

People in Conservation

Biodiversity Conservation and Livelihood Security



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Conflict, Transformation and Well-being

Opening Words

Any idea of wellbeing needs to consider all other aspects of life - social, political, economic, cultural, psychological and spiritual.

Individual wellbeing cannot be divorced from community wellbeing.

The idea of Wellbeing means different things to different people. For some it could refer to physical health, for others emotional or even spiritual. Some think of it in only individual terms while others point to its socio-economic, political, cultural and economic dimensions. The vocabulary associated with the idea of wellbeing can include terms like peace, freedom, climate, justice, meaning and hope.

Some speak of the state of harmony between the individual and society. Some draw attention to our relationship with nature - thus going beyond the human to include more-than-human; while others define it from the perspective of what it is NOT; where to understand wellbeing is to have known ill-being as experienced in the existential anxieties we suffer from because of our alienation from self/others/nature.

What are the root causes - systemic, social pathologies, structures, etc - behind illbeing? What are the modalities to achieving wellbeing at the individual and social level? These are important questions. The answer to the former can include spirituality/therapy/mediation/nature walks etc. while the latter can include considerations of ecology, peace, absence of conflicts,policies etc. or even radical systemic transformation.

Social wellbeing without justice cannot be imagined. What are the modalities to achieving wellbeing at the individual and social level?

There is a danger of what has been said above remaining stuck in the realm of ideas, philosophies and rhetoric. The moot question is whether and how these ideas get translated at on-ground/grass-root level. If this has to happen, then we need to start exploring how ideas of social wellbeing and justice relate to issues of natural resource based conflicts, struggle for gender equality (inclusive of non-binary sexualities), challenges to village level direct democracy, fight against caste based discrimination, access to justice, rights of nature, human-wildlife conflict, right to cultural identity, climate justice and so on.

Milind and Arnaz

1. Updates and Information

The Unlikely Success Of A Novel Justice Delivery System In Bihar

By Anuradha Nagaraj

Despite lingering problems, the state's village courts have an impressive disposal rate, and help settle a wide range of local disputes.

In a sparsely furnished room with peeling wall paint, 69-year-old Ram Parvesh Bhagat was holding court. He wore a white kurta and pyjama, and leaned back in his chair, the only one with wheels in the room, as he listened to a poor couple and their daughter-in-law.

The daughter-in-law, Rashmi Devi, described the harassment she and her in-laws were facing from a relative over a small piece of land, in Ainkhan Bhimnichak village, in Bihar's Patna district. "They throw stones at us from the roof when we walk past their homes, threaten us, say my mother-in-law has been possessed by a ghost," Devi said, speaking softly but clearly. "We are poor, live in a broken hut and work as farm labour or sometimes daily wage workers. We are living in fear and so far, all our attempts to raise a complaint against him have failed."

Bhagat interrupted her account with questions every now and then, seeking to understand the exact sequence of events, when the family had approached the police, how long they had been facing the problem.

The family, who belong to the Other Backward Classes category, explained that they had been beaten and threatened for over a year, since 2023, and that going to the police had not helped resolve the issue.

Rashmi's mother-in-law Damanti spoke up. "We fear for our lives," she said. "Please ask him to leave us alone."

Bhagat nodded and looked around the room at others who had gathered, all residents from the village. After a brief discussion with some of them, he declared that the person against whom the family had complained would have to appear before them at a date two weeks later. He then assured the

family that their problem would be resolved within a month.

Minutes later, the next hearing began at the Ainkhan Bhimnichak gram kachcheri, a court set up under section 90 of the Bihar Panchayati Raj Act of 2006. The body is one of the 8,057 local courts that are delivering cheap and timely justice across Bihar in cases involving matters ranging from petty theft and small land disputes to cattle trespass and family feuds.



A hearing underway at the Ainkhan Bhimnichak gram kachcheri in Patna district. The court is one of around 8,000 in the state that resolve local-level cases in matters such as petty theft and land disputes.
Photo: Anuradha Nagaraj

While these courts were first set-up in the 1950s and have their roots in 1947's Bihar Panchayati Raj Act, they ceased functioning by the late 1970s. Conversations about reinstating them began again in the 1990s after the 73rd constitutional amendment was passed, which established the framework for the panchayat system across the country.

The gram kachcheris are distinct in key respects from other similar traditional bodies that sometimes dispense justice, such as village councils and khap panchayats. Those informal bodies do not have a foundation in Indian statutes and thus do not always see themselves as bound by Indian law. Gram kachcheris, in contrast, are part of the Indian judicial system and work within certain sections of criminal and civil laws. Under the 2006 law, the courts, whose jurors are elected, can hear cases involving

bailable offences and can impose fines of up to Rs 1,000.

Bhagat, who said he is a “buffalo grazer” outside the courtroom, explained that his function was akin to that of a patriarch of a family who resolves problems.

“We pride ourselves in our justice delivery,” he said. “We rarely refer cases to higher courts, and in many cases also prevent people from going to the police. Our goal is amicable solutions and so far, I would say it has been a success because people trust us.”

He added, “We have resolved at least 100 cases in the last few years.”

Indeed, data suggests that these courts have functioned efficiently. According to a report by the Chanakya National Law University, between 2021 and 2023, the 8,057 gram kachcheris across Bihar disposed of 87% of the more than 1,43,278 cases filed before them.

A 2022 study by the non-profit Sigma Foundation and the Azim Premji University further found that in the 15 gram kachcheris they had studied in depth, 80% of the cases were disposed of within six weeks of the case being filed, as stipulated in the 2006 act.

In contrast, data from the National Judicial Data Grid indicates that more than 72% of cases in the country’s district courts and more than 79% in the high courts are more than a year old.

The courts came back in the public eye in 1993, after the 73rd amendment of the Indian constitution was passed, which directed states to empower village panchayats and “endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government”.

In Bihar, Raghuvansh Sinha was part of the team given the job to amend and update older laws pertaining to local bodies.

The 76-year-old retired bureaucrat, who is now an advisor to the state’s panchayati raj department, recounted that in the course of reshaping the law, the team decided to reinvigorate the gram kachcheri system again.

“The Indian constitution does not mention the setting up of gram kachcheris, but we decided to

borrow the framework from Bihar’s old acts,” Sinha recounted. “We literally burnt the midnight oil, meeting the advocate general every day to discuss the nuances of the bill we were drafting, and decide what the role of the kachcheris would be. Finally, we gave wider powers to these local courts in our draft, including the right to award three months imprisonment to an accused, if found guilty.”

The process culminated in the Bihar Panchayati Raj Act of 1993, which was passed by the assembly and laid down the framework for the constitution and working of gram kachcheris.

Under the new law, there was to be one gram kachcheri for every panchayat, which could include several villages. It would handle cases pertaining to both civil and criminal matters, and would be headed by an elected sarpanch – a distinct post from that of the mukhiya, who oversaw the panchayat. Each court was to have one elected juror from every ward within the panchayat – the act recommends that approximately one juror be elected for every 500 individuals in a panchayat.



Gram kachcheris were first set up in the 1950s and have their roots in 1947’s Bihar Panchayati Raj Act. They ceased functioning by the late 1970s, but conversations about reinstating them began again in the 1990s.

Photo: Anuradha Nagaraj

The jurors were to arrive at decisions by conducting field visits, and summoning and interviewing witnesses – the act recommends that they strive to mediate between the parties. The act also mandated reservations for juror posts for those from socially and economically weaker communities and for women.

The constitutional validity of the Bihar Panchayati Raj Act of 1993 was challenged in the Patna High Court in a series of writ petitions that also raised questions about the setting up of gram kachcheris. The objections included that the elected jurors would not have sufficient educational qualifications, and that they would not have the legal assistance they would need to function.

The high court agreed with the petitioners. In a judgement that struck down the law, it stated that many parts of the act were unconstitutional, and raised concerns about the legal expertise of the "simple village people" elected to listen to cases and give verdicts based on the law.

"In a special comment on the kachcheris, the court said the concept was good but asked how it would work," said Sinha. "The bottom-line was, 'How will uneducated villagers understand the nuances of the law and deliver justice?'"

The Bihar government, however, was convinced that the local courts were essential for grassroots justice delivery, and appealed in the Supreme Court, while simultaneously building consensus on the shape these kachcheris could take.

In 2001, Bihar held its first panchayat elections after the 73rd amendment came into force. But the state could not hold simultaneous gram kachcheri elections because the question of their legality remained in limbo – the Supreme Court, which had set up a nine-judge constitutional bench to look into Bihar government's petitions, had not held a single hearing on the case up to this time.

In 2005, a newly elected state government decided to convene an all-party meeting to address the concerns of the high court and resolve this impasse before the 2006 panchayat polls. "There was a resolve within the government to enable these grassroot courts and there were numerous discussions on the modalities of making this happen," Sinha said.

Following these meetings, the state government introduced a new panchayati raj act in 2006, which laid out a framework for gram kachcheris across all panchayats.

Sinha explained that in response to the concern about the lack of legal expertise among community

members who would be elected as jurors, "There had been suggestions of providing them some outside assistance." Now, as the 2006 panchayat elections approached, the state government decided to appoint two qualified staffers to every gram kachcheri, "to aid the jurors in hearing cases and dispensing justice", Sinha said.

One would be a law graduate, and would be known as a "nyay mitra", or friend of the court, responsible for advising the court on legal matters, as well as helping litigants navigate the legal system. The other, the "gram sachiv", or secretary, would aid the court in documentation.

These changes cleared the way for the 2006 gram kachcheri elections across Bihar, resulting in the establishment of 8,053 courts – one for every panchayat.

The state government subsequently withdrew its case in the Supreme Court, stating, as panchayati raj department documents noted, that it had reworked the act to incorporate the high court's suggestions.

Under the Bihar Panchayati Raj Act, 2006, these kachcheris were empowered to try cases under 40 sections of the Indian Penal Code, hear civil cases involving disputes over sums of money up to Rs 10,000 and impose fines of up to Rs 1,000.

Typically, the courts take up cases that involve land disputes, trespassing, partition of land, non-payment of loans or dues, feuds between neighbours and right to pathways to access property.

The state government was ahead of the curve in setting up these courts. In 2008, the Indian government enacted the Gram Nyayalaya Act, recommending that states set up courts across panchayats and appoint judicial officers to enable legal recourse for residents in villages.

This act stated that it was being enacted in line with recommendations made in 1986 by the law commission that the government "provide access to justice to citizens at their doorsteps and to ensure that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen by reason of social, economic or other disabilities".

However, the implementation of this act has been slow, with only 318 gram nyayalayas operational

across the country, according to department of justice data.

Bihar, meanwhile, did not implement this act, since it already had a state law with similar aims – the state is currently holding discussions about expanding the ambit of its village courts to also tackle cases of domestic violence, in line with recommendations in the 2008 act.

The courts have in some ways become part of the state's sociocultural fabric. Many, for instance, cite a short story titled "Panch Parmeshwar" by the Hindi author Munshi Premchand as illustrative of the ideals a sarpanch should embody. In the story, a character named Algu Chaudhary is elected as the sarpanch of a village and passes a verdict against his best friend Jumman Sheikh. As a result, their friendship falls apart. But in due course, when Jumman becomes the sarpanch, he realises that an individual in such a position cannot be subjective and biased.

"Everyone here knows the story," says Gorakhlal Yadav, head of the Bihar Rajya Gram Kachcheri Sachiv Sangh, an organisation that represents the 8,000 secretaries appointed to assist members of the gram kachcheris. "The story illustrates the ideal way to dispense justice and the constant endeavour is to follow it," Yadav said.

On a warm September 2024 morning, Shekhar Suman waited in the Ainkhan Bhimnichak kachcheri for a copy of a judgement against his own brothers. The 27-year-old graduate is the youngest among eight siblings and is preparing for exams that will secure him a government job.

Suman and his father, a retired grain merchant, had found themselves burdened with the expenses for one of his sister's weddings and approached the court when his older brothers refused to contribute.

"My brothers are in good jobs and earn well," Suman said. "But all our attempts to ask them to share the financial burden for this wedding have failed. The sister who is getting married is also funding part of it, but the others are refusing. We came to the kachcheri for some resolution to this impasse."

Jyoti Kumari, the court's gram sachiv, who was managing the paperwork for the proceedings, said that the court had summoned all the brothers to

present their side of the conflict before it. "One deposed on the phone and the other came to the court," he said. "While one agreed to pitch in, the other said no and the third brother did not respond to summons."

Bhagat, the sarpanch, explained that the court could not force the brothers to pay. "But we still helped the family by deciding that the brothers would not have a share in the father's property," he said. "This also gives the father and youngest brother of the bride the freedom to decide if they want to raise money against the property they own, and at what scale they want to do the wedding."

Under the provisions of the 2006 law, lawyers are banned from gram kachcheri courtrooms, unless a litigant specifically requests for one and the opposing party agrees. In the small room in Ainkhan Bhimnichak, all arguments and counter arguments were made by the litigants themselves.

"This provision was made to keep the cost of pursuing justice low," said Sinha, recalling the debates during the drafting of the law. "Lawyers are not only expensive, but also tend to keep a case going for longer duration, delaying justice delivery. In this system, the petitioner is given a chance to present their own case, which also makes it a more level playing field in the rural context, where social structures impact everyday life."

This opportunity is what prompted Sita Devi to approach the Kolawan gram kachcheri in Nalanda district. A first-time petitioner, she wanted alimony from her husband, who had migrated for work to Delhi but was not sending her any money to take care of their five children and her in-laws.

Coming to the court was her last resort. "I work hard on other people's farms and sometimes in MNREGA," she said. "My husband works as a labour contractor in Delhi, but has not been sending any money home, and I am struggling to take care of the family. I want some support. How can he just disappear and leave us to fend for ourselves?"

Sita also filed a complaint at the local police station, but did not receive a positive response. "A panch in our village suggested I come to the kachcheri," she said. "She has seen me struggle and knows how hard I work to make ends meet. She said I would get justice here."

Bhagat noted that women file more complaints in the village, believing that the system offers a unique path to justice. "They file cases about illegal sale of liquor or domestic disputes," he said. He added that sometimes petitions describe in detail how they had no vegetables to cook at home, even as their husband squandered money on alcohol.

All cases that come to a gram kachcheri are heard by a bench of at least five jurors, including the sarpanch. Both the complainant and the accused are allowed to choose one jury member on the bench. "This ensures there is fairness in the proceedings and there is no opportunity for any side to question the kachcheri members' motives," said SP Singh, chair professor of panchayati raj at the Chanakya National Law University in Bihar. "It is one of the reasons people trust these grassroots courts."

It is not only litigants who have found gram kachcheris to be beneficial. Many who have worked within the system, particularly women, also find it an enriching experience.

Among them is Sumana Devi, a resident of Kolawan village, in Nalanda district who is in her early thirties. Devi's days normally start early and end late, and she spends all her time doing household chores, taking care of cattle and working on the farm. She describes her life and work as "boring, monotonous and exhausting".

But in 2021, at the urging of family members, she contested the gram kachcheri polls and won a position as a juror.

Since then, she has eagerly looked forward every week to dressing up and heading for the weekly gram kachcheri sitting in Kolawan village of Nalanda district. "It is just a different world from my everyday life," said Sumana. "I learn here, I hear different views, I feel accomplished and most importantly, I help resolve problems."

Her fellow juror Sangeeta Devi also contested reluctantly, at the insistence of family members, but now looks forward to the court sittings. "This is the first time I have ever come out of my house," she said. "When we come together in the Kachcheri, everyone becomes an equal. No one is treated differently based on their caste, income or status in the village. I take this as my duty and perform it



Jurors of the Kolawan gram kachcheri. While many litigants find gram kachcheris to be beneficial, those who work within the system, particularly women, also find it an enriching experience.

Photo: Anuradha Nagaraj

seriously. My family also takes what I do seriously now, they understand the importance of it.

Training is essential to ensuring that individuals like Sangeeta and Suman, who have no prior legal experience, can fulfil their roles as jurors. "Till the elections, everything is smooth," Singh said. "But once they are elected, the most common question elected members ask is about what their powers are."

Singh explained that the panchayati raj department then conducts training programmes for elected to the courts, which draw on the experience of retired district judges, judicial and administrative officers – these experts hold sessions where they explain the importance of the institution and the role each elected member plays in it. "The training that follows their election becomes crucial to ensuring the kachcheris uphold the law and dispense justice," Singh said. "How every member of these courts understands and interprets the law is important."

When the Bharitya Nyay Sanhita replaced the Indian Penal Code in 2024, Singh said, the panchayati raj department ensured that the functioning of the gram kachcheris was updated, so that documentation and proceedings were in line with the new code.

Singh noted that the curriculum for the training "includes moot courts, where cases are simulated

to practically demonstrate what being part of this system entails, and practice”.

Despite the successes of the system, jurors admit that they struggle with several challenges.

They note, for instance, that the kachcheris are not well monitored and have poor infrastructure, that there are frequent delays in payment to members and support staff, and that there is a lack of awareness among communities about the courts.

They have also argued that the officials appointed to help the courts should be paid more – Yadav and others have been demanding an increase in monthly wages for sachivs from the present Rs 6,000 to Rs 30,000, as well as the provision of benefits to them.

Jyoti Kumari, the gram sachiv, agrees that those in her post should be paid more, but also noted that she has seen some improvements to the courts over the years. The schoolteacher was persuaded by her family to apply for the job and since 2007, has been a part of the system.

“In the early years, we did not even have a place to sit and conduct the proceedings and even the panch were not always comfortable working together,” she said, “Things are better now.”

She added, “Over the years, this system has got more streamlined and with every passing year, the people’s faith in it has also increased.”

But other problems continue to dog the courts, such as delays in filling up vacancies in the posts of both sachivs and nyay mitras.

“There are more than 3,000 vacancies for both posts and in many cases one person is managing more than one kachcheri,” said Abhay Kishore, a nyay mitra at the Kolawan gram kachcheri. “This directly impacts how many times a kachcheri sitting is held in a panchayat, because without the sachiv or nyay mitra, proceedings cannot happen.”

Further, many jurors and officials noted that caste and class dynamics within villages still play a significant role in the delivery of justice in villages – for instance, many individuals, particularly those with money and influence, approach the police or district and high courts directly, even for matters that fall under the kachcheris’ purview.

“In cases where the complaint is against a well-off person, then there is a tendency of the accused to ignore summons of the gram kachcheri and directly go to the district courts,” said Yadav. “They do this knowing that a poorer complainant will find it difficult to fight the case against them in these courts, which involve longer commutes, are more expensive and also cases can drag on for years.”

But Yadav noted that between 2021 and 2022, the Patna High Court issued several directions transferring nearly 60,000 cases from the district courts and the high court to gram kachcheris. ““It came as a validation for and acceptance of the role kachcheris play in the legal system,” he said.

In Ainkhan Bhiminchak, Rashmi Devi and her family received justice as promised, a month after they had approached the kachcheri. The accused was asked to pay a fine to her family and sign a legally binding bond promising not to further harass the family.

“It is a stressful job and there is a lot of pressure on all of us to ensure we maintain neutrality during the hearings,” Bhagat said, adding that even arriving upon a reasonable fine amount is often challenging.

He recalled one case that dragged on for six months. “It was a fight akin to the Mahabharat for just two inches of land,” he said. “We had to literally measure, re-measure and do all kinds of math to resolve that one. But at the end of the day, when people agree and abide with our decisions, it is very satisfying.”

Source: <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/the-unlikely-success-of-a-novel-justice-delivery-system-in-bihar/>



2. Perspectives

Can India move from conflict to coexistence with wildlife?

By Avilash Roul

Empowering forest communities, identifying probable conflict zones and compensating affected people can definitely reduce the friction between humans and wildlife



Can we, humans, coexist with wildlife? At least in India, the answer may oscillate between 'yay' and 'nay'.

Let's analyse this. The number of human deaths caused by tiger attacks in India is 51 (2020), 59 (2021), 111 (2022), 86 (2023), and 74 (2024). Maharashtra has recorded the highest number of human losses over the last five years, followed by Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. Similarly, an increasing number of human losses have been recorded due to elephant attacks in India. The loss of lives due to attacks by elephants in India is 595 (2020), 479 (2021), 561 (2022), 605 (2023) and 629 (2024), with the highest losses in Odisha, followed by Jharkhand and West Bengal. In a localised conflict, saltwater crocodiles killed 11 people in the last two years in the Kendrapara district, Odisha. Once rare, human-wildlife conflict has grown significantly in India.

From conflict to coexistence, India has sought community support in its 71st edition of Wildlife Week (October 2-8) celebrations nationwide under the theme of 'Human-Wildlife Coexistence'. From a tiger-focused conservation strategy in the early phase of India's conservation story, which always got the lion's share of the national wildlife

conservation budget, to a critical and endangered species-focused conservation initiative under the present administration, it is obvious that the government has left no stone unturned to propagate a greener and sustainable India. Of 22 species identified for the species recovery programme in 2025, the Union government has provided financial assistance for nine species to states and Union territories. However, the competition for space, resources, and survival situates people and animals constantly at odds, leading to increasing negative encounters.

What is the status of human-wildlife coexistence in the world? In a seminal survey of 70 countries by the World Bank on 'Human-Wildlife Conflict: Global Policy and Perception Insights', it is revealed that human-wildlife conflict is considered a major and serious concern, especially in low-income countries around the world. While the world population has tripled in the last 75 years, total agricultural land has increased to 4,800 million hectares (mha), more than one-third of the global land area, as per the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Since 2001, the world's total cropland area has grown by about 80 mha. With rapid land use change in terms of urbanisation, infrastructure development, and agricultural expansion to satisfy human needs and greed, human encroachment has severely degraded and fragmented natural wildlife habitat.

Despite 17.6 per cent of land and inland waters and 8.4 per cent of ocean and coastal areas of the world being globally declared as 'protected' and 'conserved' areas as per the World Protected Areas Database, the increasing challenges of human-wildlife conflicts are unmanageable. Also, climate change, according to the Centre for Ecosystem Sentinels at the University of Washington, exacerbates increasing human-wildlife conflicts on land and in the ocean. In fact, changes in temperature and rainfall are the major causes of human-wildlife conflict in more than 80 per cent of the case studies in Asia and Africa. Notably, all human lives lost due to crocodile attacks in Kendrapara district are during the wet season. Wild animals usually cause severe damage to lives and livelihoods of smallholder, subsistence farmers, pastoralists, and gatherers of minor forest produce. In other words, there is a direct link between poverty and human-animal conflicts.

Worsening matters

Does India's age-old ethos of a 'symbiotic' relationship with wildlife help in protecting both wildlife and humans? Is it not that our respect for nature and its components usually remains restricted to mere speeches, seminars, and sermons for special 'Days' or 'Weeks'? When there is an occasion for the environment, the thumb rule is to speak eloquently and eulogise nature.

The story of human-animal conflict in India is as devastating as it is in other low-income countries. There are varied degrees and forms of human-animal conflict in our country. There are crop raids by ungulates, wild boar and elephants, killings and injuries to livestock and humans by elephants, crocodiles, tigers and other wild animals, both inside and outside the large swathe of protected areas. At present, India has a network of 987 Protected Areas (106 National Parks, 564 Wildlife Sanctuaries, 99 Conservation Reserves and 218 Community Reserves). Besides, monkey menace in most urban and semi-urban areas is becoming the largest low-intensity conflict between humans and wild animals, something that is less reported in mainstream media.

India, being one of the mega-diverse countries globally, hosts nearly 7-8 per cent of the world's recorded species, and represents four of the 34 globally identified biodiversity hotspots. So far, over 91,200 species of animals and 45,500 species of plants have been recorded. Yet, the developmental spree has definitely taken a toll on nature and natural surroundings in India. Despite the eloquence of the country's executive, legislature and judiciary on nature and natural protection, the three organs of government are prioritising developmental projects over wildlife conservation.

Consider projects like Char Dham or the Great Nicobar Island Development Project, which would definitely have a transformational effect on the environment, especially wildlife. Outside protected areas, unregulated and unwise land use change is the single biggest reason for the exponential cases of human-wildlife conflict. On the other hand, in the last five years, the government has processed 8,731 proposals and approved the diversion of close to 100,000 hectares of forest land for non-forest activities under the Forest Conservation Act,

1980. The number of proposals recommended inside wildlife sanctuaries and national parks is 881, of which 421 were recommended in a year. While total cropped area has increased from 201.18 mha to 219.16 mha in 2022, total arable land has marginally decreased from 180.62 mha in 2018-19 to 180.11 mha in 2021-22. However, it is the land use change in terms of infrastructure development and urbanisation that has increased exponentially in the last decade, which directly contributes to human-wildlife conflict.

Conflict to coexistence

The Wildlife Week underscores and highlights the commitment to conserving the unique wildlife and fragile ecosystems through inclusive approaches. It must not be confined to only Wildlife Week celebrations. India, being the party to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), implements Target 4 that specifically seeks to effectively manage human-wildlife interactions to minimise conflict for coexistence. During the 7th National Board for Wildlife Meeting on March 3, Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested several measures, including specific species-focused interventions, a centre for excellence in extending timely support to all states and Union territories through remote sensing, geospatial mapping and AI and encouragement of tourism to reduce the pressure on wildlife and so on, in addressing human-wildlife conflict.

Despite the present Union government's timely interventions and scaling up conservation and management efforts with technological innovations, human-wildlife conflicts are becoming more frequent, serious and widespread. We must understand that if there is little room to roam, the clash between animals and humans is evident. Empowering forest officials with modern techniques and equipment, making communities the prime stakeholder during the design and implementation of a human-wildlife mitigation plan or strategy, identification of probable conflict zones at the earliest and continuous interactions with potential affected people and compensating them for their alternative livelihoods would definitely reduce the friction between humans and wildlife. Behavioural changes among us towards wildlife and their spaces would help us to minimise our deadly encounters

with wildlife. Besides, the land use change must be aligned with what world-renowned urban resilient philosopher, Joe Ravetz, calls as Collective Human Artificial Intelligence (CHAI) for wiser-future cities.

India can reduce human-wildlife conflict. The famous Jungle Book is the story of India that inspires the world that a symbiotic relationship between humans and wildlife is possible.

Source: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/wildlife-biodiversity/can-india-move-from-conflict-to-coexistence-with-wildlife>

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On The Cusp: Reframing Democracy And Well-Being In Korchi, India

By Neema Pathak Broome, Shrishtee Bajpai and Mukesh Shendeo

Introduction

Mainstream governance and development models – characterised by seemingly democratic but inherently **centralised and top-down governance systems and extractive, commercially motivated, capitalist economic policies** – have failed to achieve minimum levels of well-being for a very large part of humanity. They have in fact caused large-scale human and environmental injustice. However, there are also countertrends either resisting current models or developing and defending alternative forms of governance and well-being (Singh/ Kulkarni/Pathak Broome 2018). In this paper, we explore and discuss the emergence of one such process towards direct democracy and well-being in Korchi taluka in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra state in India. We use Zografos' definition of direct democracy as a "form of popular self-rule where citizens participate directly, continuously, and without mediation in the tasks of government" (Zografos 2019).

India has a federal democratic system that is decentralised in form but retains strong political and administrative centralisation in its spirit and functioning. The adivasi (tribal) and other traditional forest dwellers across much of India are dependent on forests for their subsistence, livelihoods, cultural and spiritual needs, yet historically have had little

control over surrounding forests. These communities have resisted their systemic alienation from use, access, governance and management of their surrounding forests by colonial and post-colonial governments. A strong grassroots movement led to the enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, or the FRA, in 2006. This Act, along with another radical law for the tribal areas, the 1996 Panchayat (Extension) to the Scheduled Areas (PESA), has paved the way for transformative democratic processes to take shape for adivasi and other forest-dwelling communities in India.

This discussion paper attempts to understand and analyse how these laws were used by an already mobilised community in Korchi taluka to move towards direct democracy and greater economic, social, ecological and political well-being. We discuss the model of democracy adopted by the Indian state and official processes of decentralisation; the emergence of alternative democratic processes in Korchi and what they hope to achieve; and factors that lead to the emergence of such processes and constraints and the hurdles that they face. An analysis of the process in Korchi helps foster a greater understanding of the interface between forms of representative democratic governance and direct democratic systems.

Towards ecological wisdom, integrity and resilience

The recognition of rights has revived a sense of belonging over the forests that had eroded over generations because of alienating colonial policies. Since forest-based livelihoods are now locally controlled, ensuring the ecological sustainability of the forests is also seen as a local responsibility. These once-rich forests, which have deteriorated over the years because of unregulated overuse and is divided up into individual plots of land, are now being viewed differently. After receiving rights under the FRA, many gram sabhas have started making rules and regulations regarding the management and protection of forests, including a system of regular forest patrols. Such protection and conservation systems are encouraged by the MGS. Controlling forest fires has resulted in greater regeneration and richness in forest biodiversity. The FRA requires all gram sabhas to formulate management plans and strategies, including for

sustainable harvesting and sale of the commercially important NTFPs. Using funds from the Tribal Development Department, some gram sabhas have begun drafting formal management plans. With or without management plans, however, many villages have successfully planted diverse local species. In almost all cases, extraction of NTFPs is carried out on rotation (ensuring that not all parts of the forest are extracted in one go). Using the FRA's FPIC clause, villagers have already registered their rejection of the mining proposals. The threat posed by mining is not over, however.

Enablers of Resistance and Transformative Processes

The mere enactment of radical laws such as the FRA and PESA is not enough to bring about transformative alternatives. Multiple enabling factors ensure that such laws are used to create transformation. In Korchi these include the following.

Social capital embedded in adivasi culture – collective actions and celebrations

Setting aside time for common and collective action including community celebrations, festivities and community welfare activities is integral to tribal cultures. This community focus and culture of seeing the benefit of others intricately linked with your own leads to people coming together for collective causes. As such, even though mining proposals would only directly affect a few villages, all 90 villages resist mining collectively. Regular community gatherings and celebrations (yatrasor annual community celebrations) have been crucial forums to discuss and develop collective strategies. Needless to say, the leaders of the transformative movement built upon existing traditions and systems to transform them into forums of socio-political discourse on conventional notions of centralised governance and politics, patriarchal systems, social discrimination, mining and resistance to it. These gatherings were also key to fostering awareness about laws like the FRA



Members of 70 village gram sabhas (village councils) gathered to discuss and resist mining in their sacred forests of Surjagad, Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra. @Neema Pathak Broome.

and PESA, among others. The culture of respect for elders combined with the presence of unique social leaders has played a critical role in this movement. Such leaders and elders have guided the processes and movements but often stayed away from formal positions of power, material gain and party politics. These social mobilisers invest their personal time and resources into the process without expecting a personal gain.

Continuous frictional confluence and dialectics of different socio-political ideologies – Resistance and state repression

The continuous presence of different ideologies and strong proponents thereof has led to an uncomfortable co-existence between the socialist, Gandhian, leftist, Maoist and, more recently, Hindu right-wing ideologies. There has been a constant interplay, covert struggle for dominance and resultant dialectics among these ideologies. The upside of this has been greater political awareness, providing space for debate and allowing resistance and transformation to emerge. However, this does have a downside, namely the state repression of those who have dissenting views and are opposed to mining, with the state labelling them anti-state and anti-nation and imprisoning or harassing them. This political awareness has historically led to many resistance movements in the region.

District-level study circle and peer-learning and support processes

One of the key factors of the effective and successful implementation of the FRA in the district as a whole has been the district-level study circle initiated by some civil society actors historically involved in processes intended to strengthen gram sabhas. Study circles provide a forum to understand local contexts, learn from each other and deliberate upon issues. They helped create a district-wide campaign calling for the implementation of the FRA as soon as it was introduced and led to Gadchiroli becoming the only district in the country where over 60% of the potential of the FRA had been realised by 2016. In addition to the district study circle, gram sabhas have also created means of exchange and learning among themselves across the district, as mentioned above.

Role of Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi (AAA)

Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi (AAA), a local NGO, has been active in Korchi for several decades and has worked towards improving health, forest management and women's empowerment. The AAA has also supported local social leaders, including women as karyakarta (village activists), in a range of projects and has provided them with opportunities to interact with actors at district, state and national level and be part of various discussions and debates. This has helped enhance their existing levels of awareness, information and leadership skills and gain respect and acceptance within the larger community. The AAA has also provided timely help in accessing information and building capacity through various training programmes. This NGO has played a unique supportive role by implementing projects but not imposing and taking control of the local processes.

Jeevanshalas: a school with a difference

One such significant project was a unique education programme called the jeevanshalas (school of life), which was implemented for three years in the aforementioned villages. The concept of jeevanshalas was based on the Nai Talim (Gandhi 1962) system of education, which was particularly important for the tribal children, who tuned into their forests, often found the classroom- and alphabet-based education system of regular government schools constraining and uninspiring, resulting in huge numbers dropping out. As two of the local leaders said: "We were able to be what we are because we didn't go to the formal school after an initial few years. The school was oppressive, difficult to understand and nothing much to learn. On the contrary, when we roamed the forests we learnt so much more. We also had time to be part of the collective community activities". Jeevanshalas envisioned education differently, where learning from the local surroundings and ecosystem was key. Those influenced by its philosophy are among the main leaders of both resistance against mining as well as the movement in support of transformation processes.

Conclusion

The gram sabhas in Korchi are at different stages of empowerment. While some gram sabhas have established systems of equitable, transparent and inclusive decision-making and benefit-sharing, others are striving to reach that stage. The MGS is also continuously evolving in its structure and operation. Gram sabhas and the MGS face numerous internal and external challenges, the most significant among them being existence within the nation-state and its adopted exploitative capitalist model of economy and representative electoral democracy. Party politics, having entered all other levels of governance, now strives to control the gram sabhas. The PRS institutions at all levels are beginning to feel threatened by the emerging power of the gram sabhas, creating friction with the MGS. Religious right-wing (Hindu in this case) and cultural right-wing tribal outfits are using identity politics for political gain, some of these are supported by the mining companies and often create hurdles for the MGS and gram sabhas opposed to mining. Many local activists, including one of the core team members of this study, have been imprisoned under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), which gives the state draconian powers to arrest without a warrant or evidence and keep people in police custody without bail for a certain period of time. While the state accused said team member of having connections with the armed Maoist movement in the district, it is widely understood that he was arrested for his support for the local anti-mining resistance movement and for exposing the corporate and political nexus leading to land and resource grabbing and the disempowerment of the local people.

Despite these challenges, focusing on strengthening the smallest unit of direct decision-making and ensuring that these are inclusive, transparent, financially strong and fair structures has influenced nearly all spheres of social organisation, including economic, political, ecological, cultural and social elements in Korchi. The government's decentralisation efforts are different from the people's movement towards self-rule and direct democracy in that the former remains fixated on the external structure rulebooks at the cost of the spirit of decentralisation, while the latter focuses on the spirit by constantly adapting and

evolving strategies, structures, rules and operations to address the opportunities and challenges encountered while ensuring that the core principles of transparent dialogue, consensus-based decision-making and equity are not compromised. As a Gondi proverb says, Changla Jeevan Jage Mayan Saathi Sapalorukoon Apu Apuna Jababdarita Jaaniv Ata Pahe ("to achieve well-being, everyone needs to know what their responsibility is"). The MGS members believe that to be more effective politically, different taluka-level collectives need to come together to form a district-level federation and must also have their delegates in the state legislature, which is yet to be achieved. They hope to slowly move in that direction.

Read the full paper here: <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/on-the-cusp-reframing-democracy-and-well-being-in-korchi-india/>



3. Signs of Hope

Engendering Change

By Ashish Kothari

North East Network's three decades in Nagaland show how transformation holds only when women's voices and dignity are placed at the core.



*Participants of the North East Vikalp Sangam at North East Network's Food Sovereignty Cradle on September 10, 2025.
Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari*

"No transformation towards justice is possible without the gender dimension at its core." In various forms, I heard this over several days with members and workers of the North East Network (NEN), a 30-year-old organisation active in Nagaland, Assam, and Meghalaya. It is an observation heard from movements and groups worldwide, but not necessarily internalised in all their work. In the case of NEN, it seems infused in the work it does and in its internal functioning.

Started by Monisha Behal and Roshmi Goswami in 1995, NEN has evolved considerably from its early work on health to add a range of activities in livelihoods, environment, agriculture and more. It all began when Behal travelled to Nagaland for her fellowship on women's health. In 1996, she organised a workshop on the topic in Pfutsero of

Phek district, in which young women from Chizami village participated on behalf of its Women's Society.

Subsequently, one of them, Seno Tshah, wrote to Behal about the workshop experience, prompting the latter to return to Chizami and help organise training on community health. With permission from the village elders, Chizami Women Health Centre was established in collaboration with the Chizami Women's Society. That began NEN's journey in Chizami, which I will focus on in this article.

It is important to understand the context in which NEN's work has developed. Nagaland has very strong traditional institutions of governance, with local village elders taking decisions in consultation with the village assembly. These have continued as

a foundation of the currently formally recognised Village Councils, using the special constitutional status under Article 371A which enables Nagaland to adopt its own laws and accept or reject national laws—a concession made because Nagas wanted to remain independent of India and could be persuaded to join India only with the promise of independent functioning.

Practices of mutual aid and cooperation in various village affairs, including agricultural operations, housebuilding and repair, dispute resolution, and helping in sickness, have been strongly embedded in society. Management of the commons, including forests (the State has over 70 per cent forest cover, one of India's highest), is also a crucial component of life.

Traditions, the Church, patriarchy, and conflict

The Church, active here since the mid-19th century and successful in converting nearly 90 per cent of

Nagas to Christianity, has reinforced many of these facets. On the flip side, though, there has been significant gender and generational inequity (all decision-making forums have been dominated by elder men), violence against women, and traditional enmity between tribes (the State has 17 recognised tribal groups; Chizami is predominantly inhabited by the Chakhesang community).

Rampant hunting in the past (some continuing) has reduced wildlife populations to a bare minimum—I recall several walks through forests on previous visits, marvelling at the lushness and diversity but also dismayed that I could neither hear nor see any bird, except in areas where communities had banned hunting. For all its emphasis on good behaviour, the Church has also reinforced patriarchal attitudes, discouraged many pre-Christian spiritual practices linked to nature, culture, and the land, and in other arenas enforced dogmas that discourage moves towards greater freedom and equality.



*Chizami village elder KZ Mero and Seno Tshuh, at the Vikalp Sangam opening on September 10, 2025.
Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari*

And then, always looming in the background, is the history of occupation and repression by the Army and violence by the underground. As NEN members said, many families continue to go through the trauma of seeing villages burnt, loved ones killed or beaten up, and other atrocities by both these competing forces. The use of the draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) has in particular caused waves of resentment and anger.

The militarised situation has also forced drastic demographic changes; as Behal notes in an article in the recent book *Community-Led Development In Practice* (edited by Elene Cloete and Gunjan Veda): "I noticed the absence of men in several Naga households. With militancy raging high, most men would seek opportunities in the plain areas of Dimapur.... Male cultivators were rare as they feared being apprehended by the Army."

Building trust, challenging patriarchy

It is in this backdrop of challenges and opportunities that NEN's work situates itself. The early years were spent slowly working their way through issues such as resistance from many menfolk and elders, having to deal with both the Indian military and the underground, and building trust in a context where outsiders were understandably viewed with suspicion.

Patriarchal attitudes were amongst the biggest hurdles. As Behal recounts: "Women had to be sensitised about their selfhood, recognise their collective voice on rural governance, and seek equity in all domains," and that this also involved constant interaction with men.

In the context of healthcare, the organisation's work started with three Rs—reaching out to learn (from elders, other areas), reaching out to share and teach (training sessions), and reaching out to enable women who are socially and economically vulnerable to heal. Both allopathy and traditional healing practices are used, including in the Primary Health Centres, and awareness on the determinants of health—environment, food habits, militarisation, gender violence, role of the state, and so on—is a key focus area.

In 2002, at a community gathering, NEN requested the Village Council of Chizami to provide some land;

after two months of deliberation, community elders consented, and this became the site of the NEN Resource Centre. By now, NEN had also realised that health could not be the only focus if overall social justice was a key aim.

So, from 2005-06 onwards, programmes were started on sensitising the community, especially women, on issues of livelihoods, unequal relations between men and women, gender discrimination, and the need to acknowledge and recognise women's work. These were instilled along with hands-on training on low-cost sanitation, bamboo craft, weaving and food processing. Much later, participatory video training was also provided. The video clips shot by newly trained youth were put up on YouTube, giving wider visibility to Chizami. The newly learned digital education also gave much incentive and encouragement to village youth.

Seno Tsuhah says that this was also when their approach changed from one of provider to one of enabler, with more space for the agency and voice of local women and youth. According to Wekoweu (Akole) Tsuhah, who worked with NEN for about 20 years: "This was also when we realised that we cannot go it alone, so more collaborative approaches with other civil society organisations and more institutional forms such as farmer and craft collectives begun to be explored."

Chizami Weaves: Dreams of design

One of these has been livelihoods based on traditional weaving skills. Commonly found in most parts of Nagaland, woven products have long been



North East Network's Resource Centre, which has been designed and built with local materials.

Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

symbols of tribal, gender, and other identities. NEN's contribution was to convert this traditional craft into a means of dignified livelihood for women through an enterprise called Chizami Weaves (CW).

CW is worth a story on its own. "Even at night, we dream of designs and colour combinations, we don't use drawings, we are always imagining from our mind," says Neitshopeu Thopi, when describing how the beautiful shawls, stoles, and other items are produced by this initiative.

Started in 2008, it is, as stated on the homepage of its website, "a women-led social enterprise dedicated to creating sustainable employment opportunities for rural Naga women weavers, while passionately conserving and promoting textile weaving craft and the rich cultural heritage of the Nagas". Since 2017, it has been managed by the innovatively named NENterprise, a Public Charitable Trust (this was also the year that CW's sister enterprise, Saneki Weaves, was begun in Assam).

While in 2008 CW had just seven weavers, today it involves 500-600 artisans covering 16 villages. Training is given on the design, development, and diversification of products. It also integrates

ecological concerns into its operations, giving priority to locally produced, hand-spun indigenous cotton, other local fibres like stinging nettle, and natural plant-based dyes. Products are sold in various outlets including in Kohima, with a limited stock in Guwahati.

Reclaiming food sovereignty

Food and agriculture, meanwhile, has emerged as another focal area. As Seno Tshuhah notes, 65 per cent of Nagaland's women are engaged in agriculture, but new approaches promoted by the government have weakened traditional practices like seed sharing and nutritionally and ecologically relevant cropping patterns.

To counter these trends, learning from the revolutionary Dalit women farmers of Deccan Development Society in Telangana, NEN has promoted millets (and the jhum or shifting cultivation that sustained them) as a significant contributor to good health (human and soil), encouraged the continuation of seeds and knowledge in the commons rather than privatised (including through Community Seed Banks), organised biodiversity festivals to celebrate local



Seed Centre run by Chizami Women's Society and aided by North East Network.

Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari

diversity, initiated courses called NEN Farm Schools to create opportunities for intergenerational knowledge transfer, enabled participatory videos on foraging and women's knowledge about wild edible plants, and enhanced relevant documentation.

Knowledge and practices that can act as mitigation and adaptation to the climate crisis are also encouraged. At their Resource Centre, I saw some nicely designed booklets and posters on these aspects; a Food Sovereignty hut is to become a seed bank, to complement one that is run by the Chizami Women's Society in the village.

The focus on sustaining agriculture and food traditions, including the growing of diverse crops in both jhum and settled farming, was initially viewed with scepticism by many women. They had been influenced by government and corporate propaganda to shift to Green Revolution techniques and commercial crops; or, in many cases, agriculture itself was being reduced owing to cheap or even free availability of rice and other staples from the Public Distribution System and market.

But increasing evidence of the health impacts of such shifts, and then the shock of the COVID pandemic that brought many people back to villages and forced dependence on local foods, has convinced many farmers to rethink. Outreach work and events such as farmers' markets are aiding in this.

Incremental shifts in gender relations

Have NEN's attempts to enable the agency, capacity, and confidence of women led to greater participation in the community's decision-making structures? Seno Tsuhah responded: "There is certainly greater discussion about the need to include women in governance at all levels, but it will be some time before this becomes reality. It also depends on overall changes in gender relations, with men taking much greater role in care work such as looking after children and cooking."

I mentioned to them that this is similar to the situation of traditional governance structures in other parts of India, such as the Goba system of Ladakh, where women have only very recently begun to be selected as village headpersons.

"At first, we encountered a certain degree of resistance to our work amongst men—from the

families of women who got involved in livelihood and other activities, from village authorities and so on," mentioned Akole. "However, while this persists on matters such as governance, in the case of livelihoods, agriculture, and other such activities, it is much less so, and in fact, menfolk are appreciative of their ability to bring earnings into the household. There is considerably greater respect for women now."

According to Behal, even as early as 2002, after sustained discussions, two women were nominated to the Village Council; by 2020, women members in the Village Development Board increased to six (25 per cent of total members). And in 2014, another breakthrough was made when, after many years of Seno Tsuhah and the Women's Society trying to persuade village elders, it was agreed that women would be paid equal to men.

The kind of self-confidence generated through programmes like Chizami Weaves has also changed gender relations. NEN's 2015-16 Annual Report quotes a weaver, Aneile Kapfo: "We weave in order to earn our living. Earlier, my husband used to tell me not to weave, but I continued weaving. Later, he started to help me in turning hanks of yarn into tightly bound yarn-balls. He also looks after the livestock while I weave. With the income I am earning, I have gained more respect from my family members. My children now look after the household work too."

Democracy within

Treating people with respect and centring principles of democracy seem infused in NEN's internal functioning too. There are structural hierarchies, but at least in my observation of the team at Chizami, there is more collegial decision-making, and functionaries at various levels, including those who perform daily chores, are treated with dignity. It was touching to see some of them being invited to show off their musical and theatrical skills (including the imitation of bird calls) at a cultural evening when I was there.

According to Anurita Hazarika, currently executive director of NEN, the group's focus on women-led work has been "acknowledged, replicated and studied by various practitioners and scholars across the world". In this sense, NEN is illustrative

of a phenomenon that is little appreciated by those who look down on small initiatives as being insignificant—when there is quality and commitment involved, such initiatives can have much broader impact than their own immediate geographical contexts.

Such greater reach is also part of a deliberate strategy. Realising that its overall goals cannot be met by itself, and that there is much mutual learning in building alliances, NEN has joined several national and global networks. These include Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (MAKAAM, Forum for Rights of Women Farmers), Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Millet Network of India (MINI), and Vikalp Sangam.

The last of these is a national platform bringing together groups and movements working on

alternative approaches to well-being and health, education, livelihoods, justice, and ecological sustainability. It has held over 30 sangams (confluences) since 2014 across India on regional and thematic issues. NEN has participated in many of these and offered to host the very first such confluence in India's north-east region, at Chizami, from September 10-12 this year. This is what brought me and many other colleagues to Nagaland and enabled us to experience NEN's work.

Along with others that participated in this sangam, NEN hopes to continue anchoring this process, bringing in many more communities, movements, and groups to grow the platform in the region.

The goodwill that NEN has generated through its work and through collaborative work across India and worldwide recently stood it in good stead when its office building started collapsing owing to the construction of a highway on the slope below. An appeal enabled it to generate enough resources to build some new structures, with a meeting room, dormitories, and other facilities. The National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation has promised compensation for the damage caused. But three years have passed, and the Aggrieved Land Owners Group, which includes NEN Resource Centre, is still waiting.

What of the future? In the case of Nagaland, NEN hopes to expand women's leadership, including in village and larger governance structures, deepen work on nature and natural resource management, and expand collaborations in the region and beyond.

NEN states that its vision is "a future where women are economically empowered, live with dignity, and lead the way in building resilient, thriving communities". While a long distance has yet to be covered in reaching this future, NEN seems firmly set on the path and offers an inspiring example for others to learn from and spread across Nagaland and elsewhere.

Source: <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/engendering-change/>



North East Network greatly emphasises local agricultural and wild biodiversity as food.
Photo Credit: Ashish Kothari



4. Food for Thought - Ongoing conversations

The following are some conversations, ideas, inquiries, and insights that emerged around conflict, well-being and justice from the Social Well-being and Justice Vikalp Sangam held at Fileflies Intercultural Centre, Bengaluru from 15-18 January 2026.

The Sangam explored some of the major issues besetting the world through the lens of:

1. Gender and Sexuality
2. Peacebuilding and Justice
3. Systemic roots of Individual and Social wellbeing.

Given below are brief highlights of the issues covered:

Understanding Gender and Sexuality Diversity for Social Well-Being

Discussions were facilitated by gender and sexuality activists Delfina Kanchana Sundar, Naveenraj Santhamani, Joycia Thorat, Devanshi Srivastava and Priscilla Rawade

A society's well-being is fundamentally tied to how it treats its most marginalised members. Understanding gender and sexuality diversity is essential to building communities grounded in dignity, justice, and shared humanity. When people across the spectrum of identities—women, men, transgender, non-binary, intersex, lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, queer, and more—are able to express themselves freely and safely, they are better positioned to contribute socially, economically, and culturally. This not only strengthens individual well-being but also enriches the collective health of society.

Crucial to this understanding is an intersectional approach. Identities never exist in isolation; gender, sexuality, caste, race, class, disability, religion, and socioeconomic location interact in complex ways. An intersectional lens helps us recognise that experiences of discrimination or privilege differ significantly across contexts.

Feminism has been a driving force in creating the conditions necessary for broad-based equality. Rooted in the struggle against patriarchy and gender-based oppression, feminism argues that all genders deserve equal rights, opportunities, and respect. Importantly, contemporary feminist movements emphasise intersectionality, expanding the struggle beyond women's rights alone to include transgender rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and the dismantling of all systems that restrict human freedom. Feminism's commitment to equality is therefore central to social well-being: societies that uphold gender justice consistently show stronger social cohesion, better public health outcomes, and more resilient institutions.

This session explored the above issues.

No Peace Without Justice: Exploring the Intersections of Peacebuilding and Justice Work

Discussions were facilitated by peace activist Urmi Chanda

The participants tried to:

1. Understand how peace and justice are interconnected within frameworks of conflict transformation.
2. Reflect on real-world case studies that illustrate the peace-justice relationship.
3. Engage dialogically to explore how justice and peace manifest in their own contexts and work.
4. Co-create shared insights or guiding principles for integrating justice into peacebuilding efforts (and vice versa).

The participants broke into sub-groups to explore answers to the questions below:

- a) Where have you seen peace efforts fail because justice was not addressed?
- b) Can justice pursuits ever undermine peace? How?
- c) In your work, what would it look like to center both justice and peace simultaneously?



Exploring systemic injustice and its link to physical, mental, societal and spiritual well-being

Discussions were facilitated by Senior social thinker and writer Aspi Mistry

The current political, social, and cultural environment is not merely stressful, but pathological.

Poverty, racism, sexism, and social inequality are not just moral issues; they are public health crises.

The high prevalence of diseases like autoimmune disorders, cancer, hypertension, diabetes, depression, and anxiety in wealthy, developed nations is not a random biological malfunction but an inevitable consequence of living in a society that systematically violates fundamental human biological and emotional needs.

Health and healing are not achieved by chasing a biological ideal, but by recovering the wholeness that was sacrificed in a bid to survive a dysfunctional world.

Trauma experienced by one generation (e.g. , Holocaust survivors, victims of residential schools, or those enduring systemic racism) can modify gene expression without changing the underlying DNA. These biological modifications can be passed down, making the next generation more susceptible to stress and disease - a physical inheritance of pain.

This session explored some of the aforementioned issues in creative ways.





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Cover Photograph: Coast – Jurors of the Kolawan gram kachcheri. While many litigants find gram kachcheris to be beneficial, those who work within the system, particularly women, also find it an enriching experience. Photo: Anuradha Nagaraj.

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