

# Degrowth in Movement(s)

Exploring pathways for transformation

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## Chapter 17



Community Radio mobiliser of the Deccan Development Society in  
Telangana (Image: Author)

## Radical Ecological Democracy: Reflections from the South on Degrowth

**Ashish Kothari**

Ashish is a member of *Kalpavriksh*, which has been active on environment and development issues in India since 1979. He has been on the steering committee of the ICCA Consortium, a global network of working in territories and areas conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities; has been on the boards of *Greenpeace International* and *Greenpeace India*; and is a member of *Beyond Development*, a global working group set up by the *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*. *Kalpavriksh* currently coordinates the *Vikalp Sangam* (Alternatives Confluence) process in India, under which principles and values related to ecoswaraj are being evolved. It also manages the RED e-list and website, and

has helped initiate the Global Tapestry of Alternatives. Ashish was also co-coordinator of a global activist-academic research project on environmental justice, ACKnowl-EJ.

### **1. Ecoswaraj as a response to the social and ecological bankruptcy of the currently dominant development and governance system**

The multiple crises that humanity is facing are becoming increasingly visible: in the form of disasters related to ecological damage, the stark inequalities between a tiny minority of ultra-rich and the vast numbers of desperately poor, the health epidemics related to both deprivation and affluence, mass refugee migrations in many parts of the world, and the scarcity of several once-abundant resources. Countries like China and India are fast joining the already-industrialized nations in putting even more stress on the planet, or in colonizing less powerful regions of the earth. In such a situation, there is an urgent quest for alternative pathways for well-being that are sustainable, equitable and just.

There is no doubt that as a species we have to downsize if we are to respect the limits; not only for ourselves but —just as importantly— for the millions of other species that co-inhabit the earth with us. It is timely, therefore, to talk of degrowth in the context of humanity as a whole, and most certainly in the context of the Global North which is overconsuming and overdumping.

But is degrowth, or the reduction of material and energy uses for human use, a valid and viable strategy for the Global South, i.e. countries and populations (including some in industrialized countries) that have not reached an excessive or even acceptable level of prosperity? Perhaps not. What is needed is for these regions and peoples to find their own home-grown visions and pathways of change. I will talk here of one such example: *ecoswaraj* or *radical ecological democracy (RED)*, which is emerging from practical and conceptual processes in India.

India currently sees itself as entering into the elite league of economic superpowers. Along with China, it has enjoyed the world's highest growth rates in the last couple of decades. But this has come at a horrendous cost to the environment, and to hundreds of millions of people who are directly dependent on the environment.<sup>1</sup> It has also created an increasing schism between the rich and poor, so that 1% of the population now owns nearly 70% of the country's wealth, while at least two-thirds of its people remain deprived of basic needs, and employment scarcity is staring at a hundred million young people who have recently joined the workforce.

The problem lies partly in the growth fetish. An economic policy that assumes that growth will magically translate into the poor rising above the poverty line and everyone getting productive jobs is fundamentally flawed. It ignores the fact that many of the gains of growth could be cornered by the already rich, that mechanization may offset any new job generation, and that inflation may make things even worse for much of the population. This is compounded by the increasing withdrawal of the state from basic services (the trend being to privatize them) and the serious inefficiencies and corruption in whatever service delivery that still exists. All of this is built on top of a deeply hierarchical society, with unthinkable oppression and exploitation of "lower" castes, women, and the landless.

Ecological suicide is as much a part of the history of "development" as are deprivation and inequalities. The global story of humanity crossing several planetary boundaries is mirrored in India. Two reports, not from environmental activists but from the very institutions that otherwise champion unbridled growth, have admitted as much. The *Chamber of Indian Industries* (along with the *Global Footprint Network*) said in 2008 that India is already consuming twice as much as its natural resources can sustain. The *World Bank* reported in 2013 that environmental damage (based on a few parameters such as impact on people's



health) is knocking 5.7% off of GDP growth. If all impacts of such damage were to be accounted for, even using the limited methodology of environmental economics, we would possibly be in a negative growth phase.

Communities and citizens in India are, however, not taking all of this lying down. At any given moment in the last couple of decades, there have been several hundred resistance movements, from a few families refusing to part with their land for the industry, to thousands of people protesting a mega-hydro project; from *dalit* (so-called “untouchables,” the lowest in the caste hierarchy) and women’s demands for basic human rights, to students protesting the decline in public support for educational institutions. Simultaneously, people are also coming up with innovative, positive transformations in their lives, on their own or with support from civil society organizations and occasionally even governments. It is from both the resistance and the reconstruction (*sangharsh* and *nirman*) initiatives that the idea of ecoswaraj or radical ecological democracy (RED) has emerged.

The term *swaraj* can be loosely translated as “self-rule” — though it is much more than just a governance concept— and refers to a combination of individual and collective autonomy, mutual responsibility, rights, and responsibilities. Although older than him, the concept was popularized by Gandhi as part of India’s freedom struggle against British colonial power, and is referred to in his seminal book *Hind Swaraj* as a civilizational ethos comprising the elements mentioned above. I have added “eco” to more explicitly integrate the principle of ecological wisdom and resilience into this political and cultural ethos (though it is already implicit in Gandhi’s formulation). Ecoswaraj or RED envisions a society in which all people and communities are empowered to be part of decisions affecting their lives (radical or direct democracy) in ways that are ecologically sensitive and socially equitable. Below I will further explain this concept and

refer to its various key elements.

## **2. Ecoswaraj or RED is an emerging framework for communities and organizations exploring alternative visions and pathways**

In the drylands of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in southern India, small farmers – including *dalit* women<sup>2</sup> – of the *Deccan Development Society* have transformed their lives by reviving organic farming using their own seeds, achieving full food sovereignty, collectivizing resources and labor, securing basic rights, forming cooperatives or companies to negotiate better returns, forming community-run media (films, radio), and throwing off the traditional social stigmas associated with them. In the forested landscapes of Maharashtra in central India, several communities in Gadchiroli & Chandrapur districts have taken back control over their surrounding forests, initiated sustainable harvesting of bamboo and other forest produce, converted the earnings into enhanced energy, livelihoods, and food security, and in at least one village (Mendha-Lekha), turned all private lands back into the commons. City-level or national associations in Pune, Bangalore, Delhi and elsewhere are fighting for the right of hawkers, rickshaw-pullers, waste pickers, and other marginalized sections to spaces and services of the city, and enhanced conditions for livelihood and living. Learning and educational institutions such as the *Adivasi Academy* in the indigenous regions of the west Indian state of Gujarat, and *SECMOL* in the high-altitude region of Ladakh, provide opportunities that – unlike mainstream education – enable students to remain connected with their cultural and ecological roots while also learning modern subjects and skills.

These are just a very few examples of communities, government agencies, businesses and individuals showing ecologically sensitive, socially equitable pathways to food and water security, enhanced livelihoods and jobs, nature and

natural resource conservation, manufacturing and services, social (including gender) justice, and other sectors of economy and society. For these purposes, a range of alternative media, arts, and other aspects of human creativity are being pressed into service. And it is not only those in desperate situations or crises that are acting. Increasingly, the middle classes in some cities are also asserting their desire to live more responsibly, e.g. by mobilizing to revive urban wetlands, moving towards full recycling of their waste and decentralized water harvesting and by asserting their right to be a part of city planning through participatory budgeting.

There is not the space to describe any of the above in detail, and I and others have done so in several publications elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Of course, these initiatives are not perfect (for instance, equity for traditionally unprivileged groups is weak in many), there are huge gaps in coverage, and for the most part they are small and scattered. But they increasingly show the potential of alternatives, and several have demonstrated larger spread by influencing policy changes and networking. For instance, over a dozen Indian states now have policies or programs to support organic farming (even the central government included it in its 2016 budget for the first time), undoubtedly influenced by the examples demonstrated by farmers and by the increasing urban demand for healthy food. Similarly, grassroots successes in renewable energy have prompted governments to significantly enhance financial support for it, though often in flawed ways (e.g. letting them be controlled by large corporations).

Having visited, documented, or supported several such initiatives, and having been a part of resistance movements in the last 40 years, I believe that the most important task is to learn the essence of these initiatives, and to see if the values and principles emerging from them can suggest a cohesive framework for challenging the currently dominant mindset and practice of growth-centered “developmentality.”

In a series of dialogues and confluences starting in 2014, called *Vikalp Sangam* (Alternatives Confluence), several hundred practitioners and thinkers (not exclusive categories, of course!) have discussed such a framework and agreed on the following crucial elements or pillars of a transformation<sup>4</sup>:

1. *Ecological sustainability and wisdom*, including the conservation of nature (ecosystems, species, functions, cycles) and its resilience, ensuring that human activities are based on environmental ethics and are within planetary limits.

2. *Social well-being and justice*, including lives that are physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually fulfilling, where there is equity (including gender equity) in socio-economic and political entitlements, benefits, rights and responsibilities, and where cultural diversity is celebrated and promoted. Attempts to bring back ancient Indian beliefs in “enoughness,” voluntary simplicity or austerity, without falling into the trap of bigoted religiosity, are part of this.

3. *Direct democracy*, where decision-making starts at the smallest unit of human settlement, in which every human has the right, capacity and opportunity to take part; envisaging larger levels of representative or delegated governance that are downwardly accountable, defined on the basis of ecological and cultural contiguity and linkages (“ecoregions” or “biocultural” regions).

4. *Economic democracy*, in which local communities have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets; where localization is a key principle and larger trade and exchange are built on it. This is the basis of several initiatives at producer companies and cooperatives, and producer-consumer linkages in fields such as food and crafts. The re-invention of non-monetized exchanges (barter and other forms) and local bazaars, infused with equity principles that may have been weak in the past, has to be part of this process.

5. *Knowledge commons and cultural diversity*, where the

generation, conservation, transmission and use of knowledge (including traditional and modern forms) are collective processes, not confined to formal sector “experts” or to state or corporate run institutions; and where the diversity of cultures is celebrated and sustained.

It is important to note that the above does not fit into any prevalent political or economic ideology. We use *ecoswaraj* because the Gandhian concept of *swaraj* (and the Gandhian economist Kumarappa’s “economics of permanence”) has many aspects that are relevant, but learnings and struggles based on Marxist ideas, those of the *dalit* leader BR Ambedkar, those of Rabindranath Tagore (“City and Village”), or MN Roy and others are also essential parts of the heritage of these initiatives. Crucially, though, indigenous peoples and local communities and others base their actions and thoughts on their own diverse situations, and what emerges is a set of common values that transcends any particular established ideology. Such values include: collective working and solidarity, respect for diversity and pluralism, the dignity of labor, empathy and respect for the rest of nature, simplicity, equity and justice, rights with responsibilities, self-reliance, autonomy and freedom, and others.

### **3. The principles of ecoswaraj and degrowth resonate, and there is potential for further cooperation**

From what limited understanding I have of the concept and practice of “degrowth,” I believe that in many of the above ways, RED resonates well with it. But there may also be crucial differences, given that a blanket proposal for degrowth is unlikely to be appropriate or acceptable within the Global South for whom deprivations of basic needs is a reality. It is therefore a crucial agenda for all of us to look at both commonalities and differences of alternative approaches including *ecoswaraj*, degrowth, *buen vivir*, ecofeminism, *ubuntu*, solidarity economies,

and others (for nearly 100 such approaches, see the compilation in Kothari et al 2019). A beginning was made as a civil society initiative towards *Peoples' Sustainability Treaties* in relation to the Rio+20 conference, but much greater networking and collective work will be required in the coming years.

Some of the crucial questions that could be posed as part of such work include: What are the historical factors that are common to the experiences of the Global North and South (e.g. colonialism and capitalism), and what are the crucial differences (e.g. spiritual traditions, cosmovisions)? What are the principles of process that underlie initiatives striving for an alternative to currently dominant systems? Which of these are common to the Global North and South (e.g. those of solidarity and collective action), and which are different (e.g. the environmentalism of the marginalized oriented towards survival and basic needs vs. that of the relatively well-off oriented towards reducing unsustainability). What are the commonalities and differences in ethical values? These questions should be posed and answered based on an understanding of practical initiatives grounded in different settings.

This kind of collaboration is also important for us to collectively advocate fundamental alternatives to the “green economy,” “green growth” and even “sustainable development” agendas that are being promoted globally (and which through the Sustainable Development Goals received “official” sanction at the highest UN level in late 2015), showing that there are other viable pathways that challenge capitalism, statism, patriarchy, racism, etc.<sup>5</sup>

For this it is necessary to work more closely together, proactively understanding each other's contexts and initiatives. It would be fascinating for joint teams of practitioner/activist researchers to move around looking at a range of grassroots initiatives and address the kinds of questions I've mentioned above. Some of this has been part of a new project called Academi-

Activist Co-generation of Knowledge on Environmental Justice co-coordinated by the *Institute for Environmental Science and Technology at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*, Spain and *Kalpavriksh*, India. One part of this project is to examine and have a dialogue of alternative frameworks and worldviews emerging from environmental and social justice movements in different parts of the world. Another proposal under discussion is for a Global Alternatives Confluence, learning from the confluences taking place in India – a project was launched in mid-2019 as the Global Tapestry of Alternatives.

#### **4. The diverse set of locally embedded frameworks can inspire each other**

Each alternative worldview or framework arises within a particular socio-cultural, ecological, economic and political context, and cannot be replicated or applied as it is to another context. I do believe, however, that broad principles and values, and learnings about process, can be fruitfully applied. The emphasis of the degrowth “movement” on the need to scale down, for instance, can be useful in the context of classes within the South that are over-consuming, or overall for economies in the South (such as China and India) that may already be unsustainable in some aspects. Similarly, the North may have much to learn from those indigenous peoples and other local communities in the Global South that continue to show ways of living *within* nature, where some aspects of simple living still survive, or where holistic knowledge systems combining experiential, spiritual, and scientific elements are still strong.

The deepest meanings of *swaraj*, with its complex integration of freedom, collective responsibility, self-reliance and autonomy, could be something many Northern democracies and human rights regimes could learn from. This would be particularly important in order to find alternatives to the extreme individualism and social alienation from which the Global

North suffers and which even lead to superficial solutions like recycling without questioning over-consumption.

Conversely, there is much in the solidarity economy models emerging in Europe and elsewhere that we in the Global South could gainfully absorb. In particular, initiatives like digital commons, cafes and non-profit shops run cooperatively by urban youth, and social enterprises,<sup>6</sup> and others that are in the “modern” sector may be of interest to youth in the south that are looking for gainful sources of employment in urban contexts. And of course, there is plenty of exciting scope for southern worldviews to engage with each other; imagine the power of *buen vivir* and *sumac kawsay* and *swaraj* and *ubuntu* and myriad other such worldviews collectively presenting something attractive enough to engage people currently mesmerized by the consumertopia?

## **5. We do have opportunities to move this agenda forward**

It is not easy to envision ideal futures in any detail (beyond the generic wish list of sustainability, equity, justice, peace, etc.). But envision them we must if we are to keep hope alive, find our bearings, and guide grassroots practice. However, the even harder task is to figure out specific and workable pathways to reach such a future, for these have to contend with the complex web of problems we are currently enmeshed in. Most challenging is the powerful resistance to fundamental change by those who occupy positions of power, not only within governments but also in the private sector, and within the dominant sections of society (which in the Indian context is uniquely characterized by caste as much as class, gender, and other forms of inequity and discrimination).

As high as these hurdles are, the growing number and reach of peoples’ initiatives to resist the system and create alternatives are a source of hope. Peoples’ movements and civil society



organizations (including progressive workers' unions) will have to be the primary agents of change. At times, sections and individuals within government, political parties, and academic institutions have taken the lead or assisted communities and civil society organizations, and we must continue to push the limits of such institutions. Over time, as communities self-mobilize or are empowered through decentralization, political parties will feel greater pressure from their constituencies to reorient their focus towards issues of well-being based on sustainability and equity. But we cannot rely on political parties alone, for they are part of the DNA of representative democracy that itself needs to be transformed into radical, more direct forms of decision-making.

One great opportunity provided to our generations is the historical conjunction between the local and the global. At one level are the localization movements mentioned above. At the other is the growing mobilization around global issues, such as climate change, the global financial system, the industrial monopolies on food and agriculture, and the hegemony of multinational corporations. The conditions of the contemporary world are fostering mutually-reinforcing local and global mindsets. More than ever before, we are members both of immediate communities and also of the community of humanity, or – more broadly – the community of life, just as local ecosystems are part of one global ecological system. Greater awareness of our interdependence comes with each new global crisis, and with it the possibility of greater common cause. If the emerging movements around the world, based on multiple but overlapping worldviews (old and new) and transcending orthodox ideological standpoints, can come together, then there is much hope that pathways to a saner future will be forged, and walked.

## Endnotes

- 1 Shrivastava and Kothari, 2012.
- 2 India's most oppressed group, so-called "untouchables" or *harijans*, struggling to overcome centuries' old marginalization. In this sense, *dalit* women are doubly disadvantaged as gender hierarchies too remain strongly entrenched.
- 3 Shrivastava and Kothari, 2012; Kothari, 2014; Kalpavriksh, 2015; Kalpavriksh, 2017; see also the links below.
- 4 These are embedded in a framework of elements, values, strategies, and other aspects of a holistic alternative vision evolving in the Vikalp Sangam process, pl. see kalpavriksh.org/our-work/alternatives (Accessed 31 January 2019). This builds on the Peoples' Sustainability Treaty on Radical Ecological Democracy, at [radicalecologicaldemocracy.org](http://radicalecologicaldemocracy.org). It should be noted that the initiatives on which such a vision is based do not necessarily use the term *ecoswaraj* or RED themselves. This term originated in our work, and though it is gaining acceptance, it is not meant to impose a uniform label on the diverse ways in which people articulate principles or worldviews themselves.
- 5 Kothari et al., 2015.
- 6 I've been privileged to visit some in Greece, Spain and Czech Republic.

## Links

- Alternatives India – Vikalp Sangam, website documenting the networking process of alternatives confluence since 2014: [alternativesindia.org](http://alternativesindia.org)
- Global Tapestry of Alternatives: [www.globaltapestryofalternatives.org](http://www.globaltapestryofalternatives.org)
- Radical Ecological Democracy, initiative of the India based Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group: [radicalecologicaldemocracy.org](http://radicalecologicaldemocracy.org)

Academic-Activist Co-Produced Knowledge for Environmental Justice: [acknowledgej.org](http://acknowledgej.org)

ICCA Consortium: [iccaconsortium.org](http://iccaconsortium.org)

Podcast for *Degrowth in Movement(s)* and RED: [soundcloud.com/degrowth-webportal/dib\\_radikale-oekologische-demokratie](https://soundcloud.com/degrowth-webportal/dib_radikale-oekologische-demokratie)  
(first 40 seconds in German, thereafter English)

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