HOW CAN FLOWERS OF TRANSFORMATION BLOOM IN INDIA?

Alternatives for justice, sustainability and equity

ASHISH KOTHARI

WE ARE in serious trouble. Whichever way one looks at it, from local to global, humanity is confronted with the multiple and intersecting crises of ecological and climate catastrophe, inequality, war and conflict, health epidemics related to both poverty and affluence, resurgent authoritarianism, and the stranglehold of mega-corporations in all aspects of our lives. Amongst the youth, understandably, there is deep anxiety about the present and the future. Not to mention the anguish we are causing to millions of species of plants and animals. This is as true in India as it is in the rest of the world.

In this engulfing darkness, however, there are many bright pinpricks of light. Two kinds of responses, in particular, provide hope: mass resistance to the structures creating and pushing these crises and to the destructive projects they impose, and grounded radical alternatives that demonstrate more just and sustainable alternatives. Often, but not necessarily, these are part of the same movement. For instance, in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, a federation of nearly 90 nearby villages, the Korchi Maha Gramsabha is resisting a mining project, as also asserting *swaraj* or self-rule through a mix of traditional and Constitutional governance institutions, community forest rights, self-empowerment by women. In this they are building on nearby Mendha-Lekha village's slogan "We elect the government in Mumbai and Delhi, but in our village we are the government". In Munsiari area of Uttarakhand, Maati Sangathan grew out of resistance to patriarchal domestic violence, and moved into dignified livelihoods for women and other spheres of life.

On the basis of learning from various such initiatives in India and other parts of the world, there is a sense of what holistic transformations are beginning to take place and what more needs to be done. One way to look at it is as a "Flower of Transformation", emerging from the Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence) process in India (*more on this later*), which are alternatives built on the following key elements or spheres, interconnected and overlapping:

> **As important as transformations in each sphere are, equally crucial is the way they intersect. This is at times deliberate and prefigurative, at times emerging in a natural evolution, both a response to the fact that discrimination and marginalisation are also intersectional**

a. Ecological integrity and resilience, including the conservation of nature and natural diversity, maintenance of ecological functions, respect for ecological limits (local to global), and ecological ethics in all human actions.

b. Social well-being and justice, including fulfilling lives (physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually), equity between communities and individuals, communal and ethnic harmony; and erasure of hierarchies and divisions based on faith, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, ability, and other such attributes.

c. Direct and delegated democracy, with decision-making starting in spaces enabling every person to participate meaningfully, and building from this to larger levels of governance by downwardly accountable institutions; and all this respectful of the needs and rights of those currently marginalised.

d. Economic democracy, in which local communities and individuals have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets, based on the principle of localisation for basic needs and trade built on this; central to this would be the replacement of private property by the commons.

e. Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy, with multiple co-existing knowledge systems in the commons, respect for a diversity of ways of living, ideas and ideologies, and encouragement for creativity and innovation.

How the flower blooms on the ground

Each of the above spheres can be illustrated by grounded initiatives in India and other parts of the world. The examples of Korchi Maha Gramsabha and Mendha-Lekha mentioned above demonstrate a radical form of democracy (akin to the notion of *swaraj* that Mahatma

Gandhi popularised), deeper than electoral, liberal forms of democracy in which power gets centralised. The Maati example is about social justice and gender equality. The organisation Bhasha, started by linguist Ganesh Devy, has helped document language diversity across India in the People's Linguistic Survey of India, which described 780 languages and tried sustaining or reviving Adivasi languages of Gujarat through dictionaries, a children's magazine, and other means. The organisation Khudai Khidmatgar has been promoting inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogues and harmony, so crucial in today's dangerous atmosphere of hatred fuelled by the current party in power; groups like Ektha Foundation are promoting actions and policies enabling the dignity of people with disabilities, while others like Nirangal Charitable Trust are advocating the rights and rightful place of LGBTQI+ persons. At hundreds of sites across the country, communities are sustaining traditional or creating new forms of conserving ecosystems, wildlife and biodiversity, an alternative to the exclusionary conservation model of the state. Dalit women farmers of Deccan Development Society (DDS) in Telangana have regenerated their agriculture and achieved food security and sovereignty, claiming full collective or women's rights to land, seeds, knowledge, resisting their corporate or state control. Transformations in the economic sphere also include many attempts to reclaim rights to govern the commons, for example, through community forest resource rights under the Forest Rights Act.

As important as transformations in each sphere are, equally crucial is the way they intersect. This is at times deliberate and prefigurative, at times emerging in a natural evolution, both a response to the fact that discrimination and marginalisation are also intersectional, for example, environmentally poor working and living conditions are most pronounced for those who are marginalised in race, caste or class terms, or
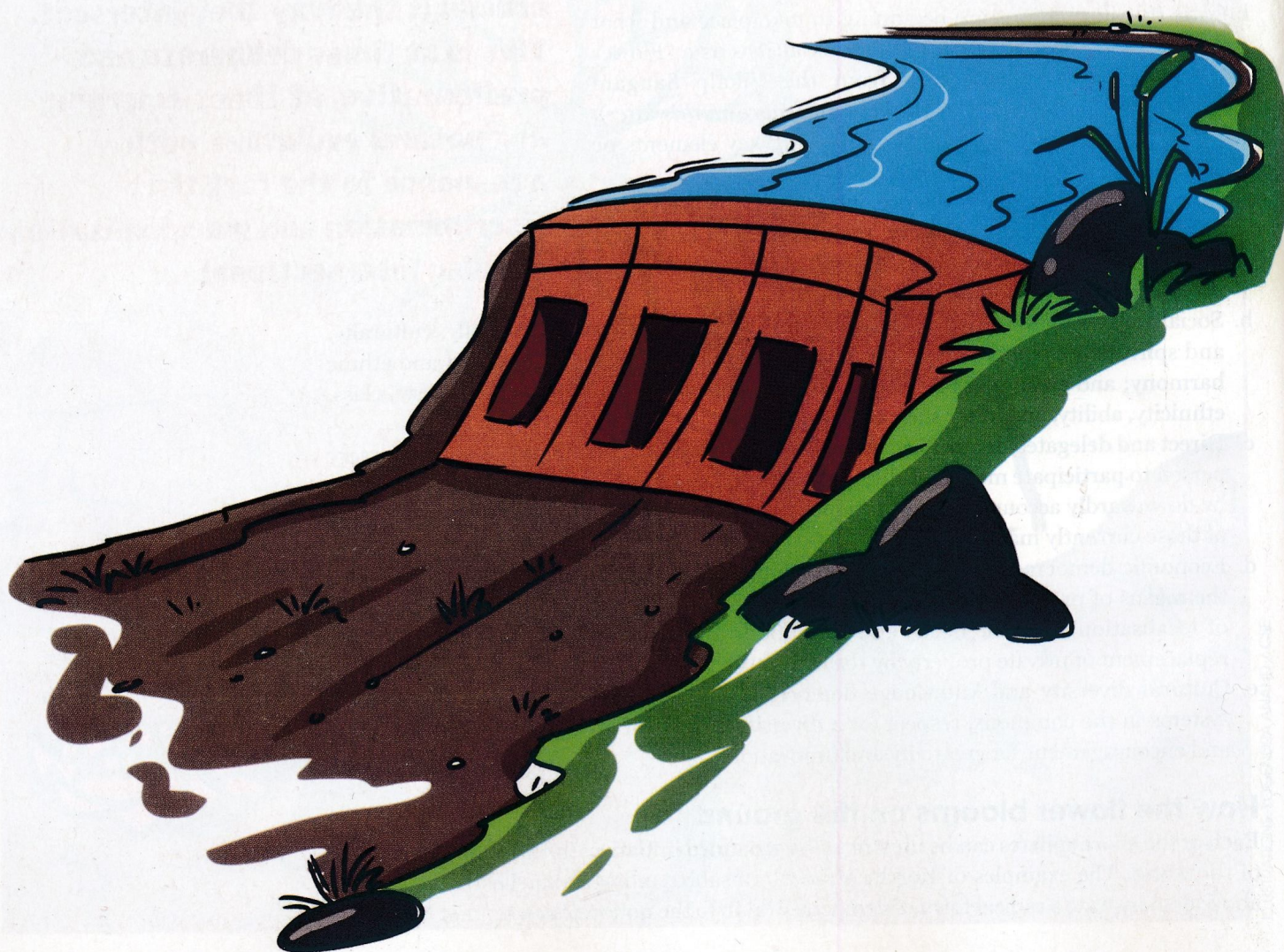
inadequate access to nutritious food can build on other discriminations against women. For instance, in the case of Maati, women's empowerment to resist domestic violence has been enhanced through secure livelihoods based on both traditional sources (farming, crafts) and new ones (homestay-based ecotourism), advocacy against destructive development projects imposed by the state or corporations, and struggles to conserve forests as a collective commons. The Dalit women of DDS have used the route of food security and sovereignty, and community media, to challenge gender and caste discrimination, as also to revive and sustain a respectful, spiritual relationship with the earth. For the Farm2Food Foundation in Assam, northeastern India, school-based agriculture has dimensions of local food security, hands-on learning, and reconnecting to community knowledge. The Dharani Farming and Marketing Cooperative, set up by Timbaktu Collective in Andhra Pradesh, ensures fair remuneration to farmers who commit to organic production, combining the economic and ecological spheres.

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In their intersectionality, some of these initiatives tend towards holistic transformation encompassing all the spheres. But at times the transformations in different spheres can be contradictory, as we found out in a detailed participatory study of the revival of handloom weaving (*vanaat*) in Kachchh, using a tool emerging from the Flower of Transformation (called the Alternatives Transformation Format, or ATF). While the revival of weaving had significantly enhanced economic livelihoods, and enabled progressive transformations in gender, caste and intergenerational relations, it had also had mixed impacts on the ecological aspects of the craft and its trade, in some cases increased the workload of women, and tended to increase inequality within the weaver community.

Beyond political boundaries

Looking at all the spheres together also leads us to challenge patterns of political governance based on hard boundaries. For various historical reasons including colonialism, such boundaries divide and interrupt the flows of nature (for example, of a river or mountain range), or economic and cultural linkages (for example, of traditional trade or nomadic pastoralist routes). This has adverse ecological, economic and socio-cultural consequences, such as the blocking of crucial water and sediment flows downstream (the Farakka Barrage in India causing major disruptions downstream in Bangladesh, or the upcoming dams in China blocking flows into India, as examples), stopping crucial wildlife migration pathways, or disrupting the livelihoods of pastoralists or fishers (the India-China fence and armed forces presence in the Ladakh-Tibet region, or the Pakistan-India borders in the sea, as examples). An intersectional approach that moves beyond this is bioregionalism (or biocultural-regionalism).

The bioregionalism movement attempts to interrogate such political boundaries, and work towards re-establishing flows and connectivity across these boundaries. In India, governments have attempted some basin approaches, for instance for the Ganga, but with no involvement of local communities, weak ecological foundations, and a rather limited view of resolving inter-state disputes. Other initiatives include the Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative of ICIMOD, which contains a substantial part of the Indian Himalaya, and a recently established South Asia Bioregionalism Working Group that has started producing historical and conceptual material and doing outreach through webinars and publications. Obviously, in today's tension-ridden international context, a bioregionalism approach in South Asia is a distant dream, but at least a start has to be made to envision what it could entail.

One aspect that clearly emerges from these alternative initiatives is the central role of communities and collectives. The VS Framework mentioned above states: "The centre of human activity is neither the state nor the corporation. But it is the community, a self-

defined collection of people with some strong common or cohesive social interest. The community could be of various forms, from the ancient village to the urban neighbourhood to the student body of an institution to even the more 'virtual' networks of common interest." The community also extends to the rest of life, the species of plants and animals around us. In this sense the approach is of radical ecological democracy or eco-*swaraj*, asserting local decision-making while also embodying responsibility for other people and for the rest of nature.

The blooming of multiple flowers of transformation across India or the Indian sub-continent faces huge challenges. But the seeds have already been sown, many growing into saplings already visible. Here and across the world, there is a veritable "Pluriverse" of transformative practices and worldviews. While not belittling the challenges, these inspirational pinpricks in the darkness provide hope for a saner, more just world. But the issue of how they can achieve scale, so that the macro-economic and social forces currently dominant can be faced, has to be dealt with.

Out-scaling and deep-scaling

Two approaches that would be mistakes, in trying to achieve scale, are replication and upscaling. Both these have been tried by governments and businesses, at times even by civil society groups. The former suffers from the fact that there is no "model" that can be applied as it is across a region containing significant ecological, economic, socio-cultural diversity. The latter has led to the creation of top-heavy hierarchies, losing their original ideals of being rooted, flexible, adaptive. Instead, what is needed is out-scaling, where we learn processes and principles from initiatives of transformation, adapt them to suit our own context, and then network horizontally to create a macro-picture. Additionally, deep-scaling is where existing initiatives can go deeper into transformation, rooting them more firmly. Such approaches are being tried out in national and global networks of agro-ecology, or feminism, or anti-colonial struggles; in all these, hundreds or thousands of transformative initiatives become macro-forces for larger change.

The most crucial aspect of such out-scaling and indeed of each grounded initiative, is a set of ethics or values that they embody. These are at the core of the "Flower of Transformation". These include diversity and pluralism, interconnectedness, solidarity, collectivity and the commons, human rights and the rights of nature, non-violence and peace, joy and others.

For achieving scale through the above approach, alliances and networks built on trust and the respect for diversity are crucial. One such attempt, for India, is Vikalp Sangam.

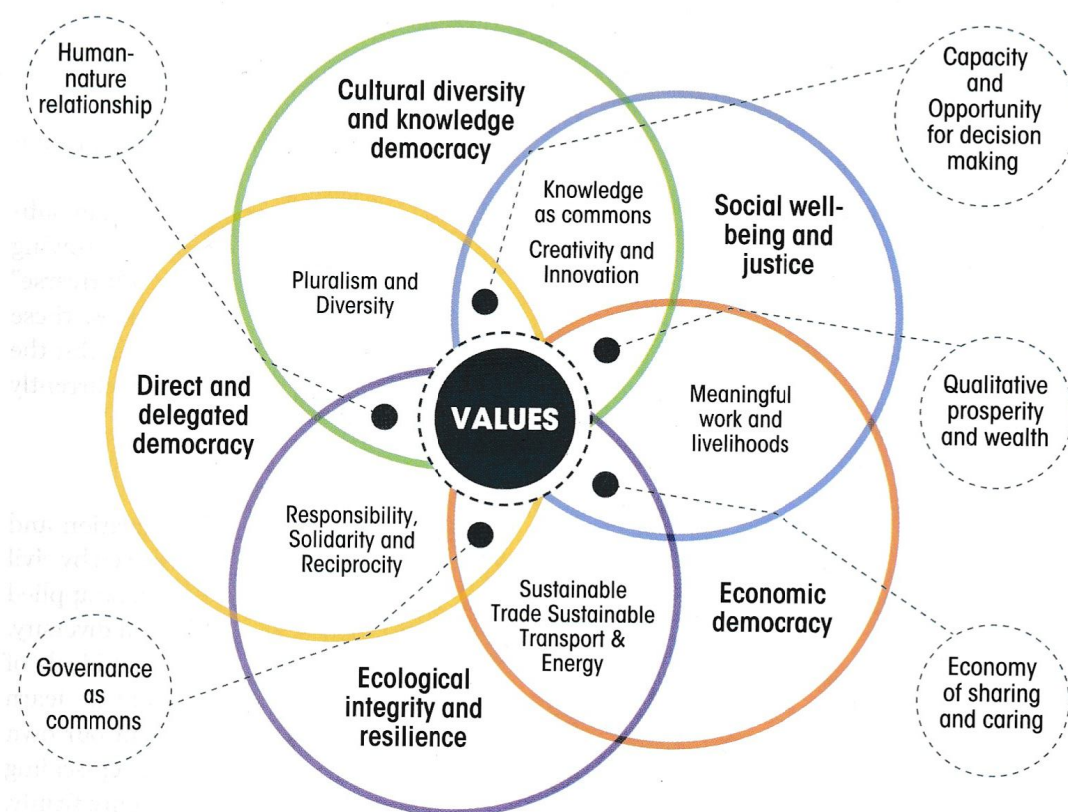## Vikalp Sangam: networking for macro-change

In 2014, realising that there was a need for a national platform to bring together initiatives of transformation together; some civil society organisations launched Vikalp Sangam (VS). The VS platform has five objectives: enhancing the documentation and understanding of grounded alternatives, making them visible through diverse forms of outreach, connecting them for collaborations and joint activities, collectively envisioning the India we want, and doing advocacy for policy shifts and further action by all social actors. Over the last decade, in about 30 physical confluences across India, several dozen online sessions, and other activities such as food festivals, it has brought together several thousand people from local communities and people's movements, academic and educational institutions, small or alternative businesses, legal and other professional institutions, civil society groups, and others. In these processes, the attempt is to stimulate dialogue and understanding across sectors, cultures and geographies.

One of the most important activities of the VS process has been collective visioning, for it is here that diverse voices, especially those of the most marginalised sections, can be

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ALTERNATIVES CONFLUENCE

Human-nature relationship

Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy

Capacity and Opportunity for decision making

Knowledge as commons

Creativity and Innovation

Social well-being and justice

Pluralism and Diversity

Direct and delegated democracy

VALUES

Meaningful work and livelihoods

Qualitative prosperity and wealth

Responsibility, Solidarity and Reciprocity

Sustainable Trade Sustainable Transport & Energy

Economic democracy

Governance as commons

Ecological integrity and resilience

Economy of sharing and caring

brought together in an act of subversion of dominant structures. The VS framework, titled "The Search for Alternatives", currently in its 7th *avatar* (it will continue to evolve as more voices enter the process), signals a fundamental shift in economy, polity, and socio-cultural relations, building on an ecological ethic. Based on this, the VS General Assembly, by 2024 consisting of nearly 90 movements and organisations, brought out the Peoples' manifestos for a "Just, Equitable and Sustainable India" aimed at the 2019 and 2024 general elections.

In a related move, about 40 authors contributed to a vision of India in 2100, with earthy pathways of getting to such a vision, in the book *Alternative Futures: India Unshackled*. Utopian thinking of this kind is clearly not enough, but it provides a horizon to head towards, which adds to the politics of protest and resistance, a prefigurative politics of hope.

Processes like VS also need regular internal reflections to assess where they are headed, what course corrections are needed. In late 2024, it marked its 10th anniversary with a national gathering, which is a time for such assessment. While celebrating its strengths and achievements, it reflected on a number of weaknesses, such as the continued inability to reach the political class (that is, formal parties), and the mainstream media.

Constituents of VS also realise that India alone cannot transform. In 2019, some of its constituent organisations connected with other such networks in Colombia, Mexico, South-East Asia and elsewhere to launch the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA), with similar objectives but at a worldwide level.

Processes like VS and GTA are also aligning with other national and global platforms for greater mutual strength. They have a long way to go, and no certainty of succeeding in helping towards the massive shifts we need in mind/heart sets, economies and polities if we have to save humanity and the rest of the planet. But it is our responsibility to try, for otherwise the collapse of the earth's life systems is an absolute certainty. ■

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