Patrick Huntjens
Najma Mohamed
Katja Hujo
Manisha Desai
Editors

Eco-Social Contracts for Sustainable and Just Futures

Mobilising Collective Power to Deal with the 21st Century Polycrisis

OPEN ACCESS

Patrick Huntjens • Najma Mohamed
Katja Hujo • Manisha Desai
Editors

Eco-Social Contracts for Sustainable and Just Futures

Mobilising Collective Power to Deal with the 21st Century Polycrisis

Springer

Editors
Patrick Huntjens
Inholland University of Applied Sciences
Delft, The Netherlands

Katja Hujo
UNRISD
Bonn, Germany

Najma Mohamed
UN Environment Programme World
Conservation Monitoring Centre
UNEP-WCMC
Cambridge, UK

Manisha Desai
Stony Brook University
Stonybrook, NY, USA

ISBN 978-3-031-99108-0 ISBN 978-3-031-99109-7 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-99109-7

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Contents

10

Radical Democracy, Ecology, and Justice in India: Experiences from Four Decades of Activist Research

Shrishtee Bajpai, Ashish Kothari, and Neema Pathak Broome

10.1 Introduction and Conceptual Framework

This chapter attempts to distil key findings and lessons from a history of engagement of members of Kalpavriksh with various aspects of local community political governance in India. Kalpavriksh is a civil society organisation focusing on environment, development, conservation, livelihoods, and related issues, active since 1979. Its main work has been located in India, but through global networks it also has wider engagements.

The first section of the chapter gives a brief history of political governance in India followed by describing the conceptual framework that the authors use to analyse some of the cases of radical democracy mentioned here. The next section gives an overview of examples where communities are asserting self-governance and control over their territories. The last section highlights key learnings from these experiences and lists some key elements of swaraj (self-governance) embedded in these varied examples. The conclusion briefly weaves the intersectional nature of transformation in the initiatives described.

S. Bajpai (✉) • A. Kothari • N. P. Broome
Kalpavriksh – Environment Action Group, Pune, Maharashtra, India

P. Huntjens et al. (eds.), *Eco-Social Contracts for Sustainable and Just Futures*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-99109-7_10

10.1.1 Brief History of Governance in India

Indigenous peoples[1] and other local communities across the world have had a diversity of systems of self-governance and decision-making guided by their cultural-social contexts and the geographies that they inhabit. These systems have operated through a diversity of institutional forms and unwritten or sometimes written codes of conduct and deliberations.

Over the several millennia that the Indian subcontinent has been inhabited, a wide diversity of governance forms has existed, including those with strong elements of direct or participatory 'democracy'.[2] This phenomenon is still relevant in the case of some of India's oldest communities, especially Adivasis, as we describe below. In more recent times, during the reign of princely states before the British Empire colonised India, most Adivasi regions remained on the periphery or as a nominal part of the realm. The rule of the monarchies and princes rarely extended to these regions beyond collecting some payments or using their habitats for aspects like hunting (Bijoy, 2024). They were usually left to govern themselves through their customary and traditional governance systems and institutions (Bijoy, 2024).

Such local systems of governance informed people's interaction with fellow community members as well as the rest of nature. These include village assemblies, selected or elected councils, and groups of village headpersons, who would form the key institutional pillars of self-governance. Broadly, these institutions and individuals were responsible for internal conflict resolution, management of village commons and water and other resource distribution, liaising with government agencies, livelihood activities, religious/spiritual ceremonies, and other cultural relations (Bajpai et al., 2022). They were in turn based on or guided by principles or norms, handed down over generations (Bhaskar et al., 2021).

During the colonial period (approximately mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth century), these communities and their governance systems came in direct conflict with British policies of commercialisation of lands, forests, waters, and other ecosystems and elements of nature. By 1864, a centralised forest department was established, draconian forest laws were enacted, and a large part of India's forests were taken over by the state (Skaria, 1999). These steps were strongly resisted by Adivasis and other communities such as those

[1] The term 'indigenous' is not used officially in India, but many communities do identify themselves as such or as adivasis (original inhabitants); the term more commonly used for official purposes is Scheduled Tribes, denoting those peoples who are listed in the relevant list of the Constitution of India.

[2] For glimpses into ancient Indian democratic or republic-like practices, see Muhlberger (1998); on clan assemblies, village assemblies, and gana-sanghas, see Thapar (2002).

in the Himalaya, leading to frequent and brutal suppression or (more rarely) conceding ground such as in the case of Van Panchayats (local forest governance institutions) in the Kumaon hills in northern India (Arnold, 1989).

The colonial state's uniform and centralised systems of governance were continued after India gained independence in 1947 but embedded within modern notions of electoral or liberal democracy. These systems did not take into consideration the already existing customary or local governance mechanisms across India, except where the colonial regime had already made concessions or let local systems remain. Only in some places where the newly established Indian nation-state did not have the reach to impose its power, or where constitutional exemptions were made due to local resistance, such as in north-east India, communities continued their traditional forms of governance in a state of relative autonomy (Bijoy, 2024).

Records of the constituent assembly during the framing of the Indian Constitution indicate that there was a recognition of the importance of local self-government, but this was not initially included as a justiciable part of the Constitution (Bijoy, 2024). Local governance was placed under the purview of state governments, leading to varied implementations across states. The Assembly ultimately agreed on the necessity of incorporating provisions for Panchayats (village councils) in the Directive Principles of State Policy, leading to Article 40 of the Constitution, which directs the state to organise village Panchayats and endow them with necessary powers and authority to function as units of self-government.

The idea of democratic decentralisation had been Mahatma Gandhi's key point of struggle but neglected by policymakers. In 1957, the Balwantray G. Mehta Committee, constituted by the Government of India, recommended 'democratic decentralisation' in the form of a three-tier Panchayati Raj System (PRS): the Gram Panchayat (council) at the village level, the Panchayat Samiti (committee) at the block level, and Zila Parishad (committee) at the district level. This system was adopted by state governments during the 1950s and 1960s (Mehta, 1957), and in 1992, it got constitutional backing, with the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India. The powers and responsibilities devolved to the Panchayats under this system include preparation of plans for economic development and social justice, along with implementation of 29 subjects listed in the Constitution. Recognising that Adivasis needed something more tuned to their context, this system was extended in modified form to Scheduled V areas (GoI, 1996), where Adivasi populations were predominant, by the 73rd Constitution Amendment in 1996.

Additionally, over time, special provisions have been made for north-east India, to recognise its diverse and unique governance institutions. This

includes empowering Autonomous District Councils or other such bodies, 'to make laws in respect of areas under their jurisdiction, which cover the land, forest, cultivation, inheritance, indigenous customs and traditions of tribals, etc. and also to collect land revenues and certain other taxes'. The Constitution's Sixth Schedule, providing relative autonomy, was provided for the states of Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Tripura (The Constitution of India, Sixth Schedule).

In the case of communities still practising traditional occupations and ways of life (forest based, pastoral, fishing, and/or farming), many traditional systems of governance are still being followed in parallel with the formal governance systems brought in by the state or being reinvented in combination with modern forms of governance (Bajpai et al., 2022). We explore this now in relation to specific sites.

10.1.2 Conceptual Framework

Over four decades of work, Kalpavriksh has tried to interrogate conventional notions and practices of democracy and understand from grounded initiatives how communities conceptualise and practice it. Democracy (demos = people + cracy = rule) is meant to be the rule of, by, and for people. In its original meaning this would imply that all of us, wherever we are, have the power to govern our lives. However, across the world its dominant meaning has been constrained by the form of 'liberal' governance in which representatives elected by people have power at varying degrees of centralisation. It is necessary to understand this crucial difference between direct or radical democracy and representative democracy (Kothari & Das, 2016). In the former, 'ordinary' citizens self-govern for various essential aspects of life, expressing and exercising power, which is felt inherently, rather than 'given' down by a 'higher' authority. In the latter, power is concentrated in representatives (elected or delegated), and typically the higher-level institutions (state and national level) where these representatives exercise their power, forming the state, are far removed from those who have voted or selected them. These two forms of democracy are not necessarily antithetical to each other, and conceivably one can formulate systems of subsidiarity where all decisions that can be taken at the level of local, face-to-face units of direct democracy are taken there. Only those decisions requiring larger-scale coordination are taken by units comprising representatives or delegates. In such a system, or even in those where direct democracy does not exist or is very weak, there can be various processes to ensure that representatives are accountable, transparent, and participatory

in their decision-making and that there are methods such as the right to recall, periodic rotation, and so on that reduce unaccountable concentration of power (Bajpai & Kothari, 2020).

This understanding of democracy has been embedded in Kalpavriksh's work towards alternatives more generally, whether on ground or through social and political action. Elements of this are many decades old, for instance, in its action research and advocacy related to community-led conservation. More recently, in 2014, Kalpavriksh initiated a process involving participants from grassroots movements, NGOs, and others engaged in resistance against destructive models of development and working towards alternative ways of being, called Vikalp Sangam (VS) (Vikalp Sangam, 2025) or Confluence of Alternatives. This platform has since then brought together nearly 100 organisations and movements across India.

One of the first questions that the VS process explored was what is an alternative? Through deliberations at multiple gatherings, a collective vision called the 'The Search for Radical Alternatives' was drafted and has been evolving since then till its current (late 2024) seventh version (Vikalp Sangam, 2024). Additionally, as part of this, a self-reflecting, activist-academic tool to help evaluate the holism and intersectionality of transformative alternatives was produced, the Alternative Transformation Framework (ATF) (The Alternatives Framework, 2017). These documents contain a concept of alternatives and holistic transformation depicted by a 'Flower of Transformation', with five intersecting petals: ecological wisdom and resilience, social well-being and justice, direct and delegated political democracy, radical economic democracy, and cultural-knowledge diversity and commons (Kothari, 2021a, b). Also envisioned is the core of this Flower, comprised of multiple values and ethics, such as solidarity, diversity, equality, dignity, rights of humans as also non-human nature, and others. The documents define 'alternatives' as those that challenge the structures of oppression and unsustainability (capitalism, statism, patriarchy, racism, colonialism, anthropocentrism) and provide systemic pathways out of these as also to meet human needs and aspirations without trashing the earth and without creating or furthering inequities and injustices.

10.2 Kalpavriksh's Work on Local Governance

Since the 1980s, one strand of work within Kalpavriksh has been to understand common learnings, experiences, and challenges around local governance in India and the intersectionality of political governance with ecological, sociocultural, and economic dimensions.

One common thread over these decades has been the documentation of, and advocacy related to, *Community Conserved Areas.* Challenging exclusionary, top-down models of protected areas, Kalpavriksh has advocated community-led approaches of conservation by providing evidence of their viability and necessity, both in India and globally (Pathak Broome, 2009). Another common thread has been to document and visibilise traditional governance systems in such CCAs and at other sites, some of which we describe below.

10.2.1 Adivasis in Mendha Lekha

Mendha Lekha village in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra is home to over 400 people, all belonging to the Gond tribe (indigenous people) or the Koya (human) as the tribe refers to itself. With a traditional cosmology of interconnection of all beings, humans and forests, forests have been synonymous with existence with these communities. For over 200 years such communities across India have been subjected to exploitation by government—both colonial and non-colonial—oppressed by centralised and corrupt bureaucracy, and marginalised by economic and industrial interests. In this context Mendha became the first village in the country in August 2009 to have its legal rights and responsibilities to use, manage, and conserve the 1800 ha of forests falling within its customary boundary recognised under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forests Rights Act) 2006 or Forest Rights Act (FRA). This was a milestone in the history of forest governance not just in the village but for the country as a whole. This legal change was a consequence of more than two decades of struggle against oppressive forest governance regimes—as part of a larger regional movement called the Jungle Bachao Manav Bachao Andolan (Save Forests Save Humanity Movement).

Mendha's historic struggle and subsequent internal processes of transformation are an iconic and remarkable testimony of what a small tribal village, politically weak and voiceless, could do to empower itself to become a formidable force, through principles of consensus decision-making, commons, and non-violence. A village where until a few decades back the villagers would run into the forest and hide at the sight of an outsider to a village today where no activities even by the highest political or administrative functionaries can be carried out without their free prior informed consent.

Through processes of internal reflection over many years, the village realised that what weakened them in the face of external pressures was a fractured and

non-inclusive governance system. This led to the revival of the customary practice of village assembly meetings for all decisions in the village, ensuring that at least one woman and one man from each family participate, ensuring adequate information and in-depth and transparent dialogues before decisions (through abhyas gats or study circles) and consensus decision-making. For decisions beyond the village, the Gram Sabha nominates delegates. Through its resistance and self-strengthening, the village has consistently questioned, challenged, and eventually catalysed a change in laws and policies or dominant social, political, and economic norms. In 2013 it also converted all private lands into the village commons, a decision taken after a decade of discussions in the Gram Sabha. Within Gadchiroli, Mendha is now part of a collective of over 30 Gram Sabhas in the region to work as a political and economic pressure group. It continues to face challenges from the state and corporations that eye the land and forests from a commercial mindset, as also the fragility that comes from being within a territory with a long history of conflict between the state and 'Maoist'[3] groups (Pathak Broome, 2018).

10.2.2 Adivasi Assemblies in Korchi

Korchi is an administrative subdivision or taluka of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra, inhabited by 133 Gram Sabhas (village assemblies), which were traditionally divided into three Ilakas (territories). Although officially the taluka is administered by Gadchiroli District Administration, informally and independently the Ilakas continue to have their traditional village level to supra-village-level self-governance structures.

Communities in the region have been resisting mining and exclusionary forest laws for several decades. These, and the struggle to gain greater control over jal, jungal, aur jameen (water, forest, and land), have significantly impacted economic, political, cultural, and social life as a whole.

Political decentralisation led to moving towards an engendered direct democracy aiming to achieve greater autonomy for the local Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) and greater accountability of the state institutions, particularly the local and administrative institutions. These processes were catalysed by the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and Maharashtra State Rules under the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA). Localised, equitable, and transparent economy through assertion of rights over traditional forests and forest produce, particularly from the extraction and sale of forest produce

[3] For more detailed analysis, see series of articles in https://www.epw.in/journal/2006/29

or its use for domestic food and livelihood security, has led to bringing back as well as reinventing notions of well-being of people and forests.

Simultaneously, a need to strengthen the traditional tribe level governance systems such as the Jat Panchayats led to making them more inclusive of women and youth, through initiatives taken by women's collectives. As key activist Kumaritai says, 'the lives of the tribal women & the forest are intricately woven with each other. Our relation with forests is much older than the Forest Rights Act that was enacted in 2006'. Kumaritai and several other Adivasi women are articulating the need to visibilise and strengthen their role in decision-making.

To deal with newer challenges from the extractive industry as well as support for economic activities such as managing equitable collection, trade, and benefit sharing of and from forest produce, a federation of Gram Sabhas called the Maha Gramsabha emerged. The Maha Gramsabha and its executive body both have 50% women decision-makers along with representation from the youth, elders, non-tribal, and physically challenged persons from within the community. As in the case of Mendha Lekha, the context of India's neoliberal economy and top-down state remain ongoing challenges (Pathak Broome et al., 2022).

10.2.3 Communities in Ladakh and Spiti

The northernmost parts of India, adjoining Tibet, are culturally very different from most other parts of the country. They comprise of high-altitude ecosystems, Buddhist-Islamic cultures, and livelihoods based on pastoralism, farming, and trade. In Ladakh, the traditional governance system of yulpa (village assembly) and goba (village headman) appears to be very old, possibly from well before the time Ladakh came under the Kashmiri Dogra rule in 1846 (Bajpai et al., 2022). The goba acts as a representative of the village with social and cultural-ritual responsibilities. Traditionally, a well-respected person with a good comprehension of local history, communication skills, and good relationships with people was usually considered for selection to the post of the goba. In some places it was a hereditary position.

Key functions of the goba (currently carried out in varying degrees and combinations in different villages) include calling for all village-level meetings and coordinating various cultural, ritual, and other social gatherings; doing conflict resolution within the yulpa; maintaining the village demographic details; keeping records of government schemes and maintaining liaison with the administration on matters not covered by the panchayat and/or the

council; presiding over the harvesting and cultivation timings in the village; keeping a check on the rotation cycle for hosting the ceremonial feast; and ensuring that all the families get water for irrigation and the upkeep and maintenance of irrigation canals. In the pastoral landscape of Changthang, the goba maintains the list of pasture lands, number of livestock with individual families, and boundaries to be adhered to by herders, conducts meetings to decide on migration timings, vests the power to allocate or withdraw access to pasture lands, and resolves conflicts between two herder communities regarding such access.

The local governance system in Spiti (Murali et al., 2021) has similarities and differences. The traditional system continues to be intact with gatpo or nambardar (goba equivalent) and local deities all playing a role in plural systems of governance. The gatpo is a village headman (very rarely, a woman) selected by the entire village periodically. The term itself may be a derivation of gopa (go = head; pa = people of an area). The gatpo belongs to the landed elite that usually comprised only a few families who had the wherewithal and means to represent the village and spend the time necessary to perform all the functions allocated to this position. Like the goba, he is also known as nambardar (an official revenue position appointed by the government). In many (perhaps most) villages in Spiti, even though the panchayat system has been introduced (on which we will say more below), the gatpo continues to act as an interface between the government officials and sarpanches on one hand and the villagers and monasteries on the other. The gatpos traditionally and still play quite a crucial role in pasture management. The gatpo appoints the lukzi who divides which animals go to which pasture. Without the gatpo, no yulva (village assembly) meetings can happen. He decides and consults the dates based on the traditional Tibetan calendar for all important functions and festivals in the village. Gatpo is also the connecting point between the village and the deities of the region (Bajpai & Kothari, 2024).

In common with many traditional systems of governance, these exhibit deep-rooted inequities and discriminations based on gender, caste, and age. Very few gobas, for instance, have been women, and the position has not been accessible to marginalised castes (though this is changing now where the choice of the goba is based on rotation amongst all families).

In the case of Ladakh, an additional governance level is the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), established in 1995. The LAHDC was born of a demand over several decades by Ladakh's population to have relative autonomy within the state of Jammu and Kashmir. This status has benefited the region in a number of ways. But it has also been severely constrained because the relevant legislation granted only limited

administrative, financial, and legal powers to the Council, inadequate use of even these limited powers by LAHDC members, and continued domination by the state government. Additionally, issues of what kind of development would be appropriate have been weakly focused on, with some notable exceptions. In 2019, Ladakh received union territory status without legislative assembly, entailing further weakening of autonomy and a shift of power to the central government in New Delhi. Over the last few years, Ladakh's population has repeatedly mobilised to demand 6th Schedule and full statehood status, to safeguard the local culture, ecology, and traditions from being swamped by influx of people and 'development' projects decided on by outside forces (Kothari, 2024c). Getting such a status would also be crucial to sustain local governance systems.

10.2.4 Van Gujjar Pastoralists in Uttarakhand

The Van Gujjars inhabit the Western Himalayan states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, northern Uttar Pradesh, and the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. They are a nomadic community and rear an indigenous breed of buffalo (called 'gojri'). They are a semi-nomadic pastoralist community who migrate to the upper Himalayan Alpine meadows called 'bugyals' during summers and the lower Gangetic plains during winter. Over time, due to various restrictions imposed on their migration patterns, many have also begun to practice short-term migration to wetlands nearby in Bijnor district, Uttar Pradesh; some have also settled into sedentary agro-pastoralism. After the nationalisation of forests in colonial times, till the designation of these forests as protected areas under the Wild Life (Protection) Act 1972, the forests were divided and demarcated for each family, usually under the leadership of the family head. These heads (men or women) were licensees and were called Lambardars. This system has been officially discontinued, and the presence of Van Gujjars in these forests is now termed 'illegal' by the government.

Traditionally, Van Gujjar society is organised as a loose collective of families and clans, within which are embedded systems of resource governance, distribution, and management. Society is organised on the principles of caring and sharing, and decisions related to collective actions or conflicts are addressed by the Painchi, who are usually people who stand out in the community because of their wisdom, ethical standing, respect based on their personal and social conduct, and ability to resolve conflicts in a fair and unbiased manner. The Painchi system is an important institutional mechanism to maintain peace and harmony. The system functions on the principles of respect for

nature, strong sense of community, and non-violent dialogue and deliberations. The decision of the Painch is binding for all, and non-adherence could lead to penalty and, sometimes, social boycott. However, the individuals or groups who are not satisfied with the decision may call for a larger hearing, where Painch from other hamlets are also invited. Each of the conflicting parties can bring their own Painch. The Painch also ensures that support is provided, in whatever kind, to individuals or families who may be in need, for example, during health emergencies, marriages, and so on.

Van Gujjars believe that issues arising in the community need to be resolved by themselves and by leaders who are aware of the local contexts, as well as the worldviews and values of the community. The Painchi system along with other mechanisms of self-governance ensures this (Pathak Broome & Chettri, 2023; and personal conversations with community elders by Akshay Chettri and Neema Pathak Broome between 2021 and 2024).

10.2.5 Kunariya Panchayat in Kachchh

Kunariya panchayat, a cluster of three settlements in Kachchh district, Gujarat, with a population of about 3500, is largely dependent on agriculture (farming and animal husbandry), crafts, and labour. In 2016, the then sarpanch (village head), Suresh Chhanga, initiated a process of implementation of 73rd Constitutional Amendment (mentioned above). He began a series of consultations in all the village wards, meetings of small focussed groups, organisation of public events on nationally important days, and conducting eight or nine Gram Sabhas (village assemblies) a year. The panchayat focussed on empowering the smallest unit of decision-making, i.e. the wards. It initiated an ambitious programme to make the village self-sufficient in water, reviving neglected wetlands and taking up watershed management. It also focussed on effective implementation of Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP) by not only making it participatory but also trying to bring in the concerns and needs of various (especially the marginalised) sections and bringing in both local and external scientific knowledge as a base (Kothari, 2021a, b).

There has been a conscious attempt to deal with entrenched traditional inequities of gender and caste. This includes a Balika Panchayat, consisting of young girls up to the age of 16, as a forum where they can bring their concerns and needs to be conveyed to the main village panchayat (YouTube, 2022). Other initiatives include regeneration of grasslands for better fodder availability and activation of the local government schools for higher quality

and creative learning (leading to the migration of children back to them from private schools).

As a result of such mobilisation of the village community, Kunariya was able to survive the COVID-19 pandemic period much better than many of its neighbours, both in terms of health, safety and continuing economic activities including those under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

10.2.6 Communitisation in Nagaland

The state of Nagaland in north-east India consists almost entirely of Adivasis (Tribal communities). It has 16 (although people of Nagaland refer to up to 18) distinct tribes and many subtribes, each with distinct linguistic, cultural, customary, social, and political characteristics.

The main livelihood is traditional shifting cultivation with some amount of settled terrace farming. These are known for sustaining high agro-biodiversity, which along with forests sustain food and nutritional security (Changkija, 2017). The life, livelihoods, cultures, emotions, and identity of the majority of people from all tribes are deeply linked with their lands and forests.

Nagaland has a special constitutional status under Article 371 (A) of the Indian Constitution, meant to safeguard the cultures, traditions, and ways of life of the Naga people. This status enables it to reject or accept national laws relevant to the customary practices, land, and resources of its people. Within this context, Naga society has a layered system of governance. At the village level customary institutions differ from tribe to tribe: from inclusive and democratic decision-making systems of the Angamis, Chakesang, Ao, and Rengma to those where lands, resources, and decision-making around them rest exclusively in the hands of hereditary male village heads. Almost all villages have informal social collectives including mother's groups, self-help groups, student unions, youth groups, age groups, land right-holders unions, and collectives of Church functionaries. With more and more villages (as of 2024, over 400 documented) (Kalpavriksh, Kenono Foundation and LEMSACHENLOK, 2024) formally declaring parts of their traditional forest lands as Community Conserved Areas (CCAs), and the formation of CCA Management Committees (Pathak & Kothari, 2009), a state level forum called Nagaland Community Conserved Areas Forum has also been constituted (Nagaland Community Conserved Areas Forum, 2025).

The state-instituted governance systems are uniform across the state; however, there is a complicated yet functional relationship and overlap between

these and the customary systems. For example, every Naga village has a village council (VC) constituted under the Nagaland Village Council Act of 1978 that handles the administration of judicial matters. The VCs, composed of male village elders, have a uniform formal structure across Nagaland, but their functioning differs from tribe to tribe depending on their own customary governance systems.

Under each VC, there exists a Village Development Board (VDB), a statutory body meant to deliver rural development programmes. There are also other statutory institutions in many villages such as Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs) and institutions set up under the communitisation process of Nagaland (see below). Finally, the state-instituted governance systems are uniform across different districts of Nagaland. There is a complicated relationship and overlap between these and the customary social formulations and collectives.

One of the main problems facing rural India is the neglect of traditional or new local systems of education, health, water harvesting and sharing, and power generation through micro hydel. Very few of these local systems have found their way in the formal service sector or encouraged in any other manner. In Nagaland, this changed to some extent when, in the 1990s and 2000s, an innovative participatory exercise was carried out called 'Imagine Nagaland'. An understanding of the ineffectivity of the government's service delivery system, as also analysis of the problems of privatised services, led to innovative policy changes. The Nagaland Communitisation of Public Institutions and Services Act of 2002 empowered village institutions to manage education, water supply, roads, forests, power, sanitation, health, and other welfare and development schemes. Implementation of this law led to some transformative changes in the school results, health delivery system, and electricity revenue collections. In recent years, however, the process has lost some momentum and appears to be awaiting renewal (Pandey, 2010; Pathak Broome, 2014).

10.2.7 Urban Governance in Bhuj Town, Kachchh

Urban governance has been a major challenge across India's burgeoning towns and cities. The 74th Constitutional Amendment mandated decentralised governance by wards, but this has rarely been implemented. An attempt at trying to bring this to the ground can be seen in the case of Bhuj town in Kachchh (Gujarat). In 2014–2015, as part of a programme 'Homes in the City', five local civil society organisations (Hunnarshala, Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan, Arid Communities and Technologies, Sahjeevan, and SETU Abhiyan), have

enabled citizens in both poorer and middle-class families to take much greater control over their settlements, including in housing, water self-provisioning, handling of waste, creating greater safety for women and girls, greater livelihood and energy security, and other aspects (Bajpai & Kothari, 2020). Local committees have handled various aspects of this transformation, and the town administration has been made more accountable and responsive. Special efforts have been made to enable and empower marginalised sections including women and girls.

The Bhuj example brings out that transformative processes at the ground are supported by a multidimensional approach. In this, the work of the five CSOs listed earlier, as also others like Sakhi Sangini (a collective of poor women), Shahri Seri Pheriya Sangathan (of street vendors), Bhuj Shahar Pashu Uchherak Maldhari Sangathan (of pastoralists), and Jal Strot Sneh Samvardhan Samiti (of water conservation activists), is of crucial significance. These organisations through their respective focus areas are contributing to the Ward Committee planning process.

10.3 Towards Swaraj

What we see in the above examples are processes of making democracy deeper, more inclusive, and more comprehensive in its application but with continuing challenges. Communities and collectives have asserted their customary forms of governance but have also been aware of the need to deal with traditional inequities and discriminations (with varying degrees of success). In documenting and understanding these, Kalpavriksh's understanding of what democracy consists of, or could consist of, has evolved considerably beyond the liberal electoral forms we are used to. We have observed that the processes have distinct elements of moving towards the vision of what Mahatma Gandhi popularised, swaraj. Loosely defined as 'self-rule', this notion is much deeper than liberal democracy, in that it entails the radical re-claiming of power by the public, from those centralising power either outside or within the community, along with the exercise of that power in responsible ways. In other words, it is a form of freedom and autonomy that does not impinge on the freedom and autonomy of others, and it contains not unbridled rights but those that are tempered by restraints in behaviour and action (Kothari, 2024a, b).[4] Several crucial elements of this can be discerned in the cases described:

[4] One of us has taken this further into the notion of '*Eco-Swaraj*' or a 'radical ecological democracy', in which the sense of responsibility extends to all of nature.

1. *Capacity and ability to participate:* Radical democracy entails processes of building capacity, especially among those historically and currently marginalised. In the examples given above, the objective is not just to create space for participation but also how can that space be deepened and strengthened and for meaningful participation of the marginalised sections within the communities–women, oppressed castes, religious, and other minorities. Through various methods, communities have tried to create opportunity and open equitable access to forums of decision-making and possibilities of distributed leadership.
2. *Autonomy and self-rule:* These initiatives attempt to enhance the local power to make decisions (individual and collective) and assert the right to free, prior informed consent. In some of the examples given above (e.g. Goba system, Dzumsa, Painchi), despite the presence of constitutionally mandated new institutions such as Panchayats, people continue to bestow tremendous amount of trust in their own traditional systems of decision-making; in other cases (e.g. Kunariya), they are moulding the new institutions towards greater self-rule.
3. *Decision-making at smallest scale:* Radical democracy entails face-to-face interaction and meaningful participation in key larger-scale decisions. The role or power of a Gram Sabha to take all decisions relevant to it is the key idea of swaraj. In Korchi, for example, the Maha Gramsabha (MGS) is important, but it is the Gram Sabha that is the centre of decision-making.
4. *Accountable, transparent, and representative democracy at larger scale.* Institutions for decisions at a larger level, comprising delegates of the individual villages or collectives, are made accountable to the units of direct democracy. For instance, the Korchi Maha Gramsabha executive committee is responsible for reporting back to the individual Gram Sabhas; in Nagaland the state-level forum of CCAs takes its mandate from individual CCAs that are self-governing.
5. *Collective, responsible governance of commons.* The institutions of decision-making have collective, democratic processes of deciding how to manage, use, and conserve the commons. In the case of Korchi, Nagaland, Mendha, Kibber, Ladakh, Spiti, and Van Gujjars, decision-making is place-based, i.e. responding to and based on the needs, rhythms, and movements of the land and of nature as a whole, ensuring that they are sustained and not over-exploited, as also related to in ethical, often spiritual ways.
6. *Responsibility, solidarity, reciprocity, including the non-human:* Autonomy tempered by the need to respect others' political rights and interests is part of community ethics in some of the examples, if not all. "Changla Jeevan Jage Mayan Saathi Sapalorukoon Apu Apuna Jababdarita Jaaniv Ata Pahe

(To achieve well-being everyone needs to know what their responsibility is)" says Izamsai Katengey, a Gond Adivasi (indigenous) activist from Korchi. "Why do we oppose this project, you ask. Let us assume that we Adivasis will have to leave the forest if the mining company displaces us. But our forest deities will have no other place to go. I might shift to a city with my deity, but our collective deity of 33 villages resides in these hills, so many birds, animals and other species live in these forests, where will they go?" In Ladakh and Spiti, the rights of communities are intricately linked with their responsibilities towards the landscapes they live in, responding to the requirements of other beings they co-exist with.

7. *Informed and inclusive decision-making:* Fully informed decision-making including the ability to create and/or have access to existing forums of information and knowledge creation, respectful of marginalised subgroups, consensus as preferred mode, and avoidance of majoritarianism and competitive voting are critical dimensions of radical democracy. When demanding justice, it is not just about one sphere of all life, it also means transforming internal systems of injustice. Similarly, in the city of Bhuj, when designing urban planning processes, there is a conscious attempt to bring in the voice of the most marginalised in cityscapes, like the sex workers, city vendors, city pastoralists, and workers. Given the history of marginalisation, this is never easy, but several of these decision-making processes exhibit the wisdom to be not reduced to majoritarianism or having only the voices of the powerful being heard.
8. *Plurality:* The communities described above display a plurality or diversity of political representation, beliefs, interests, and ways of being (including legal and other forms of institutional pluralism). In Kibber, for instance, there is a co-existence of polycentric governance models with consultations among communities as well as deities and spirits of landforms. From a different perspective, in Korchi, Ladakh, and Uttarakhand, communities work with diverse institutions including their own systems of governance as well as state institutions like Panchayats and relevant state departments, as adaptation to changes taking place around them.
9. *Equity and non-discrimination*: Communities and collectives that are attempting radical democratic transformations, especially in their relations with the state, also realise the need to democratise internally. In the Indian context, patriarchy and sexual discrimination, casteism, ageism, ableism, and ethnic discrimination are deeply entrenched, though typically less so in Adivasi societies than others. Many of these initiatives have tried to proactively deal with these, such as in the case of Kunariya and the Korchi Maha Gramsabha; others such as goba in Ladakh are only now recognising the need to.

In many of the examples above, one also sees the move towards some kinds of redistribution to reduce economic inequities. For instance, a part of the income generated from the use of forest in Korchi's villages is put into a village fund, which is used for the welfare of those who are not well-off; during the COVID-19 pandemic this fund was crucial in sustaining village residents who had gone out for work and had to return as their jobs were shut down and did not have a land base to fall back on. In Kunariya the panchayat manages to use some of its designated funds to help those without land or in other ways economically weak. Such redistribution is even more meaningful if empowered local institutions are also legally supported to gain control over the local means of production, for example, through the Forest Rights Act in case of Korchi, or to access relevant government funds, for example, the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act in the case of Kunariya.

However, given the long-standing and deep-rooted nature of many of these inequities and discriminations, they remain challenges to the goals of justice and equity.

10.4 Conclusion: Local Governance and the Flower of Transformation

For Kalpavriksh, a crucial finding of the case studies presented above is the intersectional nature of transformation. While a key focus of the studies has been on political governance, i.e. the nature of decision-making and the relations of power, this is clearly connected to ecological, economic, social, and cultural aspects of the lives of the relevant communities, as depicted in the Flower of Transformation mentioned above. For instance, traditional or new forms of localised democratic functioning are closely related to managing and sustaining the natural and land commons (pastures, forests, wetlands), including resistance to externally imposed projects that are ecologically destructive (e.g. mining). The continuation or strengthening of local governance systems has a two-way relationship to the continuation or strengthening of the local economic base. For instance, local mobilisation based on cohesive collective power leads to claims for collective legal rights (e.g. regarding forests or other commons), and getting such rights recognised leads to further consolidation of such power. The continuation or evolution of knowledge and cultural systems form another foundation of such decision-making—this includes traditional and new ecological knowledge and the customs, beliefs, and spiritual traditions relating to the commons.

All of the above are related to the social dynamics of communities, including their internal gender, caste, class, and other structures and relations and their relations with other communities. This includes inequities and discriminations of various kinds, which are often the slowest to transform; but it also includes relations of mutual aid, solidarity, and cooperation. While there are clear signs of reduced inequalities and marginalisation, it is unlikely that in any of the examples cited above, holistic or comprehensive transformations in all the five spheres or petals of the Flower have taken place. Rather, they are all at various stages, with substantial distance having been covered in some petals and not so substantial in others. Given that Kalpavriksh has not conducted comprehensive studies in any of these, i.e. covering all spheres in detail, it is not possible to say much more at this stage, other than that such intersectionality, is clearly visible.

More in-depth and wider studies (by or with the relevant communities) are needed to get a better understanding of how the Flower of Transformation is being manifested at each of these sites, where there remain weaknesses or gaps and, therefore, what more is needed to move towards more holistic transformation. It is evident that informal and customary governance systems are far more prevalent than commonly known. Though not all of these are necessarily examples of radical democracy, their continued relevance necessitates adequate recognition by both civil society and government. There are elements in the Constitution of India, and in several laws, that offer some such recognition at a broad level, but they do not fully recognise and provide legal backing to specific systems and are implemented haphazardly. In many areas, there are considerable overlaps in key functions between the traditional heads and the sarpanch/panchayat and other state institutions. In the absence of legal clarity on the divisions of their functions, there is conflict or confusion in case of overlapping jurisdiction such as in agriculture, water management, livestock maintenance, management of rituals, and festivals. Modern institutions have also at times co-opted or displaced traditional ones, at times without replacing many of their functions—most significantly the governance of the commons. It is thus important that there is adequate and appropriate policy recognition of the plurality of institutions that exist locally and clarity to ensure that their inter-relations are complementary.

We believe that a deeper inquiry into these forms of self-governance, along with efforts towards their transformational self-strengthening, could help in finding pathways out of current sociocultural, ecological, economic, and political crises.

References

Alternatives Transformation Format. (2017). *A process for self-assessment and facilitation towards radical change prepared by Kalpavriksh for ACKnowl-EJ*. https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/migrate/Resources/alternatives_transformation_format_revised_20.2.2017.pdf

Arnold, D. (1989). Rebellious Hillmen: The Gudem-Rampa Risings, 1839–1924. In R. Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern studies: Writings on South Asian history and society* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.

Bajpai, S., & Kothari, A. (2020). *Towards decentralised urban governance: The case of Bhuj city, Kachchh (India)*. Kalpavriksh.

Bajpai, S., & Kothari, A. (2024). *The Gatpo of Spiti: Current relevance of a traditional governance system.* Kalpavriksh and Nature Conservation Foundation (in press).

Bajpai, S., & Kothari, A., with Namgail, T., Sonam, K., & Deachen, K. (2022). *The Goba of Ladakh: Current relevance of a traditional governance system.* Kalpavriksh, Snow Leopard Conservancy – India Trust, Nature Conservation Foundation, Local Futures and Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation.

Bhaskar, P., Ghosh, P., & Chaudhuri, D. (2021, August 3). *Collapse of Adivasi self-governance system in Jharkhand: Need to implement PESA in letter and spirit*. Down to Earth.

Bijoy, C. R. (2024). India and indigenous peoples political autonomy and democratising governance. *Pax Lumina, 5*(3), 35–39.

Changkija, S. (2017). Sustainable hill agricultural diversity in Nagaland. *International Journal of Agriculture, 35*(1), 121–140.

Government of India (GoI). (1996). Fifth Schedule [Article 244(1)] Provisions as to the Administration and Control of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes. Amendment to the Constitution of India. https://www.mea.gov.in/images/pdf1/s5.pdf

Guha, R. (1989). *The unquiet woods*. Oxford University Press.

Kalpavriksh, Kenono Foundation & LEMSACHENLOK. (2024). *Strengthening Community Conserved Areas in Nagaland via Field intervention, Technology and Policy Support - Final Report for The Nature Conservancy*. https://kalpavriksh.org/strengthening-community-conserved-areas-in-nagaland-via-field-intervention-technology-and-policy-support/

Kothari, A. (2021a). Kunariya: A model panchayat in Gujarat. *Frontline*. 08/10/22. https://ashishkothari.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Kunariya-A-model-panchayat-in-Gujarat-Frontline.pdf

Kothari, A. (2021b). These alternative economies are inspirations for a sustainable world. *Scientific American, 324*(6), 60–69. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/these-alternative-economies-are-inspirations-for-a-sustainable-world/

Kothari, A. (2024a). In search of alternatives to development: Learning from grounded initiatives. In H. Melber, U. Kothari, L. Camfield, & K. Biekart (Eds.),

Challenging global development: Towards decoloniality and justice. Palgrave Macmillan.

Kothari, A. (2024b). *Ladakh's mass agitation heats up a cold desert*. meer.com, 16 March. https://ashishkothari.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Ladakhs-mass-agitation-heats-a-cold-desert-Meer-13.3.2024.pdf

Kothari, A. (2024c). *Ladakh's mass agitation heats a cold desert.* meer.com, 13 March. https://www.meer.com/en/79171-ladakhs-massagitation-heats-a-cold-desert

Kothari, A., & Das, P. (2016). *Power in India: Radical pathways*. In State of power 2016, Transnational Institute.

Mehta, B. G. (1957). The report of the team for the study of the community projects and National Extension Service, Chaired by Balwantray G. Mehta in 1957. www.panchayatgyan.gov.in. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20171113110803/http://www.panchayatgyan.gov.in/documents/30336/0/Balvantray_G_Mehta_Committee_report.pdf/563c2a17-a13f-463a-ba4d-339916c32d57

Muhlberger, S. (1998). *Democracy in ancient India*. World History of Democracy site. http://www.nipissingu.ca/department/history/muhlberger/histdem/indiadem.htm

Murali, R., Bijoor, A., & Mishra, C. (2021). *Gender and the commons: Water management*.

Nagaland Community Conserved Areas Forum. (2025). Nagaland CCA Forum. *Community conserved areas*. Accessed May 2, 2025, from https://nccaf.communityconservedareas.org/

Pandey, R. S. (2010). *Communitisation: The third way of governance*. Concept Publishing Company.

Pathak Broome, N. (2014). *Communitisation of public services in Nagaland: A step towards creating an alternative model of delivering public services*. Kalpavriksh and Heinrich Boll Foundation.

Pathak Broome, N. (2018). Mendha-Lekha: Forest rights and self-empowerment. In M. Lang, C. Konig, & A. Regelmann (Eds.), *Alternatives in a world of crisis.* Global Working Group Beyond Development. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Brussels Office and Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar, Ecuador.

Pathak Broome, N., & Chettri, A. (2023). *Traditional governance systems of the van Gujjars in Uttarakhand (India)*. https://radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/traditional-governance-systems-of-the-van-gujjars-in-uttarakhand/

Pathak Broome, N. (2009). *Community Conserved Areas in India.* Kalpavriksh. See also, for cases from India, https://communityconservedareas.org; and more globally, www.iccaconsortium.org

Pathak Broome, N., Bajpai, S., Shende, M., & Raut, M. with Jamkatan, G. K., Katenge, I., Salame, Z., Halami, S., Deshmukh, S., & Gogulwar, S. (2022). *Forest resource rights, gram sabha empowerment and alternative transformations in Korchi*. Kalpavriksh, Pune with Maha Gramsabha Korchi and Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi, Kurkheda.

Pathak, N., & Kothari, N. (2009). Nagaland: A quiet revolution. In N. Pathak (Ed.), *The directory of community conserved areas in India*. Kalpavriksh.

Skaria, A. (1999). *Hybrid histories: Forests, frontiers and wildness in Western India*. Oxford University Press.

Thapar, R. (2002). *Early India: From the origins to AD 1300*. University of California Press.

Vikalpsangam. (2024). *The search for radical alternatives: Key aspects and principles, framework of the Vikalp Sangam process 7th avatar*. https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Alternatives-Framework-7th-Avatar-digital-v1.4.pdf

Vikalp Sangam. (2025). *About*. Vikalp Sangam. Accessed May 2, 2025. https://www.vikalpsangam.org/about

YouTube. (2022). *Try Not To Laugh Watching Funny Fails Videos 2022*. YouTube video, 10:05. Posted by "Funny Fails," January 15, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MB1Y_ru1sxM