social justice issues. Movements across the globe need to unite on these intersectional planes, respecting each other’s priorities and seeing the complementarity amongst them, rather than the current territoriality and fragmentation we see. Perhaps the inspiring youth movements emerging in many parts of the world and on many issues (climate, peace and social justice) can achieve what their elders, people like me, have not yet been able to.

After forty years of struggle, many people ask me: With the ecological and social situation even worse than when I began my journey as an environmentalist, what makes me still hopeful? Well, it is pretty simple. I have seen ‘victims’ of destructive development projects themselves continue struggling, laughing and hoping that their actions will lead



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to a better life. I have seen that resistances can succeed (the women's movement, the anti-colonial struggles, etc.), and alternative initiatives can help transform lives (where would the Dalit women farmers of DDS be if someone had told them thirty years ago that it's all pointless?) even if the big wars are yet to be won. And I've been lucky to have had an excellent set of colleagues at Kalpavriksh (and the various other networks and groups mentioned throughout). So, what right do I have, I ask myself, to ever lose hope?



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