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VIKALP SANGAM – A DECADE OF EXPLORATION ON ALTERNATIVES IN INDIA: ASHISH KOTHARI

04/09/2024 ADITYA NIGAM LEAVE A COMMENT

Guest post by ASHISH KOTHARI

Abstract [1]

The multiple crises humanity confronts require fundamental shifts in how we relate to the Earth and to each other. This entails tackling the roots of these crises head-on, including the structures and relations of patriarchy, racism, colonialism, capitalism, statism, and anthropocentrism. This in turn needs to be done within the context of visions of the ideal society we want. This essay presents a process in India, Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluences), that has attempted for a decade to document, visibilise, network, and create collaborations amongst movements and groups involved in alternative approaches for justice, equity, ecological sustainability. It describes the process and its various components, the challenges and opportunities of bringing very diverse groups from different cultural contexts together, the potential of a bottom-up and participatory visioning process, and the excitement of attempting to bridge conventional traditional-modern, practitioner-intellectual, urban-rural, and other divides.

Keywords: Democracy; Visioning; Alternatives; Environment; Civil society

Introduction: The Making of Vikalp Sangam

A decade is not a short span of time – and yet, it is too short. These are the contrasting thoughts I have as I contemplate a process that I have been part of since its initiation, as I and my colleagues enter into a phase of reviewing whether it is on course to meeting the objectives it began with. This is Vikalp Sangam, or Alternatives Confluence, a national platform established in India in 2014.

Democracy Vikalp Sangam, School for Democracy, Rajasthan, October 2019

The process has old roots. At Kalpavriksh we have been working on 'alternatives' to top-down, exclusionary wildlife and biodiversity conservation, ecologically-destructive 'development', homogenized edu-

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cation, and centralized governance of the commons for many decades. [2] Other groups we have learnt from or collaborated with, have also been doing this in these and other fields – health, agriculture, social inequalities, arts, and more. There was therefore already a base of thinking and acting differently from the dominant system.

In 2011, I was at the Adivasi Academy in Tejgarh, Gujarat, talking to Ganesh Devy. As a linguist and activist-author, Devy had been active in the field of languages and culture, through exercises like the People's Linguistic Survey of India.[3] He had just organized a Bhasha Sangam (Language Confluence) at the Academy with over a thousand participants from a few hundred languages. When he spoke about this, it struck me that perhaps we could consider such a gathering for all those working on alternatives to mainstream systems. I asked him what he thought of a 'Vikalp Sangam'; he was immediately enthusiastic and offered to host it at the Academy. Back in Pune, I quickly drew up a note and sent it to him to take the idea further.

For a number of reasons that gathering never took place, but the idea had been seeded. Kalpavriksh began talking to several other organisations and networks – was such an initiative needed? Would it work? The overwhelming response we got was – yes! So, in early 2014 we called a few civil society groups to a brainstorming session in Pune, and the seed was firmly planted in very receptive soil.

Meanwhile the idea of a website to host stories of alternative initiatives across India had been mentioned at a Learning Societies Unconference in early 2013; the IT group Thoughtworks offered to help set it up gratis. By early 2014, Vikalp Sangam's website[4] was ready to be launched, and it was announced with a 'flash dance' at a gathering of the Economics of Happiness network in Bengaluru in March. Work was already underway to have the first physical confluence later that year; Timbaktu Collective, one of the Pune meeting participants, hosted it in October.

Since then, Vikalp Sangam has involved holding about 30 physical confluences and several online dialogues, documenting or visibilising hundreds of stories in various forms, bringing together nearly 100 movements, organisations and networks, and much else. [5] This article takes a look at this decade, reflecting on what VS has managed to do, and what it has not. These reflections are mine, not necessarily those of anyone else in the process, though they are of course informed by the views of many other active participants. Given my close involvement with the process, the account is necessarily biased, and even though I have tried to bring in as much self-criticism as possible, it may well be kinder to the process than if an independent critical observer were to attempt a similar description and analysis.

Objectives

The search for radical alternatives emanates from a sense of disquiet about the politics of protest. As members or supporters of people's movements, we have been fighting entrenched structures and relations of power – including patriarchy, capitalism, statism, casteism, racism, and human-centrism – that are ecologically devastating, economically iniquitous and socially disruptive.[6] But even as we continue this struggle with all the combined might we can muster, and get better and sharper at saying 'no', we also need to come up with what we are saying 'yes' to. Resistance that attempts to save existing ways of life, in so far as these remain relevant to our search for a better world, is very much part of how to say 'yes'. In this sense it is also part of 'alternatives'[7], especially when it demonstrates that for a large part of human history, living in relative harmony with and within nature has been the norm and only now having to be considered 'alternative'. But resistance is not enough. Several traditional ways of life have their own inequities and discriminations, based on gender, caste, ethnicity, ability and others. Additionally, these ways of life are not always able to meet basic needs or legitimate aspirations, due to adverse policies, demographic changes, and the perspectives of newer generations. This is illustrated by the mass distress amongst small-scale or artisanal farming, fishing and pastoralist communities, and amongst traditional craftspersons.[8] Addressing such issues requires constructive, creative alternatives, derived from both traditional and newer concepts and practices.

So, the VS initiative started with questions like: What is our vision of a better future? What are our answers to questions of poverty, hunger, energy insecurity, inequality? How do we meet human aspirations without trashing the earth? Are there truly sustainable pathways of 'development' or 'well-being'? What structures and relations can re-

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place patriarchy, capitalism, statism, casteism, racism, colonialism, anthropocentrism?

Answers to these questions have been attempted for many generations and in many parts of the world. 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.[9] Social movements have moved decisively to gain a number of national-level legislations providing a range of human rights – to information, education, food, employment, forest resources, child and women's empowerment, health; or more globally, UN declarations on human rights, or the rights of Indigenous Peoples, farmers, fishers.[10]

But attempts to bring these different movements and initiatives together, across sectors and throughout India's varied geographies and cultures, are scarce. Sustainable farming groups do not regularly link with the community health movements, even though both recognize that a crucial part of preventive health strategies is to have access to nutritional, organic food. Many environmental groups do not even think they have common cause with groups struggling on the rights of women and the differently abled, and even less so with Dalit movements, despite the growing evidence that environmental problems affect these sections often more than others,[11] and conversely that their empowerment can be a powerful force for ecological revival and conservation (such as for instance in the case of the Chipko movement, or the Dalit women farmers' agricultural revolution through Deccan Development Society)[12]. The fact that we all are victims, in one way or the other, of the structures and forces mentioned above, and that we need to find common pathways out of the intersecting crises we face, has only recently begun to sink in.

Another important current context is that the forces of injustice and unsustainability are trying to convince us that they have the answers, and we need not worry. Band-aids like recycling, carbon trading, 'net-zero' technofixes, even 'sustainable development', 'inclusive growth' and 'green economy', have substantial support of powerful governments and corporations precisely because they are more about sustaining their own power and profits, with a nice green façade.[13] But they do not address the roots of the crises.

What has worked, and what has not?

With the above context in mind, the VS initiative attempts to (a) help document and understand ongoing practical and conceptual systemic alternatives in all fields of human endeavor; (b) make these more visible and do outreach to inspire and enable more such initiatives; (c) provide a platform for people working in these to come together for sharing, learning, and collaborating, especially across sectors and more holistically; (d) be a forum for collective visioning of a better future and pathways to it; and (e) contribute to the possibility of a critical political mass that can, through advocacy, more effectively challenge and change the forces mentioned above.

A self-critical assessment of what the VS process has achieved or not in these five objectives, is offered here. This is necessarily limited to my own knowledge and experience of the process, and inputs from some colleagues.[14]

i. Documentation

Alternative initiatives in India suffer from a serious paucity of documentation; consequently, perhaps the majority of them are not known outside of the people engaged in them. Documentation in various forms has been one of the focus areas for VS since its inception. This has included commissioning or requesting short stories on alternative initiatives, by journalists and researcher-writers, or by people within the initiatives themselves; films on such initiatives by professional film-makers; detailed case studies of specific sites which have much to offer in terms of lessons and processes; and other forms.

Of special interest is the documentation that was carried out by VS constituents in the COVID pandemic period of 2020-22. Noting that while health and economic life was under severe stress across India, in

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some rural communities and urban neighbourhoods, the situation was better. About 70 examples of community or collective resilience, were published in a series named 'Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People'.[15] Most volumes were also translated into multiple Indian languages for wide accessibility; and at a time when on-site filming was not possible, online video interviews and other means were used to produce shorts highlighting these stories.

ii. Visibilisation and outreach

Another of VS's main objectives, that of making alternative initiatives visible to a wide section of the public, has been met in several ways. In the last decade, the VS website has published nearly 2000 stories and perspective pieces, and over 100 films. Additionally, its repository of resources has been building up continually[16], and it regularly announces programmes that are relevant in any part of the country.

A word about the selection of material to be uploaded to the website is in order here. The VS website is focused on transformative alternatives, i.e. those that are not simply reformative tinkering around within the system. The team handling the website uses, as a thumb rule, the VS Alternatives Framework, and its Flower of Transformation (more on this below, under 'Collective visioning'). In the process it is very likely that stories, perspectives, events and resources that are in the fuzzy dividing line between 'transformation' and 'reform' would also figure; the policy is that unless very clearly something merely reinforces (or worsens) the status quo, it would be carried if it is providing solutions to crucial problems.

One of the continuing weaknesses of the website is its predominant coverage in English. Many attempts have been made to diversify, such as stories and films in Hindi mentioned above, but other languages continue to be marginal. Language translation facilities have improved only in the last 2-3 years.

Other outreach methods used by VS including a mobile poster exhibition in English and Hindi, depicting alternative initiatives across many sectors; these have also been reproduced as a 20-page booklet, for wider distribution. Documented stories, case studies, and films are also used for physical or online presentations at schools, colleges, and other institutions. Many of the films have been entered into festivals, some winning awards, and promoted through platforms like YouTube. Graphic novels are also being produced.

In the last 2-3 years, VS's 'social media' (SM) presence has also been significantly expanded. Documented materials, webinars, statements are promoted through various SM handles, and live online sessions organized on relevant occasions like 'World xyz Day' (xyz = Wetlands, Human Rights, Environment, Bicycle, Women's, Indigenous Peoples, etc), the introduction of a law on the rights of gig workers in Rajasthan co-organised with Jan Awaaz[17], and others. As of June 2024, VS's Instagram account has 2700+ followers, Twitter 1500+, Facebook 2800, and LinkedIn 600+, and these are steadily rising. Unfortunately, VS's outreach to mainstream media, print and online, has remained limited and inconsistent, due to difficulties in accessing relevant contact points and convincing them to provide coverage.

iii. Sharing and Collaboration

Most important of VS's activities for sharing and collaboration, are physical Sangams – confluences or gatherings of people in different parts of the country. Typically, these Sangams are of 3-4 days, consisting of 50 to 100 people from movements, groups, and personal initiatives on alternatives. They take place regionally or thematically. As of early 2024, nearly 30 Sangams have been held, including regional ones in or for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Ladakh, Kachchh, Kerala, and western Himalaya; and thematic ones on Energy, Food, Youth, Democracy, Traditional Worldviews, Alternative Economies, Health, Wellbeing and Justice, Traditional Governance, and Peace in Central India.[18]

The Sangams focus predominantly on alternatives, with a mix of serious discussions on key topics relevant to the region or theme (including cross-sectorally, on which more below), practical activities (such as theatre, art, weaving, mudblock building, learning crafts and so on), displays and sales of alternative products, exhibits, and trips to relevant alternative initiatives in the area. For instance, the Energy Sangam in 2016 included a visit to Dharnai in Bihar, where a solar-based microgrid has been made to light up the village; and the Traditional Governance Sangam in 2024 enabled participants to see the health, organic farming and livelihoods work of Tribal Health Institute in Tamil Nadu.[19] At the Maharashtra Sangam, participants got a lesson in using the charkha, from schoolchildren of the local Anand Niketan School which uses Gandhi's Nai Taleem principles for teaching. One of the three VS events organized in Ladakh was focused on food and agriculture, and involved a *mela* (festival) serving traditional local cuisine.

Nas (Barley) festival participants, VS process Ladhakh, September 2022

Of the few thousand people that have participated so far in Sangams, the spectrum has been wide: civil society organisations, members of farming, pastoral, crafts-based, adivasi or non-adivasi communities, professionals in various fields. Members of political parties or government officials have joined a few in their individual capacity, as have those from businesses (mostly of the alternative kind). Gender balance has not been ideal, but at all Sangams women have participated actively. Adivasi and Dalit presence too is not as much as one would have liked, but they have indeed been able to make themselves heard at some of the Sangams, such as on Traditional Worldviews, Traditional Governance, and Adivasi Youth. Participation of members of LGBTQ+ movements has only recently become more pronounced, though inadequate. Industrial and service sector workers have been almost absent.

One of the questions under debate is whether to invite people from the corridors of power, those who are seen as 'the enemy' including corporates? In general, the feeling in the initial phase of the VS process was that it is important to come to some common understanding even amongst people who are of a similar broad political spectrum. In this sense it is a fragile space that is being nurtured. Now, however, with a decade over, it should be time to open up to a wider spectrum including those with contrary or opposing views, as long as this is in the spirit of dialogue.

While a report is generated from each Sangam (as far as possible in both local language and English), most of the initial Sangams have also been filmed, with the Centre for Education and Documentation (CED) or other film-makers faithfully recording almost every minute. The Ladakh Sangam on food and agriculture even has its own full film.[20]

A key aspect of the Sangam design is the encouragement of cross-sectoral exchange and sharing, in an attempt to break the 'siloisation' many groups are cocooned within. I recall vividly a discussion circle at the Tamil Nadu Sangam where a member of the civil society group Nirangal talked about issues of sexuality and discrimination against various genders, with other participants listening wide-eyed and later expressing that they had never thought about these aspects. Or a member of Ektha (working on 'disability' and a wheelchair user himself), asking at the same Sangam whether any of us felt we were free of disabilities, and asserting that the so-called disabled were as abled (or not) as any of us, albeit in different ways. Most vivid was the interaction amongst indigenous people from Nagaland, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, nomadic pastoralists of Kachchh and Uttarakhand, and adivasis of Maharashtra and Karnataka, , at the Indigenous and Community Worldviews Vikalp Sangam in 2023 and the Traditional Governance Vikalp Sangam in 2024.[21]

Amongst the early 'earthy'[22] outcomes of such exchanges is that the wildlife conservation group Snow Leopard Conservancy India (a co-host of the Ladakh Sangam), recognizing the connection between wildlife and other sectors, organised (with Ladakh Ecological Development Group) its own mini-Sangam on agriculture, food, and health. People are often hungry for ideas on what they can do and how they can do things, and the Sangams help such people to take their search wider and deeper. One of the more hopeful outcomes of the first VS on Youth held in 2017, was that several subsequent Sangams and related processes have had a focus on youth.[23] A small gathering of groups from across the western Himalaya (Jammu and Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh) in 2016 resulted in a series of Sangams, culminating in the formalization of a Western Himalaya VS forum that is now taking forward activities on its own.[24]

Participants of the various Sangams are also linked up through an elist (which by now contains several hundred people), on which news, stories, events, analyses, and conversations are shared. Occasionally this has lively discussions; for instance, in 2017, one relating to a proposed *Mohabbat ka Karawan*, which aims to visit families of those affected by the horrific 'lynchings' of Muslims that have shaken India's conscience in the middle of 2017.[25] The VS process and its list proved useful as many members spread the message of this *Karawan*, or planned to join it, as also given critical inputs on how to make it more meaningful and inclusive.

However, weak follow-up has significantly hindered the ability to learn about such collaborations (or other impacts of the Sangams). The VS model relies on the co-hosts and participants of each Sangam to take the process forward. Though it is very likely that some such follow up is happening (indicated by stray reporting back), it has been hard to get participants to tell the network about it! Also, the elist through which participants are supposed to keep in touch, is predominantly run in English. This excludes many non-English speakers; and as a written medium, it also keeps out those who use only oral communications. These issues have figured in discussions to review the VS process, and one of the attempted solutions is the establishment of a VS Facilitation Team that can keep in touch with each other and with all constituents of the VS process more regularly. But additional, effective solutions need to be found; a useful tool would be a regular newsletter connecting all the VS constituents, in various languages, but this has not yet been possible.

iv. Collective visioning

One of the tragedies of modern life is that we are scared to daydream. Utopian ideas are shot down as 'unrealistic' and 'impractical', especially in activist-academic-development circles. Of course, by definition utopias are 'unrealistic', but does that make them useless? The continuing hold of a Marx or a Gandhi or a Bob Dylan or a Rosa Luxemburg or a Kabir or religious ideals in the public mind and heart, suggests that something deep in us needs utopias. So, is there a way to integrate the exigencies of our daily existence with a conscious visioning of the future, whether we are a struggling worker or an activist trying to make sense of the disasters around us? A visioning that could help guide our practical actions?

The fourth of VS's objectives, *collective visioning*, has been perhaps its 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 Mohandas Gandhi, Karl Marx, Babasaheb Ambedkar, Ravindranath Tagore, Savitribai Phule, Birsa Munda. A recent webinar series, 'From Yesterday to Tomorrow', features conversations about the current relevance of these and other figures.[26]

Most of academia and much of civil society, especially those belonging to the urban and middle classes, assume that 'expertise' is located only in elites. The written word dominates the oral; increasingly, the digital trumps the written too. The farmer, the pastoralist, the fisherperson, the industrial worker, the craftsperson ... these are considered 'practitioners', whereas those who study them are the 'intellectuals' and 'theorists'.[27] In India this is 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 conceptualization.

Another possible reason for the neglect of 'folk' ideologies and concepts is that, overwhelmingly, governmental processes of planning 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 in-volve forest-dwellers; educational planning does not involve students.

The VS process tries to consciously enable people from communities, both rural and urban, in various activities. At the first physical Sangam 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 and concepts expressed by 'ordinary' people in communities and movements. This document, referred to as the Framework note, and translated into several Indian languages, has since then been discussed by over 1000 people. The current (7th) avatar of the note includes key elements from these interactions, and will continue evolving over time. [28]

One of the most important parts of this visioning is the search for clarity on what is an alternative. This is crucial because so many corporations are greenwashing their products as 'natural' or 'ecofriendly', governments are claiming to be climate-friendly, and many people seem to think that simply directing their garbage for recycling makes them a responsible citizen. The VS Framework note clarifies that an initiative is alternative when it helps transform the fundamental conditions of inequity and unsustainability, including the structures of patriarchy, capitalism, statism, racism, casteism, and anthropocentrism. The note contains sections on what constitutes an alternative; what are the various spheres of radical alternatives; how these translate in various human sectors; what are the fundamental values and principles underlying these; and what strategies are necessary to get towards a just and sustainable future.

As an analytical tool, the Framework note has spawned an 'Alternatives Transformation Format', to be used by actors within an initiative where transformations towards justice and sustainability are being attempted. [29] It enables them to see how holistic, coherent, and comprehensive their initiative is, where they are lacking, and what more they can do. The Format was first used in a study of transformations in the handloom weaving community of Kachchh, as part of a global project 'Academic-Activist Co-generation of Knowledge on Environmental Justice' (ACKnowl-EJ).[30]

Several organisations within and outside the VS process, including some universities, are using the VS Framework note and the ATF for critical self-reflection or for action research. At the Kachchh Sangam in 2016, there was self-questioning about the economic and ecological sustainability of livelihood approaches that help transform the economies of craftspersons (and especially women), but rely on distant markets to do so. Undergraduate students of Azim Premji University in Bengaluru used the ATF to assess various aspects of their campus. A research project on 'Green Futures' headed by Ruskilde University is using the Flower of Transformation tool embedded in the VS vision as part of its analytical framework to understand transformations on the ground in South Africa, India and Denmark, in the period 2022-26.

The VS Framework envisages rescuing democracy from its currently dominant liberal form, with power centred on political representatives and bureaucrats, and participation centred on intense electoral competitiveness, transforming it to swaraj, or radical democracy. In this, communities grounded in their own reality are at the centre of power, and political relations are changed from 'power-over' (domination) to 'power-to' or 'power-with' (used for collective good). Decision-making is also respectful of ecological and cultural connections, in bioregional or ecoregional landscapes. This is what helps us reimagine political boundaries within and between nation-states. And this goes hand-in-hand with economic democratization, struggles for social justice and equity, sustaining cultural and knowledge diversity, and sustaining the earth that sustains us.

Possibly VS's most important component, depicted as the core of the Flower, 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 such as 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, and networking to achieve scale. This is happening for instance with regard to sustainable, biologically diverse agriculture, or decentralized water harvesting, or more direct forms of democracy.

A related ambitious process to envision India in 2100 from a large range of perspectives was initiated in 2015, and has resulted in a book with 35 essays many of which balance a 'dream' of an ideal society along with grounded assessment of possibilities and pathways.[31]

Interestingly, in the Sangam space, conventional ideological barriers seem to become more porous. 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.

There may be several possible reasons for this porosity of ideological boundaries. First, participants coming for Sangams are oriented towards being more open, more receptive, more respectful of diversity. Second, there is a *positivity* of a discussion on alternatives as contrasted to the *negativity* of a discussion focusing on problems and criticism. This may lend itself to greater openness, more dialogue than debate, and more willingness to engage in constructive rather than destructive criticism (a spirit that is explicitly emphasized at the beginning of each Sangam). Third, and possibly most important, experiences from the ground are impossible to fit into neat 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-box ideologies. She would much rather not be classified into being part of a Marxist, or a Gandhian, or an Ambedkarite revolution, but perhaps all rolled into one ... and more!

The ability to transcend ideological and other differences does not mean that differences of opinion are not expressed. For instance, at the Maharashtra Sangam in 2015, one participant expressed strong disagreement about the language in the draft VS Framework, on rights of nature. Since all other participants were in agreement with the text, but the sole dissenting note was also to be respected, an appropriate footnote was put into the Framework note.

As with ideological boundaries, the VS process has also spawned discussion on and visioning of more porous political boundaries, that can help re-establish ecological, cultural and economic flows disrupted by current hard borders between nation-states in South Asia, and between states/districts within India. At the Democracy VS held in Octo-

ber 2019, a proposal was made to initiate a process on 'bioregionalism', for this purpose. The South Asia Bioregionalism Working Group got going in 2020, and has since then come out with several reports documenting and visioning bioregional or biocultural connections across political borders.[32]

v. Advocacy

The fifth objective of creating a *political critical mass* is intended to influence the structures of power towards progressive policy changes, as also create greater capacity amongst people to practice alternative transformation. At several Sangams, declarations have included policy recommendations. For instance, at the National Food Sangam in 2016, participants issued a declaration in favour of community-based sustainable agriculture, and opposing attempts to introduce genetically modified mustard. Over the last few years, several statements have been issued in support of local struggles for environmental and social justice, including in the context of Constitutional changes in the status of Kashmir and Ladakh, attempts to communalise life in Lakshadweep, and government interference in Auroville, the need for urgent action to heal the ethnic rifts in Manipur. During the COVID pandemic phase, two statements were issued about what the government's response should be, how people on the ground are responding and what lessons can be learnt from these in building back into a resilient society.[33] The 2nd of these built on the documentation of about 70 stories of community resilience in the face of COVID, mentioned above.

A regular focus of advocacy has been Ladakh, beginning with recommendations sent to the Ladakh Hill Council as a follow up to the Sangam organized there in 2015. When Ladakh's status was changed from being a region within Jammu & Kashmir state into an independent Union Territory, but under the direct control of New Delhi, local residents have been seeking Constitutional safeguards such as statehood and inclusion under the 6th Schedule. VS has mobilized national level support for this, through statements, webinars in which Ladakhis have been able to put their case across to a national audience, and other means.[34]

Perhaps the most ambitious attempt at advocacy has been the 'People's Manifestos' issued in 2019 and 2024 by the VS General Assembly (earlier called the Core Group).[35] These are detailed recommendations and demands on the full range of economic, social, cultural, political and ecological issues facing India. They are intended to urge political parties to consider these issues in their poll campaigns, but also as a template to use for other occasions such as state elections, advocacy with local to state governments, and for civil society to use as guidance for its own actions. Building on the 2019 national level Manifesto, VS groups active in the Himalaya also issued one for the Western Himalaya, in time for relevant state elections.[36]

Recognising that there are several other national or regional platforms that VS needs to align with towards the objective of a more critical political mass, in 2016 it initiated a *Sangam of Sangams.* The idea was to bring together movements, groups and individuals working on basic political, social, cultural transformation towards a more just society. Three meetings of this process were organized till 2017. However, both the VS people who were anchoring this and those from other groups, could not sustain the energy behind it; additionally, other platforms such as Convergence of Movements appeared, and seemed more capable of mass mobilisation. The Sangam of Sangams process ceased functioning soon thereafter. VS continued associating with national networks like the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM). In the last few years, VS has joined processes like Jan Sarokar, which have a similar objective to the Sangam of Sangams, though more specifically focused on the parliamentary and electoral processes. More recently it also entered into an alliance with the Campaign to Defend Nature and People (CDNP).

The VS Structure: fit to purpose?

The VS process is not a project, it is not an organization, it is a network or platform. Its relatively informal structure has a national General Assembly (consisting of over 85 movements and organisations as of mid-2024). For the first few years its hub was Kalpavriksh, but the coordinating and anchoring roles have partially decentralized into a Facilitation Team of about 20 people representing about 10 member organisations. Each Sangam is organised by one or more hosts, usually including members of the General Assembly, and others coalescing around them. As a process or a platform, VS is open to be used by anyone who broadly agrees with the values and principles in its Frame-work note. Some of the sub-processes within it, such as the Youth VS and the West Himalaya VS process, have run over multiple years with their own coordinating teams.

While there has been a move towards decentralized functioning, there remains a significant dependence on Kalpavriksh for initiating or holding things together. Greater decentralization needs to be encouraged.

There has also been an attempt to live some of the principles of the VS process, in its internal operations. For instance, the physical Sangams have a set of norms that includes the need to avoid long speeches and enable participation of all (with special focus on those who may be hesitant to speak), avoiding plastics and other wasteful products, maximizing the serving of local cuisines, and creating a safe space in various ways including no tolerance for sexual or other forms of harassment or discrimination. Other processes to enable the best possible internal dynamics, such as grievance redressal, are also being evolved.

Global Footprint

The VS process has had a visible global footprint. Based on its model, a gathering of several groups and individuals working on resistance to destructive development and/or alternatives in the middle-eastern region was held in 2017 in Beirut, Lebanon, on the sidelines of a meeting of the ACKnowl-EJ Project (mentioned above). Before that, at an International Degrowth conference in Budapest in 2016, I had proposed a Global Alternatives Forum, bringing together movements for radical transformation around the world. This idea gained ground over the next 2-3 years, and in 2019 the Global Tapestry of Alternatives was launched.[37] VS is one of GTA's 'weavers' (with other weavers in Colombia, Mexico, and South-East Asia), involved in mutual learning and collective action with other constituents.

In February 2024, a session was held at the World Social Forum in Kathmandu, to start discussions on a possible South Asia Alternatives Confluence process. Outputs of the VS process, are now being used well beyond India, for example as readings in courses in several universities.

Conclusion: Is Participatory Knowledge Generation and Visioning Possible?

The VS initiative attempts to be a celebration of the ability of 'ordinary' people to innovate, persevere, collaborate, and find solutions to crises. It demonstrates 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 – at different stages of life, in diverse cultures and livelihoods, at different levels of learning and education, in nature or on the farm or in classrooms.

In the early 2000s, many of the current members of the VS, were involved in a nation-wide exercise to prepare India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). Over 50,000 people participated in discussions, public hearings, rallies, fairs and festivals, seminars, walks, to help prepare over 100 local, state, regional, and thematic plans, culminating in the national one. Unfortunately, at the last moment the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, which had commissioned the exercise to Kalpavriksh to coordinate, rejected its outputs (and three years later produced an apology of an action plan).[38] But the *process* created a momentum that many local communities and groups carried forward, e.g. through a significant expanse in food sovereignty and biodiversity documentation exercises by Dalit women farmers of the Deccan Development Society in Telangana, or biodiversity celebrations and enterprise-based livelihoods amongst women by Vanastree of Uttara Kannada, Karnataka.[39] The large body of information and analysis it produced, was made publicly available.[40]

For us the major lesson was that even as the final products are important, they are not more important than the process by which those are produced. The more democratic, participatory, diverse, and exciting one can make the process, the more the likelihood of at least some aims being met, and unanticipated benefits being incurred. Also, that even as some of our activities may be oriented at trying to influence state policy, ultimately it is peoples' empowerment that will carry forward transformation, and the process of meaningful participation is itself enormously empowering. It is these lessons that have been carried forward in the VS experiment: create forums for people to meet, share, jointly create, envision, transmit further, and base their advocacy on, and trust that something good will come out of it.

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NOTES

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[1]This article builds on two previous pieces: Kothari 2019 and Kothari 2021. Some text has been picked up directly from these. Inputs for this piece have been received from Sujatha Padmanabhan and Aanchal.

[2] A detailed history of Kalpavriksh's first 40 years is available at: https://kalpavriksh.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Kalpavrikshs-history-note_final-version_compressed.pdf

[3] https://www.peopleslinguisticsurvey.org/

[4] www.vikalpsangam.org

[5] For a description of the process, and reports of the various gatherings held under it, pl. see https://vikalpsangam.org/about-us/.

[6] There is considerable literature on these impacts; for a detailed consolidation and analysis, see Shrivastava and Kothari, 2012.

[7] I will come back later to the question of 'what is an alternative', as described in the VS Framework note.

[8] These impacts are spelt out in detail in Shrivastava and Kothari, 2012; see in particular chapters 3 and 6.

[9] See, for a review, Mansata et al, 2017. Networks like Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture, and National Coalition for Natural Farming, are providing broad platforms for sharing experiences and joint advocacy.

[10] See, for instance, Roy et al 2017; Gopalakrishnan, undated; http://www.righttofoodcampaign.in; https://ecosoc.un.org/en

[11] On varying perspectives on the relationship between women and environment, see Shiva 1988 and Agarwal 1994; on the neglect of Dalit issues by environmentalists, see Sharma 2017.

[12] For several examples of Dalit, women's, Adivasi (Indigenous), and other marginalized sections mobilizing to protect the environment, pl. see www.vikalpsangam.org.

[13] For essays on these and other conventional or superficial approaches, pl. see section 2 of Kothari et al 2019.

[14] A colleague in Kalpavriksh is putting together a 'institutional memory' of the process, which is likely to be much more comprehensive and rounded.

[15] https://vikalpsangam.org/article/extraordinary-work-of-ordinary-people-in-multi-language-translation/. Taking a cue from this, a more global set of stories of COVID-time resilience was recorded by the Global Tapestry of Alternatives, see https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/reports:pandemic:index

[16] Note that the Resources section of the website is not restricted to India, while the Stories, Perspectives, and Events sections are predominantly from or pertaining to India.

[17] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JunVhxDVF90

[18] Reports, video clips, and other materials generated at these Sangams are available at https://vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-reports/ and http://www.vikalpsangam.org/resources/.

[19] Stories or case studies on these and other related initiatives are available at www.vikalpsangam.org.

[20] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SijjGVRf8nk

[21] https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Indigenous-and-Community-Worldviews-Vikalp-Sangam.docx-2.pdf; (as of the time of writing, the report of the Traditional Governance Sangam is not yet ready).

[22] I prefer using this word to 'concrete'!

[23] https://vikalpsangam.org/youth-vikalp-sangam/

[24] https://vikalpsangam.org/western-himalaya-vikalp-sangam/

[25] www.karwanemohabbat.in; www.facebook.com/karwanemohabbat.

[26] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhyO55a-GFjU&list=PLVGJfYVd8JMUq1ZjttDZcAQe1kW1RUVK0

[27] 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.

[28] https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Alternatives-framework-7th-avatar-post-VSCG-for-public-circulation-17.11.2023.pdf

[29] http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternatives_transformation_framework_revised_20.2.2017.pdf

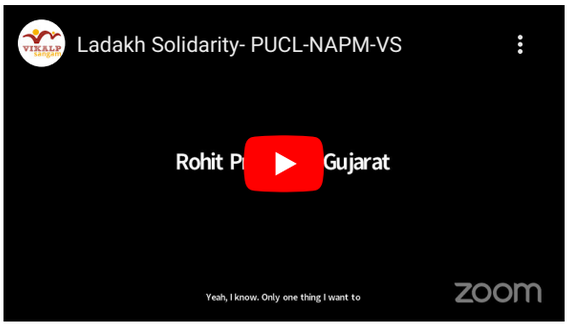
[30] See: https://vikalpsangam.org/article/sandhani-weaving-transformations-in-kachchh-india-key-findings-and-analysis/

[31] Kothari and Joy, 2017.

[32] https://vikalpsangam.org/south-asia-bioregionalism-working-group/

[33] 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/ and; https://vikalpsangam.org/article/in-responding-to-covid-crisis-prioritise-human-and-environmental-health-learning-lessons-from-first-wave/

[34] For recordings of two webinars, see: https://www.youtube.com/live/4uLUBPiaVBg?feature=shared and



[35] See: https://vikalpsangam.org/article/peoples-manifesto-for-a-just-equitable-and-sustainable-india-2019/ and https://vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-general-assembly-to-release-peoples-manifesto-2024/

[36] See: https://vikalpsangam.org/article/a-peoples-manifesto-for-the-western-himalayas-mountain-region-april-2019/

[37] https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org

[38] Kothari and Kohli 2009

[39] See 'Deccan Andhra' substate biodiversity action plan at: http://www.kalpavriksh.org/index.php/conservation-livelihoods/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.

[40] 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.

[40] Excerpted from: https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Alternatives-framework-7th-avatar-post-VSCG-for-public-circulation-17.11.2023.pdf

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