

More Questions Than Answers: Is There Indeed an Alternate Development Paradigm?

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The current trajectory of our planet points towards the urgent need for a fundamental paradigm shift in thinking among individuals, organisations, governments, institutions and, nations — all of whom are in a position of power to tilt the windmills (proverbial and otherwise). Unless these authorities embrace a radical rethinking of how we interact with the earth's resources (and who benefits), it's only a matter of time before this blue-green planet crosses an irreversible threshold to a socio-economic, environmental disaster of our own making. Oxfam's recent report, [Reward Work Not Wealth](#), highlights the increasing socio-economic chasm that is developing, not only across the world but also here in India, and that is a great cause for concern for all. Well, for almost all — except for the avaricious powers that perpetuate and thrive on this deliberate schism for their own self-serving interests.

Rather than joining ranks with the quintessential soothsayer who sees inescapable apocalypse at the edge of the horizon, it is essential to answer the question of what can be done to support an alternative fate for our planet and its inhabitants? An interesting initiative by a section of renowned Indian environmentalists, activists and social scientists are exploring possible answers to this precise question.

Among the critical questions they raise, debate, and nurture are:

1. Is there a holistic solution possible, one that is fair, just, safe, sustainable, peaceful and progressive?
2. How does one tilt the scales away from the closely held power centres that control the world?
3. How does one democratise decision-making processes wherein the current imbalances are restored, crooked power dynamics disrupted, progress redefined holistically, where communities and flora-fauna are encouraged to co-exist and thrive?
4. How do populations as a whole not only meet basic human needs but also satisfy their personal ambitions, albeit within the confines of this planet's limitations?
5. How can frameworks and visions build upon an existing heritage of ideas, worldviews, and cultures, and on past or new grassroots practice?
6. How can they be fundamentally different from today's dominant economic and political system, which has brought the world to the brink of ecological collapse and the depths of socio-economic inequalities and despair?

But What is that Alternative?

A central thread running throughout conversation between these renowned social is the essential question of what constitutes an alternative? What are the root causes that need to be displaced in order to accomplish this paradigm shift? There has to be a way to dialogue with the powers in order to catalyse systemic shifts within our current model of doing business. Unfortunately, the bridge between these disparate world views is only getting longer, and the rift is getting only wider.

The

Alternative Framework

(visit [Vikalp Sangam](#) to learn more about the movement) proposed by these eminent social scientists offers strategic solutions that are built on the following key elements or pillars which are both interconnected and overlapping:

1. 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.
2. 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 attributes.
3. Direct and delegated democracy, with decision-making starting in spaces which enable every person to participate meaningfully, and building from this to larger levels of governance by downwardly accountable institutions; while respecting the needs and rights of those currently marginalised.
4. Economic democracy, in which local communities and individuals have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets, based on the principle of localization for basic needs and trade built on this; central to this would be the replacement of private property by the commons.
5. Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy, with multiple co-existing knowledge systems in the commons, respect to a diversity of ways of living, ideas, and ideologies, and encouragement of creativity and innovation.

The Framework proposes, on the basis of the above, that the "centre of human activity is neither the state nor the corporation, but 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 interests."

A discourse thus needs to be initiated within society to see how to build traction of this alternative paradigm contemplation — one that not only addresses the systemic problems that plague our world but also engages with all critical stakeholders and brings about a lasting solution. But an even bigger challenge today revolves around the issue of mainstreaming these views, as they are often branded by opponents as nothing more than a typical far-left impractical utopian daydream. More often than not, these discourses are relegated to select conference rooms where the audience, again more often than not, are the converted and which is akin to the preaching to the choir.

There are indeed more questions than answers. But answers need to be pursued to transition from a peripheral intellectual wishful debate to mainstream positive action on the ground.

Gandhi famously said that the world has enough for everyone's need but not enough for everyone's greed. Clearly, Gandhi is outdated, irrelevant, his commemoration confined to an annual ceremony in Rajghat –his sacred memorial in New Delhi.

But what remains is a fundamental question about the infinite morbid pursuit of growth in a finitely limited planet. After all, there is only one Planet Earth, and for the time being, we have no Plan B.

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