

# Harvesting hope: the permaculture movement in India

Author - Simin Fadaee, Published on - 31.7.2018

**The major transformative potential of permaculture in India lies in its ability to make small-scale farmers self-sufficient. Hence, it offers viable solutions to the very deep crisis farmers are facing.**

Farmers using permaculture in the state of Telangana, India. Here an activist has gathered farmers on her permaculture farm and is talking to them. All photographs belong to the author. All rights reserved.

On the first of June 2018, thousands of Indian farmers started [a 10-day protest](#) demanding farm loan waivers and higher prices for their products. This large-scale protest followed a [long march](#) by 40,000 farmers to Mumbai in March. India's farming sector – which employs most of the country's labour force – has been in crisis for decades. A significant indicator has been the dramatic increase of farmers suicides which first entered the headlines in the 1990s. According to a [government report](#) which was released in 2017, since 2013 over 12,000 suicides have been reported every year.

At root, the agrarian crisis in India has a number of causes. While [climate change](#) and its consequent effects on Indian agriculture has played a role, activists and opponents of the government's agricultural policies see the Green Revolution which started in the 1970s and the transformation of Indian agriculture into large scale corporate industrial agriculture as the main reason behind India's agricultural crisis. Prominent environmental and alter-globalisation activist Vandana Shiva, for example, has referred to [farmer suicides as a genocide](#), and has accused the WTO and the government's agricultural policies of destroying small-scale farmers. Among a number of movements, civil society organisations and campaigns addressing the agrarian crisis and the effects of industrial agriculture in India, the permaculture movement is fast gaining ground among subsistence farmers and proponents of alternative agriculture. If expanded, they think it would be able to counter many of the discontents of Indian farmers.

## Permaculture: a concrete and viable alternative

The term 'permaculture' was first coined by the Australian biologist Bill Mollison and his student David Holmgren in the 1970s. It combines "permanent agriculture" and "permanent culture" and advocates the three ethics of people care, earth care and fair share. Based on farming practices, and particularly influenced by the Japanese natural farmer Masanobu Fukuoka combined with a number of scientific findings in agriculture, permaculture provides a set of [principles](#) which offer practical guidance on how to build functioning and sustainable alternatives that bring together the needs of humans and nature.

Permacultures help build resiliency among small-scale farmers and facilitate the creation of self-regenerative systems and communities with regard to energy, food, shelter and other needs, in harmony with nature. Permaculture principles are applicable in diverse environments and on different scales, from densely populated urban settlements to farms and rural areas. In other words, the principles are seen as universal, although the methods that materialize from them vary significantly according to context. Therefore, permaculture is culturally rooted and to a large extent its practice is based on local knowledge, customs and resources.

Since its inception, permaculture has grown into a global movement and is practiced by various communities [around the world](#). In the following section I briefly explain the history of the movement in India, introducing the actors and sites of their engagement before taking an overview of its transformative potential.

## Building the movement in India

Permaculture was introduced into India by Bill Mollison, who visited the country in 1986 and regularly returned thereafter to hold permaculture workshops for farmers. In the course of these workshops, small-scale farmers could learn rainwater harvesting, biomass generation, recycling organic waste, composting, soil conservation and many more techniques which would help them remain or become self-subsistent.

With the support of an Indian NGO, [Deccan Development Society](#), the first permaculture demonstration farm was established in Andhra Pradesh situated on the south-eastern part of India and became a learning education site for alternative agricultural practices. The permaculture Association of India was formed in 1989. Within this framework Indian permaculture experts started to conduct practice-oriented workshops for farmers and relevant NGOs in different parts of India. Over the years permaculture has gradually expanded and today a number of organisations and farms promote principles and ethics of permaculture throughout the country.

The Hyderabad-based [Aranya Agricultural Alternatives](#) has been one of the most active proponents of permaculture in the country. The organisation hosted the first [National Permaculture Convergence](#) in 2016 which brought together more than 1,000 farmers, academics and practitioners of alternative agriculture from across the country. It provided an inclusive forum not only for practitioners of permaculture but for those interested in various fields of sustainable agriculture, biodiversity, natural resource management, health and nutrition and sustainable living.

This event gave the movement momentum, attracted many to the philosophy and practice of permaculture while connecting those who were already practicing and working with permaculture in one way or another. Moreover, it provided the base for the emergence of Indian permaculture network. In 2017 [Aranya Agricultural Alternatives](#) hosted the [13<sup>th</sup> International Permaculture Conference and Convergence](#) in India under the theme "Towards Healthy Societies". This event brought together a large number of national and international delegates including 450 local farmers. The first ever permaculture teacher training course in India and an extended 20-day permaculture design course preceded the event.

## Actors and sites of engagement

Four kinds of actors are involved in the permaculture movement. The first group is comprised of individuals working for agrarian-oriented NGOs who provide permaculture training for farmers through courses and workshops, by establishing permaculture demonstration sites or by assisting farmers on their own farms. Although many of these NGOs might not exclusively identify as permaculture NGOs they actively or passively engage with permaculture principles in their work.

Another group of actors involved in the permaculture movement are individuals with non-farming background who have settled and/or work on small farms implementing a permaculture design. Some have transformed barren land to a food forest – a low maintenance and sustainable food production method based on

forest ecosystems – or are in the process of transforming already existing farms to permaculture sites. In most cases they actively engage with their communities and the farmers in their area by providing assistance and supervision to the farmers based on their needs. Their farms function as demonstration sites for farmers and for those who would like to develop their land into a productive and resilient system.

The third group is comprised of traditional farmers who have successfully transformed their lands or are transforming them into permaculture farms and have become advocates of permaculture in their own area and community, helping others in permaculture practice. Those more active have become leaders of their communities and have mobilised large numbers of fellow farmers against pesticides, monocropping and other unsustainable and harmful agricultural practices. Some of the farmers have connected with India's growing organic sector and sell their products in local organic markets.

The last group of actors are urbanites who do not have access to large swathes of land. This group practices permaculture in their urban gardens, kitchen gardens and rooftops and grows a significant amount of vegetables for daily use. Moreover, urban permaculture encompasses community organising in neighbourhoods, encouraging composting, water harvesting and waste management as well as transforming common and public land into sites of food production if not necessarily permaculture sites.

Promotion and facilitation of permaculture design for buildings and private urban gardens is another task these actors encourage. Very often they work with landscape designers and architects who use natural materials in buildings.

Finally, urban permaculture is strongly involved with permaculture education at schools and universities. Through workshops and seminars different issues and problems related to alternative agriculture, health and malnutrition are discussed.

In their attempt to develop sustainable and healthy communities which are in harmony with nature, permaculture practitioners are joined by many other actors such as activists of organic or local food who would not necessarily identify with permaculture. They take part in similar events and gatherings, and may be involved in the same local struggles. Yet those who exclusively distinguish themselves as permaculture practitioners refer to two aspects of permaculture which makes it stand out from others. First, permaculture practitioners admire the holistic approach permaculture offers to life which is interwoven with the three ethics of people care, earth care and fair share. Second, for many who are in search of alternatives to the status quo, permaculture is practice-based and solution-oriented. This makes it a "flexible design system which can be practiced on different scales, by different people, with different needs and in different ecosystems" as one of the practitioners explained.

### **Transformative potential**

The major transformative potential of permaculture in India lies in its ability to make small-scale farmers self-sufficient. Hence, it offers viable solutions to the very deep crisis farmers are facing in a country where more than 80% of agricultural holdings are under 2 ha.

In many ways permaculture incorporates several elements of India's traditional farming methods which prevailed until the Green Revolution and were geared towards self-sufficiency rather than largescale production. Therefore, it is not difficult for many farmers to relate to it. Furthermore, a thorough permaculture farm meets farmers' needs with regard to food, soil fertility, input costs and income. Permaculture farms offer food throughout the year, reduce waste and pests and keep the soil healthy and productive. As permaculture provides solutions for any environments many farmers from dry and unproductive areas have shown interest in permaculture techniques. Permaculture favours simple farming technologies and methods and therefore, farmers can avoid becoming dependent on loans and machines.

Instead, these nature-inspired techniques can be implemented by everyone and can be adapted to farmers' particular environments and needs. In other words, permaculture aims at creating resiliency and autonomy for farmers by decreasing their cost and dependency on any external factor from seeds to pesticides and machines, and this has been the main attraction for many farmers.

Moreover, for many young and educated Indians, many of whom who have left (or are leaving) their jobs in the corporate sector to contribute to the growing permaculture movement, permaculture has become a life project which gives their personal lives meaning. Frustrated with the ever-growing consumer culture, socio-economic disparities and increasing malnutrition and health problems in their country, permaculture provides them with an alternative project which is not only self-fulfilling but also helps them contribute to the transformation of their communities in line with the ethical values of people care, earth care and fair share. These provide the foundations for a more sustainable and just society.

### **How to cite:**

Fadaee S. (2018) Harvesting hope: the permaculture movement in India, Open Democracy / ISA RC-47: Open Movements, 29 July.  
<https://opendemocracy.net/simin-fadaee/harvesting-hope-permaculture-movement-in-india>

First published by

**Open Democracy**