

Vikalp Sangam: a decade of alternatives for India

Exploring ten years of collaboration, advocacy, and grassroots movements for justice and ecological wisdom

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Democracy VS, School for Democracy, Rajasthan, 2019 @ Ashish Kothari

A decade ago, in a discussion I had with the linguist and scholar-activist Ganesh Devy, the idea of initiating a confluence of alternatives in India was born. We reached out to several organisations and individuals that were questioning the violence of ‘development’, including destruction of nature and displacement of communities, and practicing or promoting alternative ways of meeting human needs and aspirations with justice and ecological wisdom.

Having received a strong endorsement of the idea, [Vikalp Sangam](#) (‘Alternatives Confluence’) was launched in 2014, with the key objective of bringing together such movements and organisations. After a decade, it is time to review the process and plan the next phase, for which a national confluence is being organised in November 2024. But meanwhile, my own take on what has and has not happened, is presented here in brief.

What is the impetus?

People’s movements across the world have been fighting entrenched structures and relations of power—including patriarchy, capitalism, statism, casteism, racism, and human-centrism—that are ecologically devastating, economically iniquitous, and socially disruptive. Resistance that attempts to save existing ways of life, that are relevant to our search for a better world, is crucial, but not enough. Several traditional ways of life have their own inequities, based on gender, caste, ethnicity, and ability; additionally, these ways of life are not always able to meet basic needs or legitimate aspirations, due to adverse policies, demographic changes, and the perspectives of newer generations. Addressing such issues requires constructive alternatives, derived from both traditional and newer concepts and practices.

Social movements often work in silos. What can we do to bring together these diverse movements, understanding and enhancing the intersections amongst them? How can we collectively address global political, ecological, economic, and social crises? How do we meet human aspirations without trashing the earth? What is our vision of a better future? And how do we ensure that ‘solutions’ are not co-opted by the same system that has generated the problem, such as through greenwashing or

superficial initiatives like carbon trading, the green economy, or even sustainable development in so far as it does not challenge the basics of growth-led, capitalist, or statist approaches? Attempting to come to grips with such questions is at the core of the VS process.

The Vikalp Sangam (VS) body of work

The VS process has worked on five key areas of action: documentation, visibilisation, collaboration, visioning, and advocacy. To *document* and understand the myriad alternative initiatives, is crucial to understand, appreciate, and learnt from them. This part of the VS process has involved commissioning or requesting short stories on alternative initiatives, by journalists and researcher-writers, or by people within the initiatives themselves; films on such initiatives; and detailed case studies of specific sites which have much to offer in terms of lessons and processes. An example is documentation of stories of community resilience in the face of the COVID pandemic period of 2020-22, about 70 examples of which were published in a series named [Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People](#).

Documentation is not adequate; such stories and case studies have also to be reached to diverse audiences. So, the second area of action has been *visibilisation and outreach*. A major platform for this is [the Vikalp Sangam website](#), which has published nearly 2000 stories and perspective pieces, and over 100 films, on positive transformation. Unfortunately, coverage on this website remains dominated by English language; more attempts are being made to diversify to other Indian languages.

Other outreach methods used by VS including a mobile poster exhibition, presentations at schools, colleges, and other institutions, booklets and graphic novels. In the last 2-3 years, VS outputs and events have also been promoted through various 'social media' (SM) handles. Unfortunately, VS's outreach to mainstream media, print and online, has remained limited and inconsistent. This is both due to a general tendency amongst such media to focus on scandals, politics, fashion and sports, but also to difficulties in accessing relevant contact points.

A third major area of activity is *sharing and collaboration*. The most exciting are physical Sangams - [confluences or gatherings](#) of people for 3-4 days. As of early 2024, nearly 30 Sangams have been held, including regional ones for several states/regions in India and thematic ones on Energy, Food, Youth, Democracy, Traditional Worldviews, Alternative Economies, Health, Wellbeing, and Justice, Traditional Governance, and Peace in Central India. These gatherings involve both serious dialogues as also field trips, physical actions, and display of alternative products. The few thousand people that have participated so far have been from civil society organisations, farming, pastoral, crafts-based, and other land-based communities, professionals in various fields, officials and politicians in their individual capacity, and alternative businesses.

A key aspect of the Sangam design is the encouragement of cross-sectoral and cross-cultural exchange and sharing, in an attempt to break the 'siloes' many groups are cocooned within. One of my vivid memories is of the interaction amongst Adivasi or indigenous people, nomadic pastoralists, and non-advasi farming communities at the Indigenous and Community Worldviews Vikalp Sangam in 2023. Another is of a person with disabilities, and another from the LGBTQ+ community, sensitizing so-called 'normal' people about the issues they face.

Though not always obvious because of inadequate reporting back by participants, these gatherings lead to subsequent collaborations that help make grounded work deeper and wider. For instance, Sangams in the Western Himalaya have led to exchange programmes to learn from each other, and eventually a three year process that is independently run by groups from the region. A Youth VS held in 2017 led to a multi-year process of bringing together young people from various fields and geographies and cultures, to enable articulation of the kind of society they want and are working towards.

A fourth area of action is *collective visioning*. This attempts to bring visionary voices of many sections of Indian society, over many years, into a common agenda. This includes the voices and perspectives of the farmer, the pastoralist, the fisherperson, the industrial worker, the craftsperson – people often considered to be 'practitioners' while urban intellectuals are the 'thinkers' (a tendency partly rooted in strong gender and caste hierarchies). Breaking this false dichotomy has been an important objective of the VS process.

One primary vessel for such visioning is a document—["The Search for Radical Alternatives: Key Aspects and Principles"](#)—that was drafted in 2014, and has been evolving through multiple Sangams till its current (7th) avatar. This contains a section on VS's understanding of what an alternative is, a 'Flower of Transformation' describing five intersecting spheres of change, and more (see next section).

The fifth and final arena of action is *advocacy*. VS members realise that without a political critical mass it is impossible to challenge the currently dominant macro-political and economic forces. At several Sangams, declarations have included policy recommendations. For instance, at the National Food Sangam in 2016, participants issued a declaration in favour of community-based sustainable agriculture, and opposing attempts to introduce genetically modified mustard. Several statements have been issued in support of local struggles for environmental and social justice, including in the context of constitutional changes in the status of Kashmir and Ladakh, attempts to communalise life in Lakshadweep, government interference in Auroville, the need for urgent action to heal the ethnic rifts in Manipur, and lessons learnt from communities that remained resilient in the face of the COVID-generated crisis.

The most ambitious attempt at advocacy has been the [‘People’s Manifestos for Equitable, Just, Sustainable India’](#) issued in 2019 and 2024. These contain detailed recommendations on economic, social, cultural, political and ecological issues facing India. They are intended to urge political parties to consider these issues in their poll campaigns, but also as a template to use for other occasions such as state elections, advocacy with local to state governments, and for civil society to use as guidance for its own actions. VS has also aligned or collaborated with other national networks with similar objectives, such as in the Jan Sarokar process.

Transcending ideological and sectoral boundaries

The VS Framework envisages five intersecting petals of the Flower of Transformation. The political sphere is about rescuing democracy from its currently dominant liberal form, with power centred on political representatives and bureaucrats, towards swaraj, or radical democracy, in which communities grounded in their own reality are at the centre of power. The second petal is of ecological integrity and connectivity across bioregional or ecoregional landscapes, and respecting non-human nature. The third petal is of economic democratization and localisation, the fourth of struggles for social justice and equity, and the fifth of sustaining cultural and knowledge diversity and commons.

At the core of the Flower are ethical values and principles which radical transformation initiatives encompass and promote. These include collective responsibility and sharing, solidarity and reciprocity, diversity, freedom and autonomy, respect and responsibility, living within and with nature, dignity and inclusiveness, human rights, and others. A crucial extension of this is that instead of ‘upscaling’ successful initiatives (a typically capitalist or statist approach, unfortunately adopted by many NGOs also), the strategy is to ‘outscale’ them, with thousands of distributed initiatives learning principles from each other, adopting them to their own unique contexts, and networking to achieve scale. This is happening, for instance, with regard to sustainable, biologically diverse agriculture, or decentralized water harvesting, or more direct forms of democracy.

Interestingly, in the Sangam space, conventional ideological barriers seem to become more porous. Participants with strong Gandhian, Marxist, feminist, Dalit, adivasi, nature rights, and other perspectives, which can often be in contestation with each other, have managed to have constructive dialogue. The atmosphere is one of working out these differences, or explicitly acknowledging them, and building on the commonalities (especially in values and principles). This could be because participants coming for Sangams are oriented towards being more respectful of diversity, or because there is an atmosphere of *positivity* in discussions on alternatives as contrasted to the *negativity* of a discussion focusing on problems and criticism. Third, and possibly most important, experiences from the ground force discussions and collaborations to be intersectional, cutting across ideologies that academics or activists often get trapped in.

The VS process has also spawned discussion on and visioning of more porous political boundaries, that can help re-establish ecological, cultural, and economic flows disrupted by current hard borders between nation-states in South Asia, and between states/districts within India. At the Democracy VS held in October 2019, a [South Asia Bioregionalism Working Group](#) was proposed, and has since then come out with reports documenting and visioning bioregional or biocultural connections across political borders.

Spawning analytical tools and global networking

The VS framework note mentioned above, led in 2017 to an [‘Alternatives Transformation Format’](#), for use by actors of alternative initiatives. It enables them to see how holistic, coherent, and comprehensive their initiative is, where they are lacking, and what more they can do. The format evolved as part of a global project ‘Academic-Activist Co-generation of

Knowledge on Environmental Justice' (ACKnowl-EJ), and has been used by several organisations within and outside the VS process, including some universities, for critical self-reflection or for action research.

The VS process has also connected with similar networks and platforms in other parts of the world, to launch the [Global Tapestry of Alternatives](#) in 2019. VS is now one of GTA's 'weavers' (with other weavers in Colombia, Mexico, and Southeast Asia), involved in mutual learning and collective action with other constituents.

Structure and process: towards subversion

The VS process is not an organization, it is a network or platform. Its relatively informal structure has a national general assembly (consisting of over 85 movements and organisations as of mid-2024). For the first few years its hub was Kalpavriksh, but the coordinating and anchoring roles have partially decentralized into a Facilitation Team of about 10 member organisations. Each Sangam is organised by one or more hosts, usually including members of the General Assembly.

In its internal operations too, VS tries to encompass its core principles. The physical Sangams have a set of norms that includes participation of all (with special focus on those who may be hesitant to speak), avoiding plastics and other wasteful products, maximizing the serving of local cuisines, and creating a safe space in various ways, including no tolerance for sexual or other forms of harassment or discrimination.

The VS initiative attempts to celebrate the ability of 'ordinary' people to innovate, persevere, collaborate, and find solutions to crises. It shows further that the visioning of a better society, is not the prerogative of formal 'experts'. It can be done by putting together the wisdom, knowledge, and experience of people anywhere - at different stages of life, in diverse cultures and livelihoods, at different levels of learning and education, in nature, on the farm or in classrooms. And in doing so, it can be subversive of conventional, top-down, colonial ways of generating knowledge and action.

Over the last few decades, some of the key participants have learnt that *process* is as important as *product*. The more democratic, participatory, diverse, and exciting one can make the process, the greater the likelihood of at least some aims being met, and of unanticipated benefits. Also, even as some of our activities may be oriented at trying to influence state policy, ultimately it is people's empowerment that will carry forward transformation, and the process of meaningful participation is itself enormously empowering.

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

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1. Art demonstration at Kerala VS, 2017 @ Ashish Kothari

2. Participants at Traditional Worldviews VS, 2022 @ Alex Jensen

- 3. Participants of Maharashtra VS, 2015 @ Ashish Kothari
- 4. Traditional healers at National Vikalp Sangam, Udaipur, 2017 @ Ashish Kothari
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