



Alternatives Confluences across India

The severe negative impacts of the current model of 'development' and '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, and many more are on a powderkeg, as a result of the upheavals caused by a mindless pursuit of economic growth. Meanwhile all formal sectors of the economy and society are being oriented towards feeding into this pursuit, whether it is education, R&D, markets and trade, or health.

In the midst of this dismal scenario, there are myriad attempts at generating and practicing alternatives that could not only challenge the dominant 'development' paradigm, but 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 sustainability, holistic rural wellbeing, and so on. These are placed within a gathering momentum to participatory (or radical) democracy and political approaches, which provide access to all citizens to decision-making forums (rather than rely on 'representatives' alone), and bring in essential governance principles like accountability and transparency.

These initiatives are showing that at local and landscape levels, there are indeed viable alternatives. 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 the concept. 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 these 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. There are a series of small group sessions focused on individual themes, to enable in-depth exchange and learning, and at least half of the time is devoted to learning across themes and movements. Opportunities to showcase the initiatives

are provided, through exhibitions, films/A-Vs, theatre and other arts, and other media. Spontaneous joint activities like art and theatre are also attempted. If easily accessible, trips to one or more alternative initiatives 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 hosted by one or more regional organizations/institution that have the capacity; expenses are shared by these organizations and participants. It is doubtful anyone can raise full funding for an event like this, so costs will have to be distributed widely.

As of mid 2017, the following Sangams have been held: at a regional level, Andhra Pradesh / Telengana, Tamil Nadu, Ladakh, West Himalaya (a mini-Sangam), Kachchh, Maharashtra, Kerala; at thematic level, Energy, Food, & Youth.

An evolving core group has been set up to coordinate the planning of the Sangams, with the following members (as of early 2017): 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, MAKAM, Sambhaavnaa, Jagori Rural, Deer Park, Blue Ribbon Movement, EQUATIONS, and Chalakudypuzha Samrakshana Samithi / River Research Centre; and Sushma Iyengar and Dinesh Abrol. The Core Group will keep evolving with the process.

Interested?

Please contact: Ashish Kothari chikikothari@gmail.com; Sujatha Padmanabhan sujikahalwa@gmail.com; Shrishtee Bajpai shrishteebajpai@gmail.com

