



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. But most of these are limited to individual sectors/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 ecology, education and learning, 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 are often 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 or theme-based organizations/institutions that have the capacity; expenses are shared by these organizations and participants.

The Sangam process started in 2014. As of early 2021, 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>). A dedicated Communications Team is regularly putting outreach material on various 'social media' sites.

Another process emerging from Vikalp Sangam is Vikalp Sutra (<https://sutra.vikalpsangam.org>), a national networking platform to generate action on dignified livelihoods. It has three components: Sutra Vani (a helpline for those in need, used during the COVID crises for relief, but to be used for livelihoods in the longer term); Sutra Mandali (an online and physical gathering place for learning about livelihood options); and AajeeWiki (a repository of organizational and other resources on dignified livelihoods).

National Core Group

An evolving core group has been set up to coordinate the planning of the Sangams, with the following members (as of June 2021): ACCORD, Adivasi Lives Matter (ALM), Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), Alternative Law Forum (ALF), Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), BHASHA, Bhoomi College, Blue Ribbon Movement (BRM), Centre for Education and Documentation (CED), Centre for Environment Education (CEE), Centre for Equity Studies (CES), Centre for Financial Accountability (CFA), CGNetSwara, Chalakudypuzha Samrakshana Samithi / River Research Centre, ComMutiny: The Youth Collective (CYC), Deccan Development Society (DDS), Deer Park, Desert Resource Centre (DRC), Development Alternatives (DA), Dharamitra, Ekta Parishad, Ektha, EQUATIONS, Gene Campaign, Goonj, Greenpeace India, Health Swaraaj Samvaad, Ideosync, India and Bharat Together (IABT), Jagori Rural, Kalpavriksh, Knowledge in Civil Society (KICS), Kriti Team, Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO), Let India Breathe (LIB), Local Futures, Maadhyam, Maati, Mahalir Association for Literacy, Awareness and Rights (MALAR), Mahila Kisan Adhikar Manch (MAKAAM), Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (NAPM), National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), National Coalition for Natural Farming (NCNF), Nirangal, Non-Timber Forest Products - Exchange Programme (NTFP-E), North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS), Peoples' Science Institute (PSI), reStore, Sahjeevan, Sambhaavnaa, Samvedana, Sangama, SANGAT, School for Democracy (SFD), School for Rural Development and Environment (SRDE), Shikshantar, Sikkim Indigenous Lepcha Women's Association (SILWA), Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT), Social Entrepreneurship Association (SEA), Society for Promotion of Participatory Ecosystem Management (SOPPECOM), South Asian Dialogue on Ecological Democracy (SADED), Students' Environmental and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), Thanal, The Himalaya Collective,

Timbaktu Collective, Titli Trust, Travellers' University, Tribal Health Initiative (THI), URMUL, Vrikshmitra, Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN), Youth Alliance, Yugma Network; Sushma Iyengar, and, Dinesh Abrol. 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 2021.

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