

CLIMATE ADAPTATION

Accounts of Resilience, Self-Sufficiency
and Systems Change

Edited by Arkbound Foundation

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by Arkbound Foundation**

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Visioning the Future as an Act of Subversive Democracy

Ashish Kothari¹

1 This article builds on 'Collective dreaming: Democratic visioning in the Vikalp Sangam process,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. LIV no. 34, Aug 2019.

Caught with its hubris-filled pants down, humanity is probably as far away from utopian thinking as it has ever been. Immediate survival, whether from COVID-19 or unemployment and unrest, appears to be on top of everyone's mind. And yet, what better opportunity than a collective global crisis to do some collective visioning of the kind of future we want? I start here with one such vision of the future, and then describe two ongoing processes that could help us move towards such a vision.

A borderless, bioculturally governed South Asia

In the book *Alternative Futures: India Unshackled* (2017), my co-editor KJ Joy and I report on an imaginary speech made by Meera Gond-Vankar in 2100, looking back at a century of transformation. Among the many changes she noted was the following: "Everything I've described above has been remarkable. But perhaps the most noteworthy has been the change in our relations in South Asia. While India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and China still retain their 'national' identities, boundaries have become porous, needing no visas to cross. By the middle of the twenty-first century various oppressed nationalities of the twentieth and early twenty-first century in the region could choose their own political future. Local communities have taken over most of the governance in these boundary areas, having declared *shanti abhyaranyas* (peace reserves) in previous conflict zones like Siachen, the Kachchh and Thar deserts, and the Sundarbans (the last had become a serious arena of water and land conflict due partly to the climate crises, during the 2030s and 40s). The same applies to the Palk Strait, with fishing communities from both India and Sri Lanka empowered to ensure sustainable, peaceful use of marine areas. A Greater Tibet has become a reality, self-governed, with both India and China relinquishing their political and economic domination over it and rather extending a helping hand where necessary. In the Greater Thar, communities of livestock herders in both India and Pakistan have been similarly empowered for self-governance. In all these initiatives, narrow nationalism is being replaced by civilisational identities, pride and exchange, a kind of *swasabhyata* (own ethnicity) that encourages respect of and mutual learning between different civilisations and cultures. Both nomadic communities and wildlife are now able to move freely back and forth, as they used to before these areas became zones of conflict and were dissected by fences. In short, the trans-boundary elements of nature and resources in the region – like water, forests, migratory species – are being increasingly brought under a regional public good framework of governance."

Getting there: envisioning and acting

To be sure, this vision seems to be far from being realised at present. Nation states have become ever more insular, and we have the renewed belligerence of the Chinese state on India's northern borders adding to the continued tension with Pakistan. Internal colonisation and aggression continues, or has worsened in some parts of the region, such as in the Kashmir region where the Indian state revoked its relatively autonomous status in 2019.

Humanity has been confronted with such seemingly intractable situations before. The great European war (otherwise known as WWII) was about as bitter and murderous a conflict as could be imagined. Yet Europe subsequently unified as no other continent has done; leaving aside the fact that the 'economic' integration has been pretty disastrous for many, the fact that visa-less travel and cross-border employment became possible between nations that were at war with each other just a few years before is pretty remarkable. Why can't that happen in South Asia?

Community resilience in the face of crises

Even as COVID-19 created mass suffering among already marginalised sections of society, it has also thrown up new forms of citizens' solidarity actions and demonstrated the resilience of communities that have mobilised themselves for various purposes: In Telangana, over 4,000 *Dalit* and adivasi¹ women farmers, part of Deccan Development Society, have transformed a state of hunger, malnutrition, gender and caste oppression into achieving *anna swaraj* (food sovereignty). In COVID-19 times, these women fed landless families in their villages, contributing 10kg of food grain per family to the district relief measures, and daily feeding 1,000 glasses of nutritious millet porridge to health, municipality and police workers in nearby Zaheerabad town.

In Kachchh, the village of Kunariya set up a crisis management team, used social media to raise awareness about COVID-19, and facilitated a full health survey. Three hundred and sixteen needy families, including those of visually impaired and differently abled individuals, single women and other marginalised people, were assured all basic necessities using *panchayat* (village council) funds or local donations. Over the last few years, dynamic facilitation by its *sarpanch* (elected village head) Suresh Chhanga has enabled Kunariya to move towards greater public participation, including women's empowerment, in governance of local affairs. After COVID-19 hit, Kunariya is now envisioning the local production of all basic needs.

1 *Dalits* are the 'lowest' caste in traditional Hindu hierarchy, once also called 'untouchables' or 'outcastes'. They have been systematically oppressed, assigned the most undignified jobs, and considered 'impure', and subjected to systemic marginalisation that continues in many forms today. '*Adivas*' (original inhabitant) is the term used for India's Indigenous or tribal peoples, about 7% of its population.

- Several villages in eastern Maharashtra have obtained community rights under the Forest Rights Act 2006, overturning two centuries of centralised government control and exploitation of their forests by outside contractors. Apart from helping to sustain domestic needs (including forest foods, medicinal plants, and culturally and spiritually important sites), sustainable harvesting of forest produce has earned villages substantial income, part of which has gone into community funds. In settlements like Rahu in Amravati district, together with Kukdale and Salhe in Gadchiroli district, these funds are being used to help returning migrant labour or landless people obtain basic relief materials. In the Korchi region of Gadchiroli, 90 villages have formed a *Mahagram Sabha* (a federation of village assemblies) towards greater self-rule and economic self-reliance also as a way to stop destructive mining.
- Kuthambakkam village near Chennai has demonstrated how small-scale manufacturing (e.g. of solar fan-bulb kits) and grain processing have helped families avoid having to migrate for work. Its ex-*sarpanch* Elango Rangaswamy has created a solar-powered way of making disinfectant, which he says can be set up cheaply in any village for both employment and disease prevention.
- In the Adi village in Upper Siang region of Arunachal Pradesh, the local institution (*kebang*) used a traditional practice of restricting movement during certain festivals and rituals, to enforce quarantine and lockdown even before the government declared it (as did many other Adi villages). The village has faced no food scarcity issues as mixed cropping of jhum (shifting cultivation) and home gardens (alongside long-term storage traditions for food grain, smoke-dried meat and fish) have ensured adequate food availability.



Deccan Development Society women at mobile fest, Pastapur, Telangana (India), Feb 2020. **Credit:** Ashish Kothari.

In all these and many other examples,² the single most crucial element of resilience is the ability of communities to take collective decisions for themselves. Democracy has been deepened in each of these communities, well beyond the neo-liberal electoral drama that we indulge in once every five years. Communities have taken control over one or more critical elements of their life – the visioning of what they want their present and future to be, building on their past – whether it is regarding food production and distribution, or local ecosystems on which their livelihoods are based, or their health or local markets.

Some (even if partial and imperfect) vision of *swaraj* (self-rule)³ has been achieved based on explicit or implicit prefigurative dialogue and discourse, and with plenty of asking-doing-learning-doing-asking spirals. As a result, dependence on the state and on faraway markets has been reduced or even eliminated. In all these examples, there has been some movement towards tackling internal inequities: some faced by women, Dalits, children or other marginalised sections of society, though many are so entrenched they will not go away without a fight.

Such radical democracy (it is strange I have to qualify democracy in this manner since its original meaning, power of/by the people, should be radical enough!) is a subversion of normal structures of power. These communities even challenge the notion of ‘power-over’ and argue for ‘power-with’ or ‘power-to’, rendering the concept and practice of power less hierarchical and competitive, and more equitable and solidarity-based (Kothari and Das, 2016).

From individual to collective visioning

Prefigurative actions by communities and collectives at various levels are important in themselves, especially as they occur at the human scale. For this reason, I think people are wrong in scoffing at ‘local’ actions as being insignificant. But they are right in observing that, by themselves, they will not bring about the macro or systemic changes we require. For this, we need to create a critical mass of various kinds, and this entails coming together across regions, cultures, ideologies and imaginaries.

In a significant part of people’s movements and civil society, there is an increasing restlessness about being in a constant state of protest. Many of us have been fighting systems – including those based on patriarchy, capitalism,

2 See dozens of stories and case studies at www.vikalpsangam.org, and in Kalpavriksh, 2017; Kothari and Joy, 2017; and Singh, Kulkarni and Pathak Broome, 2018; see also about 60 stories of COVID-19 time resilience from various parts of India in a series called Extraordinary work of “ordinary” people: beyond pandemics and lockdowns, <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/extraordinary-work-of-ordinary-people-in-multi-language-translation/>

3 *Swaraj* is an ancient Indian term, revived during its independence struggle against British colonial rule by Mahatma Gandhi. However, its meaning is much deeper than national freedom: it entails a deep democracy, with an assertion of individual and collective autonomy along with responsible behaviour towards all others so their autonomy is not undermined.

statism, casteism, racism and other forms of power asymmetry. All are ecologically devastating, economically iniquitous and socially disruptive. This includes, in its most visible form, the current system of ‘developmentality’, an ideology that assigns all countries or peoples as being ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ based on homogenous criteria like GDP or financial size of economy, and forces or encourages all to take the path that the industrial West has taken (Deb, 2009; Shrivastava and Kothari, 2012). It is a struggle that has to continue, especially in today’s times when regressive forces are emerging stronger than ever.

But we also need to put our energies into collective prefigurative visioning and actions, building on what communities and collectives are already attempting. Even as we get better at saying ‘no’, we need to come up with what we are saying ‘yes’ to. Resistance that attempts to save existing ways of life (*adivasi*, peasant, pastoral, fishworker, artisanal) is very much part of how to say ‘yes’. But it is not enough, because in many of these ways there have been inequities and marginalisations of their own: patriarchal dimensions being nearly universal, casteism featuring prominently in India. Another reason is that many of these ways of life are no longer able to meet basic needs or legitimate aspirations. Witness, for instance, the mass distress among small-scale or artisanal farming, fishing, traditional crafting and pastoralist communities, even in pre-COVID times (Shrivastava and Kothari, 2012). There is a real need for addressing issues of deprivation and injustice, across the world, and that cannot come only from protest and resistance. Constructive, creative alternatives for meeting needs and aspirations have to be revived from the past and created anew. And such scattered actions on grounded alternatives have to be enabled to come together.

Vikalp Sangam: collective envisioning in India

In 2014, an initiative began to try to address a number of questions at a collective level. The underlying question was: if we don’t want patriarchy, capitalism, statism, casteism and racism, then what do we want? What solutions are emerging to tackle real poverty, hunger, energy insecurity and other deprivations? How do we achieve them without destroying the earth, or without creating further inequities and inequalities?

Answers to these questions have been attempted over many generations and in many parts of the world. However, movements along these lines have often been divided or fractured on lines of sectors, generations, urban-rural, classes, and so on. The agro-ecology movement (internally quite diverse) has grown as a response to the destructive chemical-dependent ‘green revolution’ model propagated by governments and corporations.⁴ Movements for individual human or collective community rights have obtained legislation providing a

4 Among the substantial literature on these subjects are books and articles by Vandana Shiva, Devinder Sharma, Bharat Mansata, Kavitha Kuruganti, Rajeswari Raina and Claude Alvares. A review and visioning of the subject is under publication by Mansata et al., 2017.

range of protective or assertive rights – against discrimination, and instead towards information, education, food, employment, forest resources, health, child and women’s empowerment.⁵ But not so common are attempts at intersectionality, bringing different movements together.



Democracy Vikalp Sangam, Rajasthan, India, Oct 2019. **Credit:** Ashish Kothari.

In the climate movements, there have been strands that do not actively seek a common cause with, say, the anti-racism or worker rights movements. Typically in India, many environmental action groups have not reached out to those struggling on the rights of women and the differently abled, even less so with *Dalit* movements, despite the growing evidence that environmental problems affect these sections often more than others,⁶ and conversely that their empowerment can be a powerful force for ecological revival and conservation (such as in the case of the Chipko movement, or the *Dalit* women farmers’ agricultural revolution through Deccan Development Society).⁷ Urban groups do not often work well with rural ones and there can remain significant gaps between ways of thinking and doing between old and new generations. The fact that we all are victims, in one way or the other, of the system(s) mentioned above has only recently begun to be realised. To address these issues, a process called Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence) was initiated in 2014 as a platform to share, collaborate and collectively evolve alternative futures. It involves physical gatherings (there have been 20 so far,

5 See, for instance, Roy et al., 2017; Gopalakrishnan, and <http://www.righttofoodcampaign.in>

6 There is considerable eco-feminist literature on the relationship between women and environment, including varying perspectives by Vandana Shiva and Bina Agarwal in the Indian context, see Shiva, 1988 and Agarwal, 1994; on the neglect of *Dalit* issues by environmentalists, see Sharma, 2012.

7 For several examples of *Dalit*, women’s and other marginalised sections mobilising to protect the environment, see www.vikalpsangam.org.

at regional levels or on themes,⁸ providing spaces for cross-sectoral or inter-cultural exchange among practitioners, thinkers, researchers and theorists (these are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories!). It also involves extensive documentation and outreach of alternative initiatives, collated into a website. An e-list connects several hundred people, including those who have participated in the Sangams. During the COVID-19 period in 2020 and early 2021, several online dialogues and presentations have been organised since physical gatherings were not possible.



Human chain demonstration against mega-dams on Indravati river, Hemalkasa, Maharashtra, India. **Credit:** Ashish Kothari

In general, the Vikalp Sangam (VS) initiative attempts to help document, understand and make more visible ongoing practical and conceptual alternatives in all fields of human endeavour provide a platform for people working in these to come together for sharing, learning and collaborating, especially across sectors

- be a forum for collective visioning of a better future and pathways to it
 - contribute to the possibility of a critical political mass that can more effectively challenge and change the system or systemic forces mentioned above
- The third objective, *collective visioning*, has been perhaps the most important, innovative and subversive element. It attempts to break out of our modern-day inability or unwillingness to envision utopias. Comparing it to the grand task of preparing a constitution for a newly emerging nation would be rather hubristic, but in a sense it is a similar attempt at bringing the visionary voices of many sections of Indian society, over many years, into a common agenda. And in doing this, it has sought to learn from and bring up grassroots voices, while also recalling and learning from historic greats like Gandhi, Marx, Ambedkar, Tagore and Phule.

8 see <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-reports#WxjYtC2B1E6>

This aspect of VS's visioning is crucial. Most of academia and civil society, especially those belonging to the urban and middle classes, assume that 'expertise' is located only in such classes. The written word dominates the oral; increasingly, the digital trumps the written too. This means that most of 'folk' knowledge and wisdom, worldviews and conceptual frameworks, remains 'hidden' to the world of formal 'intellectuals'. The farmer, the pastoralist, the fisher, the industrial worker, the craftsperson ... these are considered 'practitioners', whereas those who study them are the 'intellectuals' and 'theorists'.⁹ In India this is likely exacerbated by the caste and gender hierarchies, built on the strong belief that *Dalits* and other 'lower' castes, and women in general, are not capable of (or should be kept away from) intellectual conceptualisation.

Another possible reason for the neglect of 'folk' ideologies and concepts is their marginalisation in official processes of planning and visioning. Overwhelmingly, governmental processes of planning at various levels involve only officials, academics and urban civil society members. Agricultural and fisheries planning and visioning does not involve farmers and fishers; forest sector planning and visioning does not involve forest dwellers; educational planning does not involve students, and so on.

The VS process tries to consciously involve and enable people from communities, both rural and urban, in various activities. At the first Sangam (referring to physical confluences that are part of the process) in Timbaktu (Andhra Pradesh) in 2014, Kalpavriksh introduced a note In Search of Alternatives: Key Aspects and Principles for discussion. This was based on our understanding of on-ground processes of resistance and transformation, including the kinds of strategies and principles that are contained in them. It includes wisdom expressed by 'ordinary' people in communities and movements. The document (translated into several Indian languages) has since been discussed by over 1,000 people.¹⁰

One of the most important parts of this visioning is the search for clarity on what is an alternative. At a time when so many corporations are 'greenwashing' their products as 'natural' or 'eco-friendly', governments are claiming to be climate-friendly and even 'well-being' oriented, many people seem to think that simply directing their garbage for recycling makes them a responsible citizen. Vikalp Sangam makes it clear that an initiative is alternative when it challenges and helps change the fundamental conditions of inequity and unsustainability, including the structures of patriarchy, capitalism, statism, racism, casteism and anthropocentrism.

The VS vision document describes what kinds of transformations are taking place or need to take place in five spheres of life: political, economic, social, cultural, ecological and – at the centre of this – ethics and principles. It is in

9 There seems to be little written about this in academic circles, though it is a frequent topic of discussion in civil society. Some related issues are dealt with by Shambu Prasad, 2011 and authors in Basole, 2015.

10 <http://www.wikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/>

the political sphere that it envisages rescuing democracy from its currently form (with power centred on political representatives and bureaucrats, and participation pivoted around intense electoral competitiveness), transforming it to *swaraj*, or 'radical' democracy, where communities grounded in their own reality are at the centre of power. In this way, political relations are transformed from 'power-over' into 'power-to' or 'power-with'. Decision-making is also respectful of ecological and cultural connections, in bioregional or eco-regional landscapes. This is what helps us reimagine political boundaries within and between nation states, such as what Meera Gond-Vankar spoke about at the beginning of this chapter. And this goes hand-in-hand with economic democratisation, struggles for social justice and equity, preserving cultural and knowledge diversity, and sustaining the earth that sustains us.

Possibly VS's most important component is a clear statement of ethical values and principles, which are at the foundation of alternative initiatives, either implicit or explicitly stated. In the examples I have briefly described above, communities have been able to achieve a great deal based on principles like collective responsibility and sharing. There is a focus on solidarity and reciprocity, diversity, freedom and autonomy, respect and responsibility, living within and with nature, dignity and inclusiveness, and others. A crucial extension of this is that instead of 'upscaling' successful initiatives (a typically capitalist or statist approach, unfortunately adopted by many NGOs also), the strategy is to 'outscale' them, with thousands of distributed initiatives learning principles from each other and adopting them to their own unique contexts, then networking to create a bigger scale. This is happening, for instance, with regard to sustainable, biologically diverse agriculture, or decentralised water harvesting or more direct forms of democracy.

A very interesting part of the VS process has been the porosity of conventional ideological boundaries. Several Sangams have had participants with strong Gandhian, Marxist, feminist, *Dalit*, *adivasi*, nature rights and other perspectives, which can often be in contestation with each other. Yet there has been an atmosphere of working out these differences and building on the commonalities, based especially on a collective agreement on the above-mentioned ethics and values. This could be because the Sangam space has an atmosphere of positivity given its core subject matter, so participants coming into it are aware in advance that it is a space for constructive dialogue. But perhaps most important is how experiences from the ground are impossible to silo-ise into ideological or sectoral boxes; the experience of a *Dalit* woman farmer breaking out of caste and gender and class barriers and achieving food sovereignty lends itself magnificently to holistic, out-of-the-box ideologies. She would much rather not be classified as being part of a Marxist, or a Gandhian or an Ambedkarite revolution, but perhaps all rolled into one ... and much more!



National Vikalp Sangam, Udaipur, 2017. **Credit:** Ashish Kothari

One outcome of the VS process that also lends itself to democratising spaces is the ‘Alternatives Transformation Format’.¹¹ This is meant to be used by actors within an initiative where transformations towards justice and sustainability are being attempted. It can be done with or without external facilitation, enabling actors to see how holistic, coherent and comprehensive their initiative is. It has been used for a two-year study of transformations among handloom weavers in Kachchh (Kothari et al., 2019) and sporadically by organisations for some critical self-reflection.

The latest from the VS stable is a national networking process to respond to the huge crisis of livelihoods created by COVID-19 (or rather, by the callous nature of the lockdown imposed by the Indian state). Called Vikalp Sutra,¹² this links to several dozen national or regional organisations (including those working for immediate relief and rehabilitation, and those working for many years on generating and sustaining dignified livelihoods). Apart from an intense focus on livelihoods and worker rights, the Sutra process also hopes to conceptualise and advocate for fundamental changes in economy – towards greater self-reliance, open localisation, circularity, local exchanges, producer control and well-being. The Sutra process endeavours to be non-hierarchical, horizontally distributed, with a light coordination structure; again, a core principle of democratic functioning.

Finally, the fourth objective of VS – to create a political critical mass for transforming the structures of power and decision-making – has enabled some spaces for democratisation. Advocating policy shifts for certain regions (e.g. Kashmir, Ladakh) or in certain sectors (e.g. food and agriculture) are elements

11 http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternatives_transformation_framework_revised_20.2.2017.pdf.

12 <https://sutra.vikalpsangam.org>

of this, but more ambitious are attempts to push ‘people’s agendas’ at a national level, such as a manifesto¹³ issued in the context of the 2019 general elections, and a statement on long-term measures that should be taken in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.¹⁴ In 2020, it also linked with several other movements on the Jan Sarokar process and in sessions of a Janta (People’s) Parliament, bringing together citizens’ views on the government’s performance in various sectors and advocating alternatives.



Village Mapping at Kunariya, Kachchh, western India. **Credit:** Kunariya Panchayat

13 <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/peoples-manifesto-for-a-just-equitable-and-sustainable-india-2019/>

14 <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-core-group-statement-on-the-need-for-creative-long-term-alternatives-in-view-of-COVID-19-28-march-2020/>

Global transformations

A transformation towards justice, equity, sustainability cannot happen in India alone. Economic globalisation has interconnected peoples and countries like never before, and global crises with climate, biodiversity and inequality blithely disregard national boundaries. Visioning and democratisation movements have to link with similar processes elsewhere, creating a global critical mass.

In the same imaginary speech quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Meera Gond-Vankar went on to observe:

“The people of India and the rest of South Asia have been significant movers of an increasingly borderless world ... the gradual dissolution of rigid nation state boundaries. South Asia learnt from the mistakes of blocks like the European Union, with its strange mix of centralisation and decentralisation and continued reliance on the nation state, and worked out its own recipe for respecting diversity within a unity of purpose. This is heavily based, as mentioned above, on community-based governance in areas of what were formerly nation state boundaries. Peoples’ movements across South Asia were key actors towards devising the democratic Global Peoples’ Assembly that, sometime in the mid-2000s, began to replace the United Nations. This Assembly has a series of governance mechanisms that do not give permanent or long-term power to any people or individual, are accountable to direct democracy and eco-regional units on the ground, and are meant exclusively for absolutely essential functions such as governance of the global commons (the seas, the atmosphere, and so on), and facilitation of equitable and sustainable cultural and economic relations.

Indeed, let us acknowledge that the transformations in South Asia are not entirely its own doing ... It was only when we realised that we could learn enormously from peoples’ initiatives across the world, just as they could learn from us that transformations could be made more effectively and widely. Still, I guess we could take some pride in having been instrumental in starting (with others) the Global Alternatives Sangam, which ran for some decades till it was incorporated into the Global Peoples’ Assembly.”

A number of attempts are being made to bring together progressive movements across the world. One, emerging from the Vikalp Sangam process (and other

similar ones such as *Crianza Mutua*¹⁵ in Mexico), is the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA)¹⁶. This is a non-hierarchical, convivial platform for *weaving*: exchange, mutual learning, collaboration and collective visioning, to challenge the dominant patriarchal, capitalist, statist, racist and anthropocentric system. The aim is to demonstrate that it is possible to live in ways that promote justice, equity and ecological wisdom. It stresses learning from Indigenous people and other local communities, along with radical counter-movements emerging within industrialised societies.

Begun in mid-2019, the GTA process has been endorsed by networks, movements and several prominent individuals, spreading across all continents. It is setting up exchanges, dialogues, mutual learning and mapping to support on-ground action with several partners, building on the experience of networks like Vikalp Sangam and Crianza Mutua.

Conclusion: the democratic potential of collective visioning

At its core, democracy should be about ‘ordinary’ people, unshackled from blind faith in conventional structures of power, individually and collectively taking stewardship of their past, present and future. The above describes some modest attempts at trying to provide platforms to enable this. As I observed elsewhere, an attempt like VS 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 ‘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. It shows further that the visioning of a better society, of a future we want to strive towards, is not the prerogative of formal ‘experts’. It can be done by putting together the wisdom, knowledge and experience of people anywhere. People in different stages of life, in whatever culture and livelihood, at whatever level of learning and education, in nature or in the farm or in classrooms. People who have shown themselves capable of doing the most extraordinary things.”

¹⁵ https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/newsletters/01:index#crianza_mutua_in_mexico

¹⁶ <https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org>

To be sure, one can never confidently state that such processes will change society in fundamental ways. In the early 2000s many of us were involved in a nationwide exercise to prepare India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). Over 50,000 people participated, through various modes of interaction, and produced about 100 local, state, regional and thematic plans, all culminating in the national one. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Environment and Forests rejected its outputs (Kothari and Kohli, 2009). But the process created a momentum that many local communities and groups carried forward, e.g. through a significant expansion in food sovereignty and biodiversity related exercises by Dalit women farmers of the Deccan Development Society in Telangana, or biodiversity celebrations and enterprise-based livelihoods among women by Vanastree of Uttara Kannada, Karnataka.¹⁷ It also created a large body of information and analysis, made publicly available.¹⁸ And it created lasting connections between communities and civil society, even individual government officials, that have spawned other constructive collaborations for visioning and action.



Indus, on way to Alchi, Ladakh, India. **Credit:** Ashish Kothari.

It is the *process* that is important, as much if not more than the final outcome. The combination of grounded action and lofty visioning, even utopian thinking, frees us from the confines of what the dominant system tells us is 'possible'. In this sense, the dreaming of alternative visions and thinking of pathways to get there is deeply democratic, taking us that much closer to swaraj and freedom.

17 See 'Deccan Andhra' substate biodiversity action plan at <http://www.kalpavriksh.org/index.php/conservation-livelihoods1/72-focus-areas/conservation-livelihoods/biodiversity-and-wildlife/national-biodiversity-strategy-action-plan/225-bsaps-ftp-sub-state>; see also <http://ddsindia.com>, and <http://vanastree.org>.

18 For the full documentation arising from this exercise, including a detailed process document, see <http://www.kalpavriksh.org/index.php/conservation-livelihoods1/biodiversity-and-wildlife/national-biodiversity-strategy-action-plan>.

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