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Contemporary India is going through a critical time in its economic development. It seems that every step taken towards tackling the poverty and deprivation rampant amongst its people pushes the country deep into the swamp of environmental degradation. Home to six of the ten most polluted cities in the world, India's natural resources are being plundered rapaciously to realise an ill-conceived vision of development. Furthermore, its weather patterns are becoming increasingly erratic and often lethal. The country seems to be hurtling ever forward towards ecological mayhem.

Moreover, the neoliberal fundamentalist agenda being foisted on the Indian people by its elite is worsening entrenched social inequities and suffering caused by patriarchy and casteism. At present, the richest ten percent of the population hold three quarters of the total wealth. They also hold 370 times the wealth of the bottom 10%. For the super rich, the top 1%, the results are even more breathtaking; their assets account for nearly half of the country's total private wealth: about \$1.75 trillion! The picture for the underprivileged, however, is quite different. Thirty years ago, before India opened up its economy, India accounted for about one-fifth of the world's poorest people. Today, close to a third of that group (about 400 million) live in India.

Despite this bleak and overwhelming picture, there are significant efforts being made by civil society to construct alternative paradigms and pathways towards a world that is sustainable, equitable, and just. These frameworks and visions that aspire to bring together existing ideas, world views and cultures that still survive in the country, particularly amongst the indigenous community, with new progressive ideas and grassroots practices. Activists, academics, thinkers and practitioners of alternatives, are coming together with indigenous and rural communities, artists and communicators in search of just climate futures.

Alternatives – the logic

Vikalp Sangam, or the Confluence of Alternatives (www.vikalpsangam.org), is a unique initiative to explore and understand alternative thinking and organising on a broad spectrum of economic, social and environmental issues in India. The chief aim of the endeavor is to create a platform where alternatives to ecological self-destruction and economic inequality can reach a large audience and be discussed, analysed and eventually replicated in other places. Vikalp Sangam was started in 2014 by four prominent Indian NGOs (Kalpavriksh, Bhoomi, Shikshantar and the Deccan Development Society), which have been actively seeking solutions to environmental, developmental and educational challenges confronting the country.

But why are we searching for alternatives in the first place? As an increasingly assertive populace seeks remedies to their economic struggles and the worsening environmental situation around them, it has become more apparent that there is a need for synergy between socio-political resistance and alternative solutions. This has become all the more important given the entrenched interests and substantial forces supporting the status quo. It's not surprising that the purposes and integrity of protest movements are challenged and subverted by the establishment based on the lie that dissent exists merely in a comfortable ideological vacuum and lacks a handle on the rigors of real life. This narrative then, conveniently, becomes the dominant one perpetuated by the corporate media. It's true that movements can periodically encroach upon the power of the ruling elite, but only an alternative way of thinking and being can ensure the equitable distribution of economic, social and political power within Indian society.

So, from the perspective of meaningful change the most important question is, "are contemporary movements able to demonstrate that they're not only questioning and protesting the existing societal structure, crucial as that is, but also have viable, well thought-out alternatives to offer?". Moreover, are such alternatives already being utilised in some form and showing promise for larger replication? We are convinced that for resistance to move forward with integrity, and generate consequential hope for people, it must be centred on alternative visions.

What are alternatives and what are their underlying principles?

According to the "Alternatives Framework" (<http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspec...>), which is continuously revised through discussions among the Vikalp Sangam participants, "alternatives can be practical activities, policies, processes, technologies, and concepts/frameworks, that lead us to equity, justice, and sustainability. They can be practiced or proposed/propagated by communities, government, civil society organisations, individuals, and social enterprises, amongst others. They can simply be continuations from the past, re-asserted in (or modified for) current times, or new ones; it is important to note that the term does not imply that these alternatives are always 'marginal' or new, but that they are in contrast to the mainstream or dominant system."

The Vikalp Sangam process is rooted in the realisation of the ecological limits of human activity and the consequent rights of nature and all species to survive and thrive in the conditions in which they have evolved. This respect for the integrity of ecological processes further informs the larger values that the process places upon non-violence, harmony and peace amongst individuals, communities and collectives, and between humans and nature. Committed to simplicity and sufficiency, Vikalp Sangam advocates self-reliance in meeting the basic needs of the people and respect for the dignity and creativity of labour and work, and equity between physical and intellectual labour.

The Vikalp Sangam process advocates a system of governance that respects the ecological, economic and socio-cultural commons. This system is based upon the people's custodianship of these elements and not on their ownership by unnatural fabrications, such as corporations. In the same spirit, the governance model is intended to be closer to local rural and urban communities that are related to each other at bioregional, ecoregional and cultural levels; such that each person can participate meaningfully in [largely] face-to-face decision making as part of a radical participatory democracy. This model also ensures collective and cooperative thinking based upon the responsibility of each individual to ensure that decision making rests on ecological integrity and socio-economic equity. Ultimately, the process emphasises the interconnectedness between humans and their environment, and the intrinsic relationships between cultures, ways of living, knowledge systems, values, economies, livelihoods and politics.

The process

The Vikalp Sangam process is geared towards the propagation of "alternatives". Over the last three years the initiative has established an active website for dissemination of news and views on alternative issues and practices, and held regional and subject-specific meetings to bring thinkers and practitioners together to learn from each other and further sharpen the debate (for reports on these and other related material, see <http://kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives/alternatives-knowledge-ce...>). These meetings offer spaces to exchange ideas and experiences emerging from practice and thinking in a range of endeavours: sustainable agriculture and pastoralism, renewable energy, decentralised governance, community health, craft and art revival, multiple sexualities, inclusion of the differently abled, alternative learning and education, community-based conservation, decentralised water management, urban sustainability, gender and caste

equality, and more. People practicing and conceiving of some of the most amazing initiatives in India have been able to get together and share their expertise.

Beyond the sharing of practical experiences, however, one of the most important outputs of the Vikalp Sangam process is a conceptual framework of transformative alternatives. This framework is constantly evolving; after discussions at each Sangam and debates involving several hundred representatives from the range of sectors mentioned above. So far, ten such meetings have taken place all over India – seven of them were region or state specific, which is important given the geographical vastness and ecological diversity present in the country. The other three meetings focused on prominent issues facing India – energy, food and the issues of the youth. These Vikalp Sangam deliberations have resulted in the following five areas being identified as the cornerstones for the exploration of alternatives:

- Ecological integrity and resilience – this includes the conservation of nature and natural diversity; maintenance of ecological functions; respect for ecological limits, both local and global; and ecological ethics in all human actions.
- Social well-being and justice – including physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually fulfilling lives; equity between communities and individuals, communal and ethnic harmony; and erasure of hierarchies and divisions based on faith, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, ability, and other attributes.
- Direct and delegated democracy – with decision making starting in spaces enabling every person to participate meaningfully; building upwards to larger levels of governance by downwardly accountable institutions; and all these processes being aware and respectful of the needs and rights of those currently marginalised.
- Economic democracy – in which local communities and individuals have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets, based on the principle of localisation for basic needs and trade built on this; central to this would be the replacement of private property by the commons.
- Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy – with multiple co-existing knowledge systems in the commons; respect to a diversity of ways of living, ideas and ideologies; and encouragement to creativity and innovation.

The “alternatives” world view

In the Vikalp Sangam framework the “center of human activity is neither the state nor the corporation, but the community; a self-defined collection of people with some strong common or cohesive social interest. The community could be of various forms, from the ancient village to the urban neighbourhood to the student body of an institution to even the more ‘virtual’ networks of common interest.”

The inputs into to the Vikalp Sangam discussions are based on the alternatives experiments being conducted by diverse organisations all over India. Consequently, there is lived experience which is guiding the process, and not just hopeful thinking – however sincere it might be. The areas of the Indian existence where these experiments are taking place include the following.

Alternative economies & technologies: These are initiatives that help to create alternatives to the dominant neo-liberal or state-dominated economy and the ‘logic’ of growth, such as the localisation and decentralisation of basic needs towards self-reliance; respect and support of diverse livelihoods, producer and consumer collectives, local currencies and trade, non-monetised and equal exchange and the gift economy; production based on ecological principles, innovative technologies that respect ecological and cultural integrity; and moves away from GDP-like indicators of well-being to more qualitative, human-scale, ones.

Alternative politics: Initiatives and approaches towards people-centred governance and decision-making, including forms of direct democracy, or the Gandhian idea of swaraj in urban and rural areas; linking these processes in larger landscapes; re-imagining current political boundaries to make them more compatible with

ecological and cultural contiguities; promotion of the non-party political process; methods of increasing accountability and transparency of the government and of political parties; and progressive policy frameworks.

Energy: Initiatives that encourage alternatives to centralised, environmentally damaging and unsustainable sources of energy; equitable access to the power grid, including decentralised, community-run renewable sources and micro-grids; equitable access to energy; promoting non-electric energy sources, such as passive heating and cooling; reducing wastage in transmission and use; putting caps on demand; and advocating energy-saving and efficient materials.

Environment and ecology: These are initiatives that promote ecological sustainability, including community-led conservation of land, water and biodiversity; eliminating or minimising pollution and waste; reviving degraded ecosystems; creating awareness leading to greater respect for the sanctity of life and biodiversity of which humans are a part; and promoting ecological ethics.

Livelihoods: Linked to the search for alternative, localised economies; this includes initiatives for satisfying, dignified, and ecologically sustainable livelihoods and jobs. These could be continuations or enhancements of traditional occupations, including those in agriculture, pastoralism, nomadism, forestry, fisheries, crafts, and others in the primary economy; alternatively, they could be jobs in manufacturing and service sectors that are ecologically sustainable and dignified.

Food and Water: Initiatives towards security and sovereignty over food and water, by producing safe and nutritious food and making it accessible to people; sustaining the diversity of Indian cuisine; ensuring community control over food production and distribution, and commons from which uncultivated foods are obtained; promoting uncultivated and ‘wild’ foods; making water storage a priority; use and distribution of decentralised, ecologically sustainable, efficient and equitable producer-consumer links; advocating the continuation of water as part of the commons; and promoting democratic governance of water and wetlands.

The other prominent areas where similar experiments are taking place are: health and hygiene, learning and education, settlements and transportation, and culture and media. A huge trove of opinions, facts, theories and data has emerged out of the various Vikalp Sangam meetings. This information is helping the evolution of “alternatives” thinking in India. Furthermore, it has initiated the process by which a fundamental and transformative systemic change could be introduced into the society for the construction of a new political-economy that moves beyond both corporate capitalism and state socialism towards the creation of what we call “Radical Ecological Democracy”, based on climate justice, environmental sustainability and socio-economic equality.

An “alternatives” future

Through the Vikalp Sangam process we have been able to rigorously debate the idea of wellbeing – about secure ways of meeting basic needs, being healthy, having access to opportunities for learning, being employed in satisfactory and meaningful tasks, having good social relations, and leading culturally and spiritually fulfilling lives. There is no reason that these goals need be achieved through ecological devastation, and no reason why only some people should get to enjoy them. Human wellbeing can be achieved without endangering the earth and without leaving behind half – or more – of humanity.

Lastly, we’re also exploring the possibility of replicating the Vikalp Sangam model on an international level. A one-day Sangam has already taken place in Lebanon, involving groups from Jordan, Egypt and Palestine. We want to determine how information regarding the process can be shared with academics and activists in other parts of the world, and to probe the mechanisms by which the positive outcomes from India can be integrated into a global search for alternatives, and vice versa. We’re committed and excited about our attempts at cooperation between academics, movement activists, creative thinkers, and practitioners of alternatives to challenge the ever-tightening grip of corporate fundamentalism on the economy and the

environment.

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