

BLOG: RESISTANCE AND RECONSTRUCTION

Confluence of hope: Converging for a better world

Ashish Kothari outlines the vision and processes of Vikalp Sangam, a movement that seeks to bring together a multitude of grassroots initiatives that are exploring alternative, inclusive and sustainable paths to human well-being.



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Gatherings with a difference, infused with hope and positive energy, a celebration of human potential. Used to as I was, to NGO meetings where system-bashing, doom and gloom dominate, I found these refreshing.

In October 2014 and February 2015, two Vikalp Sangam gatherings (Alternatives Confluences) were held, the first at the campus of the Timbaktu Collective near Anantpur in Andhra Pradesh and the second at Ekta Parishad's CESC campus near Madurai in Tamil Nadu.

Each had about 100 participants, and put together, they came from widely varying walks of life: farmers and forest-dwelling adivasis, human rights activists, environmentalists, disability and sexuality rights activists, educationists and unlearning proponents, feminists, social enterprise managers, waste-pickers, urban NGOs, researchers, entrepreneurs and others.

What was such an eclectic bunch of people doing together? Well, that was the main idea: to bring together people working on stories of hope from as many different sectors as possible. Cross-learning, constructive mutual criticism, exploration of synergies, and collective imagining of a better future that is more equitable, more just, and more in tune with nature, these were our motivations for being together for 3-4 days each.



Vikalp Sangam meeting at Timbaktu. Pic: Ashish Kothari

As Mari Marcel Thekaekara, an activist with ACCORD in the Nilgiris said, “I was not keen to come for yet another NGO meeting, but after these three days of being with you all, I am recharged and excited. In these days of crisis and disruption, keeping alive a collective hope is so crucial.”

Mari was echoing what many of us felt. This was not surprising, since the days at Timbaktu and CESC were spent listening to and seeing exhibits of so many amazing initiatives across the southern states. Here’s a sample from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala who participated:

- **Timbaktu Collective** works in nearly 200 villages on eco-restoration, child and disability rights, women’s and farmer cooperatives, organic farming and producer owned enterprises.
- **ReStore**, a non-profit store in Chennai provides a forum for organic farmers and others to not only sell produce but build relations with consumers.
- **Deccan Development Society** has transformed caste and gender discrimination against Dalit women farmers through organic, traditional farming, and by making films, running a community radio and a school.
- **Rythu Swarajya Vedika** has helped Dalit and other small farmers face the onslaught of the corporate agribusiness by securing land rights and linking them to like-minded political parties.
- **Rural and Environment Development Society (REDS)** and **Andhra Pradesh Women Network** have fought against child labour and human trafficking, linking it to the decline of collective farming and traditional livelihoods.
- **WASSAN**, the **Daana Network**, **Earth 360**, **Organic India**, and many of the organisations named above are reviving the conditions for sustainable, diverse, organic farming, from the availability of water and seeds to marketing and consumer awareness.
- **Vikash Vidya Vanam**, **Sholai School**, **Puvudham School**, **Vidyodaya**, **Marudam**, **Bhoomi College** are alternative learning and educational initiatives that focus on living with nature, learning from real life experiences, building a spirit of solidarity instead of cutthroat competition, and inculcating human values.
- **Hasiru Dala** is an organisation of wastepickers in Bengaluru, promoting livelihoods based on responsible management of waste; the **Indian Green Service** has shown how almost all waste products are resources that can be remade into useful products.
- **Just Change** is a grass roots organisation initiated by **ACCORD**, bringing together adivasi farmer producers, consumers in nearby settlements, and investors who would like to support organic, diverse farming and other adivasi livelihoods.
- **Mahila Samakhya** works for the women empowerment, especially in the field of small-scale agriculture and land rights; **Vidya Sagar** advocates access and inclusion of the ‘disabled’; and **Nirangal** struggles to gain respect for sexual minorities.
- **Trust for Village Self-Governance** has demonstrated that decentralised, village-based manufacturing can provide an economic environment in which distress-driven rural-urban migration can be eliminated.
- **Unltd Tamil Nadu** helps generate funds for community-based social enterprises and providing technical training where needed.
- The **5th Pillar** mobilises citizens for corruption-free, transparent and accountable governance.
- **Poovulagin Nanbarkal**, is a group of professionals that brings out simple outreach material on diverse ecological, social, and legal issues.
- **Tribal Health Initiative** is a group of doctors that practises and advocates community, diverse health systems (including adivasi and other folk medicine), and prevention through nutritional organic food and secure livelihoods.
- **Students Sea Turtle Conservation Network** which for decades has involved the youth in protecting nesting turtles along Chennai’s beaches.
- **Nizhal** takes action to protect and document tree diversity in Chennai, including through students.
- **Kudumbashree** is a large-scale government project that provides decent, rural livelihoods to lakhs of women, helping reduce outmigration and empower women in many ways.

Discussions amongst these diverse groups of people were animated and challenging, providing to each of us perspectives we may have never considered. Rajiv Rajan, bound to a wheelchair due to cerebral palsy, gave us a lesson in humility when he demonstrated how we are all dependent in one way or the other, and the ‘disabled’ are as normal as any of us.

Shakthi Nataraj and Sankari, the latter a transgender, sharply brought home to us the many biases that even people in civil society have towards those with ‘different’ sexualities. The presence of Aam Aadmi Party members provided fodder for a discussion on alternative politics.

Manisha of Adavi Trust reminded us that we exhibit an upper caste and class bias when we only talk about learning from Gandhi and Tagore and Marx and Ambedkar and yoga gurus, and not about learning from ‘ordinary’ adivasis and Dalits and folk healers and dancers.

Best of all, though, all this was in the spirit of constructively learning from each other, becoming stronger in our practices and resolving to work towards a better society.

The Sangam Process

The Vikalp Sangam process has its origins in the increasing feeling that while criticism of the currently dominant economic and political system, which is taking us rapidly down the path of ecological and social destruction, is crucial, it is not adequate.

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What is our vision of the future?

What are our answers to questions of poverty, hunger, energy insecurity, and other deprivations?

How do we meet human aspirations, can it be done in ways that don't destroy the earth, or leave half of humanity behind?

Are there truly sustainable pathways of 'development' or 'well-being'?

Answers to these questions have been attempted for many years and in many parts of the world. However, most of these have focused on one or few sectors; for instance, the organic and sustainable farming movement is growing steadily as a response to the destructive chemical-dependent 'green revolution' model propagated by governments and corporations.

Similarly, the rights movements have moved decisively to gain a number of legislations providing a range of rights – to information, education, food, employment, forest resources, child and women's empowerment, health and so on.

Each of these has been led by different champions, but missing, or very weakly articulated, are attempts to bring these different movements and initiatives together. And so we have the unfortunate phenomenon where the sustainable farming folks do not regularly connect with the community health movements, even though both recognise that a crucial part of preventive health strategies is to have access to nutritional, organic food.



Vikalp Sangam gathering in Tamil Nadu. Pic: Ashish Kothari

Many environmental action groups do not even think they have common cause with groups struggling for the rights of women and the differently abled, and even less so with Dalit movements. The list could go on.

The fact that we all are victims, in one way or the other, of a top-down state regime and/or a rapacious capitalist system and/or entrenched systems of patriarchy and caste hierarchy, and that we need to find common pathways out of our individual crises has not yet sunk in for many of us.

The Sangam process cannot possibly be the answer to all these issues, but it is one step in that direction. It is a celebration of the ability of ‘ordinary’ people to innovate, persevere, collaborate, and find solutions to what may seem intractable problems. It puts back faith in communities and individual citizens, who are not waiting for ‘experts’ and the ‘sarkar’ to lead the way to sustainability and justice.

But it also shows that transformative initiatives can come from anywhere: from civil society and communities, from government officials and research institutions, from social enterprises and businesses.

Planning and structure

It is with these thoughts that the first planning meeting of the Sangam was organised by Kalpavriksh in January 2014. Participants, many of whom went on to form a national Vikalp Sangam Core Group, laid out the broad contours of the process. Subsequent work including the two Sangams has built on this.

The Core Group consists of: Kalpavriksh, Deccan Development Society (DDS), Bhoomi College, Shikshantar, Timbaktu Collective, Development Alternatives (DA), SOPPECOM, Gene Campaign, BHASHA, Kriti Team, Centre for Equity

Studies (CES), URMUL, National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (NAPM), Peoples' Science Institute (PSI), Maati, Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), Ekta Parishad, South Asian Dialogue on Ecological Democracy (SADED), Knowledge in Civil Society (KICS), North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS), Centre for Education and Documentation, ACCORD, and some individuals (Sushma Iyengar, Dinesh Abrol).

Currently hosted by Kalpavriksh, it is hoped that over time, others from amongst these will take on the responsibility. Funded for the time being by groups like the Heinrich Boell Foundation, Oxfam India, and Misereor, it is also hoped that eventually the process can become self-supporting.

The Vikalp Sangams are not intended to be academic conferences, but rather a more free-flowing meeting of minds and hearts. The three or four days together are spent on exchange of experiences, small group sessions focused on individual themes, discussion on possible collaborations, joint art and theatre activities, brainstorming on a conceptual alternative framework, and opportunities to showcase the initiatives through exhibitions, films/audio-visuals, and other art forms. The Sangams are meant to be a mix of fun, learning, and bonding.

Another crucial part of the process is a website, www.vikalpsangam.org (or www.alternativesindia.org), which hosts stories of and resources on alternatives in the full range of sectors, provides a platform for analytical perspectives, and announces relevant events.

In less than a year, the site already hosts over 200 stories and perspective pieces. Though mostly in English as yet, the website hosts (Kalpavriksh, Shikshantar, Deccan Development Society, and Bhoomi) hope to put up much more material in other Indian languages. For anyone who is battling depression after reading the morning newspapers, this site is guaranteed to lighten your mood!

The Future

Apart from sharing experiences of ongoing initiatives, the Sangam process is also ambitiously evolving a common framework of an alternative society. Based on a brief note put together by Kalpavriksh, each of the Sangams has discussed the broad contours of the alternative politics, economics, and social and cultural processes that are needed for a sane future. This note will continue to evolve and hopefully become a robust conceptual base for the practical work going on across the country.

The first two Sangams are just the start of a long-term process, in which many more regional gatherings will be held in different parts of India. Additionally, there will be thematic Sangams at a national scale (ones on food, regional economies, and energy are being discussed). Collectively, all these will hopefully lead to a dynamic network of organisations and movements and individuals that can become a critical political mass influencing policies and political actors.

The advocates of the Vikalp Sangam process are not starry-eyed do-gooders; they are well aware of the enormous challenges they face. This is not only from the dominant political and economic system which will tolerate such moves for some time, and then try to hit back when threatened. It is also from within civil society itself, which has found it rather difficult to come together for any length of time before ego and ideological (or assumed ideological) issues create rifts and dissension.

Only time will tell whether the Vikalp Sangam process can avoid these pitfalls. For now, its humble contribution is to provide a forum for keeping alive hope.

(For more on the Vikalp Sangam process, see: <http://www.kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives>; <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/events/>)

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<http://indiatogether.org/vikalp-sangam-champions-of-alternative-sustainable-development-op-ed>

