

All the way to Timbaktu

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Anantapur district is one of the driest areas in all of India.

Here, in October 2014, We found ourselves amongst a group of activists, experts and concerned citizens who had gathered from all over India to talk about a range of issues, including gender rights to alternative education, politics and ecology.

The gathering was at a place known as the Timbuktu Collective.

This is a place of growth and creative transformation. As their latest annual report states, "A piece of dry degraded land 24 years ago, Timbuktu is today a green wilderness and an agro forest habitat. Timbuktu has been our learning space where strategies for eco-restoration, organic farming, alternative construction, alternative lifestyles and alternative education were developed."



I had the privilege of attending the first ever Vikalp Sangam at the Timbuktu Collective over a weekend. 'Vikalp Sangam', or 'Alternative Confluence', is a people's movement "providing a platform to constructively challenge and learn from each other, build alliances, and collectively evolve alternative futures."

Vikalp Sangam was created by several different organizations, from Kalpavriksh, to Deccan Development Society, Bhoomi College and Shikshantar to name a few.



Ashish Kothari with Manish Jain, two of the co-hosts of Vikalp Sangam

Three days were spent trying to understand each others' work and experiences, and how overlaps can be made. In the process, I managed to speak to a number of them.

Many people spoke about creating a society of trust, instead of what today seems to be a society based on fear-driven decision making.



Manish Jain, a co-founder of Shikshantar, spoke about how we have all been conditioned through various mediums to think that there is not enough in the world for everyone, so we must compete with each other to get the most. "We have to change this thought process. Vikalp Sangam wants to talk about abundance and not scarcity. When we think in terms of abundance, we don't have a reaction of needing to collect things, we are free to use only what we need because we know that there is more."



One of the participants, Sangeetha Sriram, shared her thoughts on her social business in Chennai, called Restore. "I started Restore as a space where the community could gather and gain positive energy, and build together. Restore sources only pesticide-free products, and all at fair prices for the farmer. We don't follow the market prices, because they are falsely created, but go by what inputs the farmers has put in. The community who comes to shop at Restore also knows that our products are organic, even though we don't have the label. They trust us, and the farmers we work with, and it is that circle of trust that we are trying to restore. If we can't trust our farmers, who can we trust? Anyway, at the end of the day, we don't own anything, we're just using it temporarily."



Another participant, V.B. Chandrasekaran of the Chhatti Mahatma Gandhi Aashramam, spoke about using **ahimsa** in his activism. His newest initiative is a walk for the Polavaram Project which is a proposed dam coming up across the Godavari River located in Andhra Pradesh, while its reservoir spreads in parts of Chhattisgarh and Orissa States.

The project will displace several hundred families and Chandrasekaranji hopes to march to the villages and start a dialogue. "I don't want to do any negative dharnas,

or protests. That has not solved anything. Many times as activists we're always reacting to things, and it can be exhausting. I want to go to the villages which will benefit from the dam and ask the village, 'Can't we do this without submerging your neighbours? If it is benefiting you, can you help your fellow man?'" When we asked him if he thought this would work, he smiled as said, "What do I have to lose?"

Through these conversations, we sensed that there is perhaps there is some urgency in affirming that we are not alone. That we not only share ideas with like-minded individuals across the globe. That we are intimately connected to many different kinds of people through our day-to-day lives.



The sense of isolation, some aspects of which is magnified by urban life, are assuaged by

sangams

like these. Places like Timbuktu refresh this trust of community, creating oases for alternative ideas to thrive.

We went to one of the driest districts in India, and yet it had plenty to offer. We came back with the sense that there are larger communities ready to welcome anyone who is willing to participate in a holistic, thoughtful way of life.

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Read a report on the [Vikalp Sangam gathering at Timbaktu](#).

Read this **report in Telugu**, translated by Shri Mallikarjuna Rao, Laya, Visakapatnam

Watch the

proceedings at the Vikalp Sangam gathering

on video clips by Centre for Education and Documentation.