



Vikalp Sangam

Alternatives Confluences across India

The severe negative impacts of the current model of ‘development’ and economic globalisation include ecological destruction, displacement of communities, disruption of livelihoods on a mass scale, and growing socio-economic inequities. Various parts of India are already facing tension and conflicts caused by a mindless pursuit of economic growth, along with continued patriarchy, capitalist exploitation, state-centred power domination, casteism, and other sources of inequity and unsustainability. All sectors of the economy and society are being oriented towards feeding into the developmental pursuit, whether it is education, R&D, markets and trade, or health.

In the midst of this dismal scenario, there are many alternatives that challenge the dominant ‘development’ paradigm and other structural forces mentioned above. These alternatives also provide viable pathways for human wellbeing that are ecologically sustainable and socio-economically equitable. These include sustainable farming/ pastoralism/ fisheries/ forestry, democratic markets and worker-controlled production, community education and health approaches, cross-cultural peace initiatives, initiatives to further class, caste, religious, racial, and gender equity, urban and rural sustainability and wellbeing, community-centred arts and crafts, youth empowerment, inclusiveness of diverse sexualities and abilities, alternative media, and so on. There is also a momentum within some of these initiatives to direct or radical democracy and political approaches where citizens are part of decision making (rather than have the decisions taken by ‘representatives’ alone), and/or to ensure greater transparency and accountability in governance.

These initiatives show that there are indeed viable *alternatives* at local and landscape levels. However, a number of factors severely limit their effect:

1. There is little documentation and public awareness on most of them;
2. They are mostly scattered and unlinked, often very small;
3. They are not threaded together into comprehensive frameworks or visions of an alternative society.

As a consequence, these alternative initiatives do not yet form a critical mass capable of changing the dominant paradigm or even providing it a formidable challenge.

The word alternative or *vikalp* is being used here for simplicity, while accepting that no single word can fully encompass the complexity of ground realities, concepts and worldviews. We understand that in many cases, these may not have emerged as a challenge to the dominant paradigm or pose an alternative as such, but simply as a way of life grounded in certain basic principles. Also many of these ideas, concepts and ways of life may have existed for a long time, while others may be new.

The idea of Vikal Sangams / Alternatives Confluences

It is against this backdrop that regional and thematic gatherings of people practicing or conceiving alternatives have been initiated. These are being called *Vikalp Sangams* or *Alternatives Confluences*, and provide a platform to constructively challenge and learn from each other, build alliances, and collectively evolve alternative futures.

We are aware that there are many networks and initiatives that have brought together movements and groups on various platforms related to this theme. But most of these are limited to individual themes or kinds of movements, e.g. struggles against destructive ‘development’ projects, alternative health initiatives, sustainable farming work, etc. There are limited opportunities and attempts to cut across thematic areas, bringing ecological, education, health, justice, livelihood, market/trade, governance and other alternatives together to learn from each other. The Vikalp Sangams aim to be such cross-cutting gatherings, and to build on rather than replicate the existing/ongoing initiatives.

Minimum time is spent at the Vikalp Sangams on the ills of the current economic/ political/ social system. There are plenty of other occasions available for this; the Sangams are predominantly focused on alternatives. But we also do not want to fall into the trap of romanticizing these alternatives; both the pros and cons of such initiatives are shared.

Structure of the Vikalp Sangams

The Vikalp Sangams are not intended to be academic conferences, but rather a more free-flowing meeting of minds and hearts and hands and feet. Over 3-4 days, there could be small group or plenary sessions focused on individual themes, to enable in-depth exchange and learning, with substantial time devoted to learning across themes and movements. Opportunities to showcase the initiatives include exhibitions, films/A-Vs, theatre and other arts / media. Spontaneous joint activities like art and theatre, or learning some craft, are also attempted. If easily accessible, trips to one or more alternative initiatives in the area are included. The Sangams are a combination of fun, learning & unlearning, and bonding.

Participants and Venues

The Sangams bring together practitioners, thinkers, researchers and theorists (these are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories!) working on the broad theme of alternatives to destructive and inequitable development. The participation ranges from a few dozen to over a hundred people, depending on local situations. Each of the Sangams is organized and hosted by one or more regional organizations/institutions that have the capacity; expenses are shared by these organizations and participants.

The Sangam process started in 2014. As of late 2019, the following Sangams have been held: at a regional level, Andhra Pradesh / Telengana, Tamil Nadu, Ladakh, West Himalaya, Kachchh, Maharashtra, Kerala; at thematic level, Energy, Food, Youth, Peace in Central India, Health, Well-being & Justice, Adivasi Youth, Democracy, Alternative Economies. A National level Sangam in late 2017 reviewed 3 years of the process, and planned the next phase. Reports on all the Sangams in English and relevant local language are available (see <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-reports#.WxjYtC2B1E6>).

Related Processes

Apart from the physical confluences, the Vikalp Sangam process also includes extensive documentation and outreach of alternative initiatives. A website, www.vikalpsangam.org, collates stories, case studies, perspectives and resources on alternatives in India. An e-list connects several hundred people including those who have participated in the Sangams. Poster exhibitions, booklets, films, and other resources for outreach have been produced (see <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-outputs#.WoLHzvmux1s>).

National Core Group

An evolving core group has been set up to coordinate the planning of the Sangams, with the following members (as of late 2019): Kalpavriksh, Deccan Development Society (DDS), Bhoomi College, Shikshantar, Timbaktu Collective, Development Alternatives (DA), SOPPECOM, Gene Campaign, BHASHA, Kriti Team, Centre for Equity Studies (CES), URMUL, National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (NAPM), Peoples' Science Institute (PSI), Maati, Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), Ekta Parishad, South Asian Dialogue on Ecological Democracy (SADED), Knowledge in Civil Society (KICS), North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS), ACCORD, Centre for Education and Documentation (CED), Centre for Environment Education (CEE), reStore, ComMutiny: The Youth Collective (CYC), Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Ektha, Students' Environmental and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT), Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO), Local Futures, Sahjeevan, Samvedana, Dharamitra, Video Volunteers, Ideosync, Greenpeace India, MAKAAM, Sambhaavnaa, Jagori Rural, Deer Park, Blue Ribbon Movement, EQUATIONS, Chalakudypuzha Samrakshana Samithi / River Research Centre, CGNetSwara, Tribal Health Initiative, Sangama, Thanal, Alternative Law Forum, Social Entrepreneurship Association, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), School for Democracy (SFD), School for Rural Development and Environment (SRDE), SANGAT, Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture (RRA), Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN), Vrikshmitra, Nirangal, Youth Alliance, Goonj; and Sushma Iyengar, Dinesh Abrol, Ovais Sultan Khan. The Core Group will keep evolving with the process.

Kalpavriksh has been coordinating the Vikalp Sangam process since its initiation in 2014; it is proposed that this coordination will shift to another of the above organisations by 2020.

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