

A Vikalp Sangam Dialogue on Spirituality in Social Justice and Well-being

Date: 18th-21st July, 2022

Venue: Fireflies Intercultural Centre (Bangalore)

Premise of the conference

In a crisis ridden world of political, economic, social and cultural collisions confronting the saner under currents of civility, equanimity and piety of faiths, there is a need for dialogue to emerge: to tap into the bedrock of spirituality when everything else seem to fail and discover the Will for peace, justice and wellbeing beyond the narrow vistas of the individual sanctum.

The VikalpSangam Conference was a nuance of that Will evoked by Kalpavriksh, a non-profit organisation based in India with its office in Pune, Maharashtra, India, an organisation committed to research, networking, education, grassroots work, advocacy and activism in the field of environment, ecology, development, and alternatives.

Participants (See Annex I) from academia, civil society, grass root movements, religious communities, students and alternative practitioners converged on the secular grounds of Pipal Tree located at the Fireflies Intercultural Centre, off Bengaluru city on the 18th to engage in that dialogue till the 21st of July 2022 to share, offer, explore and divine on the opportunities which could be created, developed and shaped to permeate the constructs of conventional thought and belief.

Day 1 Afternoon- Launch of the conference (See Annex II)

Unveiling the conference with breaking-the-ice introduction of 'guess that's here form, "A departure from the conventional roll call, 'Hi! I am...' the warm up concluded with an orientation to the Vikalp Sangam process by MilindWani, programme coordinator for Kalpavriksh's Documentation and Outreach Centre, who laid a few ground rules for the next few days to follow. (Learn more about VikalpSangam on <https://vikalpsangam.org/>)

Day 2 commenced with the session by Srilakshmi (9.30AM)

She invited members to hold the things with which they had personal spiritual associations, to feel it, feel one's sacredness and offer it at the Mandala, an altar and a metaphoric space of divine intelligence.

John D'Souza offered his pen drive which to him represented information and an open-source platform which helped his work but also represented anxiety due to frequent loss of data and work.

Dominic referred to the Covid mask which to him represented the dichotomy of hope and paranoia.

Urmi, drawing attention to the statue of Lord Krishna, defined it as an embodiment of love representing a personal journey back from the brink of atheism towards spirituality.

Ashim cited fear and said it was difficult dealing with it. "I don't want to reject it but don't know what to do with it."

Rukmini spoke of space for hope and for all to exist.

Brototee, speaking about the pagan aspects of the Celtic ring said the knot 'Thiketra' in the ring represented the mother maiden goddess and said, "There is big difference between spirituality and structured religion."

Pankhuri, showing her handkerchief said, "I have been growing up and only last year I was able to understand what it meant to 'cry'."

Radhika mentioned water. "Connecting with water from more than a research perspective started recently especially as a dancer learning to connect with the idea of flow," she said.

Annie, on her soft toy dog said although her pet passed away tragically, the toy gave her motivation.

Maya Joshi showed a mala given to her by the Dalai Lama who was a source of strength for her. The commitment of his Holiness represents hope to others. She was in awe of how the Dalai Lama managed to laugh. "It is a symbol of compassion," she said.

Mirza acknowledged the importance of all the values that everyone was bringing which would reflect in the flow of dialogue.

Milind, on the meaning of mala, elucidated that 'Form' was emptiness and emptiness was 'Form'. "The mala is circular but it is also empty. The mala also represents continuity in time and hence, hope. It represents seamlessness of one thing flowing into another and it also represents wholeness. It's a perfect geometrical form,"he said.

Laxmi aligned with the ring which invoked the ancestral memory of strength, pain and her identity.

For Bharatwaj, it was the mala, representing love and friendship. "Evanescence is also a spiritual category,"he said.

For Indavi it was the writings of Pandurang Sadashiv Sane, a Marathi teacher and freedom fighter also revered as Sane Guruji. She practiced it every day and tried living by it. 'Khara to ekachi dharma, jagala prem arpave...(there is only one religion, keep offering love to the world). A stanza very precious to her reads, 'ase je apalyapashi, ase je vitvavidya, sadatedetchhijave, jagalapremarpave' (whatever is there with us: wealth, wisdom, one should always keep sharing it with the world).

Ujwala spoke of the value of respect for self and others around, a value which gave her strength.

Ranjeet, after a Covid attack, lost power in his eyes and spectacles helped him. He stressed on the importance of looking at the world with clear lens.

Augustine drew an analogy from a jackfruit from the tree saying, "It will grow, nurture, and then decay ...represents life and its temporary-ness."

Anannya, incanting a prayer, "...Purnamadapurnamidampurnasyapurnamadaya..." and lit a flame saying, "The flame keeps flickering and changing form but we can never lose that flame because that is who we are and part of that poetry is also that the whole comes from the whole and ultimately and we go back to the whole for each one of us is whole. The wholeness remains as we share our wholeness with others as we share our flame."

Walter, on his journey of enquiry of what was happening to all us said he brought a book 'Biology of belief' and that he wanted to stay with the idea of thinking or feeling, this understanding of us as a sense of community, as a global community and what kind of community can we be and live with it.

Siddhartha anchored on hope. He said, "Working with Adivasis and seeing young Adivasi girls transforming, from being scared and shy to being confident is very beautiful to see. It gives me a sense of hope."

The Session by Siddhartha followed at (10.30 AM)

Founder of Pipal Tree, Siddhartha, long involved in the issues of political conflict, has been engaged in initiating dialogue. He said the Buddha was a symbol of all journeys, a kind of secular spirituality which could transcend religious boundaries. "I believe in our common humanity that precedes all the religions on the planet which are newer in the time line of evolution. We therefore have one foot in our common humanity and one foot in our religious beliefs," he commented.

"There is crisis everywhere. In India we are moving from India to Bharat, India represented by the liberal, western educated and Bharat by the uneducated and vernacular. But it has religion in it. Increasingly India is moving towards Bharat and Bharat is not just about Hindu or vernacular but also represents a rise of unemployed people. So, when we talk about dialogue in this context, are there any sensitive guidelines to India or Bharat? How do we deal with these kinds of issues and different kinds of sensibilities?" Siddhartha asked. "Some people have said that you need enemies to mobilize the people and for that the truth is distorted," he added and observed that the phenomenon was happening everywhere in the world.

An eclectic PPT by Siddhartha then projected the following:

- Buddha says 'Self' does not exist meaning that the self that we think we have is largely a constructed self whereas Buddhism is about wisdom and compassion. We have to deconstruct the 'Self' to find wisdom and compassion. According to David Loy, American scholar and teacher of Sanbo Zen, this constructed self always feels a sense of lack and this sense of lack can drive us towards materialistic endeavours making us deal with a global value system which pushes us in all these directions.
- Recounted his experiences of dialogues with scholars of Hindu and Muslim communities, Siddhartha said all truths were contextual. In a historical sense, a statement in the Quran to kill the non-believer is contextual but it has been used out of context. Hence, in a dialogue one has to be open to listen.
- Gandhiji said 'Truth is relevant'. In negotiations, honorable compromise has to be made. It should not be a win-lose situation. The either side should not be considered as an enemy to be defeated. If truth is relative, truth is also plural, he argued.

- Hinduism is a very open-ended tradition and is a laboratory, taking away caste and gender, and defined Shiva as the metaphoric lord of the meeting rivers.
- A quote from Basavanna, 12 Century philosopher, statesman and social reformer "I am a poor man. I can't build you a temple, but my body is a temple. Therefore, things standing shall fall and things moving shall ever stand."
- Pointed to Bishop Desmond Tutu who saw the mission to fight against apartheid as a God-given duty. He insisted that he was 'not defying the government' but 'obeying god'.
- Dialogue can also be an act of protest (non-violent) - exemplifying Sri Lanka.
- In the context of climate change: We have to think whether our actions of the last 20 years will be relevant and meaningful for the next 20 years? If there are protests can those be non-violent?
- We might have to deal with mafias, violence and we also have to be strong. In this context what are our values, our spiritualities? And if there is evil really, there might be part in those evils which or whom we have to be deal with. Here, spirituality gives us some sense of calmness, some moments of peace and it might be important to address how spirituality can be open ended and secular!

A discussion ensued moderated by Laxmi.

John D'Souza stated that the basis of the dialogue was the recognition that if you had an opinion, you had the right to have an opinion. "The social media portrays that we are at extremes but in reality, the extremes might not exist and there might be a space for dialogue and a belief that the system we might have will accommodate both of us."

Mirza posed a question in defence of Bharat, "You have initially mentioned that there are two binaries about India and Bharat. The word vernacular also has many layers and cannot be homogenized and there are lot of positivity in Bharat."

Maya offered her argument, "The concept of Bharat should not be given up. Yet it is important not giving into rigidity but also be ready to unlearn some of anglicised silos and discern how one who speaks for Bharat could be hijacked," adding in disdain that, "The word Bharat has probably been hijacked already."

A response to John D'Souza went, "Can everything be reduced to opinions? There is a point at which conflict will arise (for example tribal vs Ambani) and that is what we have to grapple. There is a need to distinguish between personal beliefs and beliefs which can have conflicts to have a dialogue."

Ashim said, "There is nothing called as universal dialogue. Dialogue presupposes boundaries and all boundaries can remain blurry. So, to be in dialogue one has to take a position and still be open to listen. That is the idea of shared space. Yet there are boundaries even in shared spaces and these boundaries need to be respected."

Aspi observed that there was a lot in the discourse about what dialogue was not, like not being aggressive, etc. "There can be antagonistic and non-antagonistic dialogue. Dialogue of personal beliefs can be non-antagonistic but when in the antagonistic situation and we should not be naive about what we are trying to deal with," Aspi cautioned.

Walter moderated saying, "Probably dialogue can be made with some people who are on the brink and have not completely become antagonistic."

Bharatwaj, on his study of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, a gnostic Sufi philosopher who wrote on the journey of Noah and his people said, "Noah did not understand that God could represent both 'Tanzih' transcendence (formless) and 'Tasbih' (eminent form). The problem seemed not with the people but with Noah." He advocated the value of understanding the texts and their interpretations even before having dialogues with others.

Ranjeet spoke about confusion which ensued from dialogues between his wife and him, who has deeply felt the issues of communalism while working with community on caste issues and the generation gap with his children and how to deal with this gap.

Laxmi thanked the participants for capturing current state of affairs in the personal, community as well as the global level. "Although we don't seem to have time for dialogue that is what we need the most; time to listen, see, understand what is happening in the other person's life. We don't have the luxury of time but we need it," she emphasized.

Ashim said while listening was important, he didn't believe in universal dialogue. Dialogue, he said had to be strategic.

Mirza commented, "We are also talking about impermanence, time, language, and it reminds me of oral history and how that sense of interpretative ways of the past were carried through narrators of stories, for example, my grandparents. Listening is important and so is story telling."

Ending the tea break Laxmi held a session on a listening exercise which let participants pair to speak and listen to each other about one's fears and hope.

At 12:20 PM, the paired teams were ready to present their inward journey to the audience as Bharatwaj moderated the session.

Dominic and Anannya touched on the 'Relevance of spiritual dimension in the climate crisis and increasing fundamentalism' and inquired, "What is spirituality? How does spirituality help us in our relationship with work and interpersonal relationships? Does the world we live in inform us? How does it support our interiority when we work with people? And what is our interiority?"

Walter spoke about sacredness which he was moving away from due to the problems with the constructed self and God. "It has taken some time to move from the constructed self and Gods and yet we are still searching and looking for God. The question is can we depend on structured religions for our lives? We have spoken about hope and despair and the drive is a mix of hope and disappointment."

Speaking about his personal experience of the death of his younger brother which led him towards spirituality, Dominic shared his understanding of spirituality. "Spirituality is preparedness for anything that might come," he said. "We might want to look at climate change differently as context to do certain things and take things as they are and surrender to the will of God. It can be interpreted as a deterministic perspective but might help us in dealing with the uncertainties around us."

On how spirituality was anchored in our interior self and in that context what does spirituality mean for us individually, Milind beamed onto the spiritual spectrum of political economic critic Marx's philosophy on divinity in human beings. "What spirituality means while dealing with the climate crisis is to behave as if you believe in God," he said. "Maybe there is divinity already in us which we need to explore," he added. "A crisis situation also draws us deeper into ourselves and our own spirituality and divinity because we stopped growing spirituality. We have a crisis but what if we look at this crisis as an opportunity to grow... a rebirth of humanity? What kind of politics would it need for this 'Rebirth of humanity' to happen in spite and despite of climate collapse?" he asked. In a sum up Milind welcomed the addition of some meaning to our lives from such a rebirth. "Courage in spite of an imminent failure or courage in the face of death which could be found through spirituality is how we can deal with this crisis." was Milind's call.

Mirza contemplated on his spirituality. "I always have this call to a river and listen to it. I imagine the river in the past, present and future and how it has evolved with all that has happened. Listening to the river is spirituality to me. I have been visiting the same spot for the past 15 years and have had good sleep. Now I hear the sound change as the flow diminish and I am losing my sleep."

Siddharth wanted to revisit the past 20 years and delve into what disintegrating spirituality in our life and work mean? He expressed the need to for dialogue with the Capitalist and the Hindutva people. "At this meeting we need to also visit the idea of spirituality in action. If protests emerge how will spirituality help us in leading radical work at least in the environmental sphere if not the political? We also have to see whether there is another kind of process which integrates the spiritual with the political," he said.

Brototee narrated a few of examples of environmental and spirituality struggles: The instance of victory over the Vedanta mining company by the tribal communities in saving their deity Niyamraja who dwelled in the mountains; the river and dam issues in Latin America where the natives talked about land and body existing in a strong spiritual; the Tanabhanat movement in Chota Nagpur where the leader had a dream with spiritual connotations that proscribed certain things from occurring on the land.

Urmi's strategies for the next 20 years prescribed engagement with businessmen and politicians and of contextual importance, faith leaders. "To tie in spiritual and environmental values, we need faith leaders who have greater approach to people and command a listening audience," she said and remarked, "Maybe the left leaning movements have shy-ide away from these spaces."

Aspi said, "People have encountered the issue of meaninglessness in life's events, but climate crisis and wars have made the inquiry into the meaning of life more urgent. This meaning cannot be found in just political analysis or technological advances. Meaning can be found in transcendental meaning. Every society will have different ways of defining this transcendental meaning... for some it will be God, Jesus, etc., and when we talk about action it is important to keep in mind this transcendental meaning. We underestimate the role religion plays in society but it is a way of bringing some sort of social coherence, of creating a community... sangh. Now the danger here is that I am spiritual but not religious. If spirituality is completely devoid of religion then there can be contradictions," he said. "In personal life spirituality and religion can be segregated but in social life there needs to be some cohesiveness otherwise there will be privatization of religion," he cautioned and offered an example. "I will follow Christianity, Islam, etc. I will follow what suits me and that is privatization."

Ashim remarked, "Listening to rivers, forests are nice but I deal with people every day. Let the people be the source of your spirituality," and referred to its presence in the congress movement. "Optimism comes from a deep sense of commitment from the people. Spirituality will not come if we don't listen to people. Every people's movement did not follow one ideology but also had this

essence of spirituality of people," he said. "For you and us the cause for action is the same and as long there is a cause for action, there can be secular spirituality which can come from different paths of movements."

Maya panned her lens to cosmic science, faith, spirituality and the liberation theology and posed a question, "Why can't we look at the thinking of self as part of a larger whole? The awe-inspiring nature of the cosmos can be liberating and spiritual in itself. This leads us into all sorts of subjectivity and can also bring us together. The Bhakti poets did it very well. Transcendence can connect with others, not just the atomistic individualism but seeing that all beings are connected."

Walter said, "I don't personally use the term spiritual. In the last 10 years I have been going to a group which does meditation with therapy. There were people coming to do these programmes but I stayed aloof. I just sat by the kitchen and looked at the sky. Yes, the cosmic instils a sense of awe in me and gives me meaning and sense of action but sometimes I also feel this sense of awe is a way of escapism," leaving him with how to deal with escapism and the need for action. He remarked, "Serendipity is probably more important than planning for 20 years."

Bhim observed that nowadays the word of spirituality had become very political. "Believing in self and connecting with the grassroots is important. In every village there's politics around temples and connecting with each other is important."

Indavi spoke of her confusion. "We made the mistake of not addressing the beliefs and religions of communities we are working with. Personal spirituality can calm me down but how can spirituality be used for our movements?" she enquired.

Radhika said, "An example that I can think of is the 'Rights of nature and rivers' movement in changing the anthropocentric jurisprudence to the ecocentric jurisprudence...using belief systems, ideologies, spiritual values stemming from philosophies, traditions and indigenous communities to actually counter the environmental problems in legal terms."

At 2:40 PM, Radhika energised the participants with invigorating dance followed by John's meditative exercise six minutes later.

At 3 PM the session by Ashim commenced.

The session, he said, was to try and address issues of how we understood reality and work out our politics out of that reality. "Would our theory of knowledge and worldview decide how we take action?" he asked. "Part of today's problem is a sort of culmination of a long-term process of our civilization. We can call it climate crisis or crisis of capitalism, or morality in which nature has become the other object," he observed. "There is a long-standing Indian tradition which has looked at reality as non-dual but what we see is the fabrication of dualism/maya. Since the modernity of today has taken the path of dualism, is the urgency to look at reality from a non-dual perspective?" Ashim probed followed by an avalanche of enquiry and historical perspectives.

"We are confronted with Hindu nationalism and how to deal with it? There is an overstatement that social movements do not have spirituality which is false. The Bolshevik revolution was brought up in the Russian Orthodox Church tradition. The Polish movement was steep in Church tradition. The Iranian revolution was inflamed by a strong religious tradition. The Algerian freedom struggle had cultural and spiritual roots," he iterated. "No revolution is ever done without spirituality. The latest farmers' movement in Delhi was sustained because the Sikh order was a part of it," he said. "We all come to terms with it but it is time we acknowledge and accept that every movement has and will have spiritual bases."

However, he said there was a distinction between spirituality of a person and spiritual tradition. Hence, the distinction was necessary. In the context of modernity and duality, Ashim defined the individual spiritual trajectory as one who found divinity in one's self that drove the person to follow it throughout life.

Touching on spiritual tradition Ashim saw no distinction between Marxism and socialism, socialism being a part of Marxism. The power of theory was that it was open to new challenges unlike the limitations of ideologies. It was open and free for experiment. Therefore, he said Marx's theory could be useful for everything that we are dealing with.

Moving to Hindutva, Ashim said it was a combination of 'Hindu' and Nationalism'. Noting nationalism as a modern concept, he said, people of these new modern created nations were structured in nation building, where nationalism became a dominant process. "In different times, nations have different social and political basis," he said. "In India it stemmed from anti-imperialism but lamented the disjoint of the 3 elements of caste, nation and class in the Indian national Congress Socialist movement. The Congress Socialist did address the question of class and nation in which Gandhi played an important role but did not address the issue of caste."

Critiquing the Indian spiritual tradition, he said it had everything except 'human'. "Ambedkar brought back the 'human' in the context of nation. Ambedkar began working on the distinction of 'secular' as a process and not just ideology but it stopped after his death and neither his disciples nor the left took it up.

"The RSS took over the Sanskritization tradition and institutions took up the process while the secularization process was not taken up...all that was looked at was who is secular and who is not...and we didn't want to address it because we did not want to address the caste issue and because we did not look at caste, we also did not look at spirituality to some extent.

"This is where Indian spiritual tradition split into gyana and bhakti tradition but it remained in the Brahminical and Shudra space. Within the tradition of path of knowledge only Brahminical people were allowed. Ambedkar brought gyana into the bhakti Marg and considered inclusion of Kabir and Nirgun in the movements symbiotic. But 'caste' has divided spirituality into duality." he regretted.

One of the lessons, Ashim proffered was that duality was all about contradictions and this tension had to be held in reality. There was the 'material' and the 'ideal' and there was something called 'social' which was objectivity and that we missed it in most of our understanding.

"The modern world," Ashim concluded, "has found divinity in humanism and humanity as it exists today and therefore both exists-socialism and capitalism. There is a need to bring together bhakti marg of divinity and gyana marg of humanity in our social movements. The category of 'human' and therefore 'human rights' did not exist in Indian traditions and this needs to be brought in through the modern theories of socialism."

It was noted that the book 'Shudra' was recommended for reading.

Ashim's session then opened for discussions

Maya lead with her question, "Narendradev (a leftist) taught Buddhism and he was conscious of the caste system. In utopian imagination, the caste system was removed in his book and he was aware of it. How was this caste issue silenced?"

Ashim responded "The tragedy was that he tried to bring in Buddhism and Marxism but Lohia and JP, his successors, did not address this. The mainstream Marxist system felt that if 'class' was addressed, 'caste' would be addressed.

Radhika commented, "The Vankar tradition of weavers in Kutch follows the Nirgun parampara and Kabir as the bhakti movement and as a way of rejecting the caste system but it is neither studied much nor addressed.

Anannya queried, "How do you define gyana marg because in Buddhism we do not accept mediums because we are directly connected with the divinity...connected with each other. Maybe there are blurred lines and we have to address them."

Ashim replied, "In Indian spiritual tradition there is Brahminical and Shudra space. We know that from post modernism tradition.

To a question, "Lenin spoke about idealism and Marx was a materialist thinker. Could gyana marg be idealism and bhakti marg closer to materialism? Or are they crossed?" the answer was, "We cannot make this distinction."

The Session by Annie and Brototee took off next at 4.30 PM.

Participants broke into three groups, each carrying with them a topic for discussion and sharing the process when the groups reconvened. The topics for deliberations were:

Group 1) What do we understand about the nature and structure of the world and the relevance of spirituality? (Is it real, illusion, fragmented, etc?)

Group 2) Can the world be divided on spiritual, political and social lines?

Group 3) How is the spiritual dimension an integral part of understanding the social, economic and the political? (Is our understanding limited without integration?)

Group 1 shared their deliberation projecting the following points:

- The complete technologization of nature, and its total dominance by the technological regime, makes it impossible to be surprised by the mysteries of nature because technology has made everything homogenous and quantifiable.
- The importance of the critique of tradition and traditional values in our work with ecology. Our values should not be imposed on us, but should rather be self-determined. So the work of ecology must contain a strong critique of tradition.
- There is a need to flatten the distinction between human beings and the rest of nature. There is a need to tap into indigenous cultures and religions that work against this species-divide and which look at nature as divine and as having the same intrinsic value as human beings.
- There is a need to expand on our ecological thinking.

Group 2's dissertation evinced a kaleidoscope of perspectives:

- It has already been divided - governments are divided and religions divide the world today.
- When we look at the 'World/Globe', the 'World' is already divided.
- Is the essence of the question 'Can you separate your engagement with the 'World' spiritually or politically/socially?'
- Let's look at the question as it is - so when the term 'World' comes up and we are talking about religion, we can talk about religious divisions but what about spirituality?
- We could also look at socio-political worldviews and spiritual worldviews.
- If we are drawing the line between spirituality and religion - spirituality is a deeper force than religion — spirituality on a common footing is difficult to divide.
- But politics wise we are divided in terms of class, caste, north-south, etc.
- Engagement with the spiritual has not been the norm in the activist — the left liberal engagement with the 'World' has been non-spiritual and so can we continue this way to the extent it might be anti-religious or anti - spiritual? - could this be a way of understanding the question?
- One can talk about politics as the focal point of spirituality and social. But can economics be spiritual?
- True spirituality can transcend the politics of it all - because you already have a common ground - but that is utopia.
- Spirituality for me is 'universe is one family' this idea exists in the minds of few people but universal spirituality does not exist. Everyone is non-spiritual/atheists when we are talking the religion of others —spirituality exists only in the minds of people.
- There was a level of the Gods making everything work at the human level - politics and sociality in Islamic view.
- Marx's to each according to his need, from each according to his capacity...one gives what is in his capacity and gets what is needed. Can that be the spirituality of Marx?
- But politics will come in when we have to convince others about this viewpoint.
- One point in spirituality...assumption is that politics is a contention of class, caste etc. Is there a way of transcending this debate through spirituality? Maybe if we look at it as politics of humanity it could be spiritual.

Group 3, short of consensus, arrived at:

- Human beings are inherently spiritual
- Spiritual values need to be cultivated
- Spirituality is used to construct ideologies in the non-spiritual dimensions of economic, political and social spheres
- Spirituality has different forms: For some it could be the arts and hence spirituality doesn't have to be grounded just in faith
- Spirituality can provide public movements and cultural practices with sustainability and clarity
- Spirituality is a great mobiliser in bringing people together
- Spirituality is also a personal motivator

Following the presentations, it was time for **Reflections of the day.**

"The whole day," said Aspi, "was a set of reflections. We had many important points mentioned and commented upon. Lessons from Siddhartha's presentation: dialogue with whom and to what purpose. There is nothing as universal dialogue, only which is within a context. There are some things that we need to reflect on about the dialogue process: The RSS statement that Muslims should accept the Babri demolition gracefully is a dangerous shift of the constitution's goalpost. To resolve the problem, we are saying we should go back to the constitution. When the Supreme Court said that it was a criminal act, accepting it was as graceful act is a problem.

"Ashim's stated it is important to listen to the people. Now, I am reading a book about Hindutva which explains that RSS people are successful because they are listening. What are they listening to? For example, a tribal village wants a centre for village gatherings. So, the RSS gives a temple and with that a public space on which they have ownership. In the process, the RSS placed the village deity alongside the mainstream deity thus pleasing the villagers and coercing their agenda on the villagers. Ashim da also stated that there has been no social movement without a spiritual dimension. Milind mentioned that reality is fragmented but it is underpinned by non-duality. But Islam is very dualistic where it is in contradiction with Sufism. Today we also learnt about Marxist history."

Siddhartha commented, "In all our meetings there are so few Muslims. There is a need to have friendships with Muslims and discuss these issues with them."

Ashim said, "RSS is quite intellectually equipped to deal with these problems."

Mirza reflected on the great Hindutva experiment: how appropriation of tribal spaces are done, etc. how RSS volunteers work in the ground level.

Siddhartha cautioned "We will make a mistake if we look at Hindutva as monolithic. Many of the RSS people met and garnered support from Yashwant Singh. Many RSS people don't agree with the present BJP. Since Modi has come into power RSS has become corrupt and the honest people among them are disillusioned. Spaces for dialogue must not be discounted.

Anannya shared some of her reflections, "I feel we are quite spirited; truth is something we discover as we go along. Basavanna's poem and Shiva as lord of the meeting rivers and not as a human form are beautiful things to remember. Dominic talking about construction of gods which has moved away from human nature and importance of becoming open and take what comes, Milind talking about crisis as opportunity to explore inner divinity, changing the way of our politics are some other important points. It is important to study the values that underlie the protest of various kinds and how sacred values have been used for protest."

"Can there be a possible formation of secular spirituality?" she introspected. "A lot of people spoke about lack of integration and also importance of awe, affection, emotion and that spirituality is not a dry objective study. Spirituality is not escapism but a way of engaging with people and not a dichotomy of the spiritual and the political. Spirituality is not something that is imposed but is a well of creativity for everybody. The point to think about this hypothetical situation is if the left were to give public space, would we suppress the sacred sentiment?"

Ashim asked, "It is true that temples will be built but can we shape the idols and rituals as Left in an organised way?"

Over the exchange, Siddhartha said, "It is much more complex than that. Caste is a reality in India which will not go away for a very long time. Caste is also hierarchical. So, it will be necessary to see if the present government can create a caste less Hindu community or caste based Hindu community?"

Maya concurred, "There is a golf club for IAS and police officers in Lucknow. The elections for the golf club are caste based...so, caste is still very dominant and might continue to remain dominant."

The exhaustive day ended with an enchanting evening provided by Radhika about discovering spirituality in dance and movement along with a discourse on the political history of Bharatnatyam and other dance forms in India.

DAY 3

Commencing with gathering some responses to the previous day as to the self-enquiry into what each were doing, Milind explained that the response was always given to Vikalp Sangam on day 2. A Vikalp Sangam could be a combination of workshop, training workshop, consultation, etc. and might look scattered but there was a larger idea behind it and so it was important to remain open. That said, the session by Anannya broke through at 10 AM.

Navigating on the Sacred and the Secular, Anannya steered the session with the question, "If we say spirituality offers a space to look at things differently, then what is it? Is it more than religion and if so, how? Indigenous communities had a concept of sacredness - tree, lake, fruit, etc. which have certain rituals? What is this sacredness?"

"What is the feminine principle?" she asked. "We are aware of the Brahmanical nationalist capture of Hindutva, so we are sceptical of the word 'Hinduism', but most of these ideas are before any ism... We are aware of the misuse of religion, and when we are using certain concepts please be aware that I am aware of the critique but we don't have time to go into that

"Is religion the opium of the masses? Marx's critique of Friedrich Hegel's philosophy states that the criticism of religion disillusioned man so that the man can act from his/her own agency and self. Advaita Vedanta (AV) would completely agree with this because in AV there is complete directive to depend on self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Liberation is possible here and now, anyone can get liberation. There is no authority out there that controls it. There is no priest or book. There is the Anubhav: removal of ignorance which leads to liberation.

"The current state of humanity is under hypnosis either by religion or secularism. Anything that takes power from you is something that should be taken away and what takes power away, the sense of dualism... the separation from self from our true self cause ignorance and hypnosis. This distancing from our own power is ignorance."

Illuminating on the feminine principle in spiritual tradition, Anannya said, "This is not the feminine as in the biological woman. It is a metaphor and because of the anthropo-gisation of everything feminine and masculine it has become biological. The actual thing is that it transcends the duality - it is both - relative reality and absolute reality."

Delving deeper, she postulated that the feminine principle was about living on the razor's edge, in-describable and inexplicable it not either or, it's all together. "This was explained by Ramakrishna Paramhansa- he brought the feminine principle and AV together," she instanced.

"What does 'feminine' translate into as a grounding experience?" she asked and iterated it was constantly being aware of radical change. "Everything is a radical change, understanding of our location with humility, because we are human and have lovable constraints which we must accept with humility. There is a delight in the 'We don't know' which is not a limitation in contrast."

Expounding further, Anannya said the feminine represented impersonal fierceness and love of truth and self- feminine principle as beingness. "In AV there is a term 'neti-neti'- 'not this -not this' as a process of trying to get to the absolute reality. AV is like a rocket flying straight towards transcendence but the way of the 'feminine' is a much more scenic route. There is spiritual significance in matter, life, there is divinity in everything and being-ness in everything. It is collective, democratic, and egalitarian. It is not obliterating differences or a hierarchy of differences or the Feminine as non-binary. It is not a critique of good vs. bad, feminine vs. masculine. The notion of the opposite does not exist - it is about finding that razor's edge – the balance, the middle path."

Examining the principles feminine principles revealed, she cited Marx's dictum of free development of each being a condition for free development of all as she did Roy Bhaskar, English philosopher best known for initiating the critical realism movement who said the minimum necessary unit for emancipation was the whole human race and that there was no one agent alone responsible for being an agent of change.

On the issue of alienation, she said, we wanted to bring back connection. The world has been disenchanted and spirituality was a path to reenchant and remove alienation through spirituality. "It is a field of change," she said. "Spirituality is not just about absolute reality but also about the relative reality. We have to be open to knowledge different from what our current knowledge is. We have to be open to different perceptions, intuitions, and other sources of knowledge. Otherwise it will limit us."

Posturing problems of the individual/collective in the social justice domain, "We are all talking about collectivity but the key is individual desire for spiritual growth. We cannot force people to spiritually grow. That is the problem with forceful religion as well as political ideology," she observed. "The purpose of 'Sadhana' is not about what we get but the removal of ignorance. Having own power means having immediate knowledge of self not mediated by Vedas, teacher, etc. But we are all victims of master/slave relations excluding the preordained collective agency which has to be constructed through a non-binary approach and constant negotiation and discovery. Striking the resonance of beingness from the collective will happen with the willingness to open to the experience."

Anannya said we were witnessing the capture of spirituality and our response has been inadequate with apologetic and defensive argument. We were also overthinking and overestimating the possibility of capturing this miasma. The best process of action when confronting this miasma was not to collide with it but to walk to the side of it and start afresh, she suggested. Narrating a Zen Buddhist story of a man of the top of a hundred-foot pole, she entreated we might have to come down that pole to be open and courageous and quoted Roy Bhaskar, "It is not a war between war and peace. In other words war and peace are not equal opposites. If we do that then we are limiting ourselves."

Proposing a new pedagogy in learning, she said, "It cannot be an anachronism. We can't use the pedagogy of the old times; it has to be of the current times. We are using old keys when the locks have changed. We have to be open to new ways of acting and being seeing." We would also have to get away from building temples, churches, etc. to undertake change of consciousness in creating the new way of being, she said and acknowledged, "It is difficult."

Discussions followed moderated by Maya centering on the importance of unlearning and relearning to co-create and understand the limitations of today's mainstream religions to explain to the world.

Laxmi said she would like to hold the space with Anannya's talk and looking at consumption as inner crisis and a call for consciousness to address this.

Urmi was clear that the interpretation of mainstream religion in social media and text taken out of context was a problem especially of the younger generation. "This has to be addressed," she conceded.

Rukmini built on Urmi's point about misinterpretation and how pointed at how religion became dogma.

Siddhartha said, "You mentioned in your journey about troubled ego and first finding ego before handling it. This has to do with the troubled collective and individual egos for which the response is Hindutva. Is there a sense of wounded collective ego which unless addressed, manifests Hindutva as the response?"

Walter said, "One thing we don't talk about is that religion is actually based on indoctrination from birth which we have to recognise with its blindness, principles and practices. But, we have not recognised the power and interpretations and the problems of indigenous religions. The failure of left ideology is that they derided all practices superstitious. Perhaps, we have also been dogmatic."

Ashim noted that every religious tradition had a sense of community as was also with the principle of communism. In the modern world, he said, communism still been tried to do that where mainstream religions had failed in some sense, and added. "Roy Bhaskar keeps talking about transition at an individual level. But there is also limitation to that in the sense that capitalism cannot be defeated by the individual so the community is important — for example the collective of working class is still active everywhere. In this regard there is a mirroring in the spiritual world and the Marxists tradition and the knowledge system."

Walter said, "We cannot condemn theory with practice and vice versa. If we talk with theory vs. theory there can be a dialogue but not between theory and practice."

Tea seemed to suggest a break from the intensity of the parleys but when discussions resumed at 11.30 AM, the ensuing dialogue had far from lost the rhythm of the morning's vigour.

Srilakshmi, wondering whether spirituality might have more to offer felt the consideration of indigenous practices and rituals pertinent as religions was problematic. She felt it was important to address how spirituality and social justice work could co-exist? "How women hold life and spirituality might be different but that has to be acknowledged," she held.

Anannya's answer to an earlier question of Radhika's to her on how after all her learning and intellectual journey, she could negate everything was, "It's the way I am! I love living on the razor's edge. It is a dance and constant negotiation. It is not an intellectual joy. I am passionate with work and certain detachment which was not there earlier but came in later which is very helpful for my own survival. The practice has instilled a kind of recognition which is the being-ness of the divinity in everything and that is bigger than anything."

"If something is not working out, I feel sad but I also have a sense of the bigger picture and I am able to recover quite rapidly. That builds resilience and hope. My work is provisional and of organization, it is a bit like securing the ego... collective and individual ego. So my work is provisional in the relative reality to create an environment of well-being, justice etc." She explained, "By provisional I mean it is not the end of the goal. The goal post is. In this there are setbacks, victories, and that is part of the journey. Crisis is important for relative reality as it is a space of 'becoming' - not a space of it is as it is... it is changing. I am happy with not knowing, the Joy of 'don't know!' she submitted but crowned it sagaciously with, "There is so much imposed silence on spirituality and religion. Sometimes I use the terms spiritual and religion as synonyms but in essence, it is important to listen to the sound of silence."

Mirza asked "How does spirituality respond to the destruction around, for example, a highway going through a sacred forest? Sometimes traditional knowledge systems find themselves incapable of handling with the scale of these interventions, once that knowledge is lost there is nothing to fall back on. How can spirituality play a role in persuading the political powers?"

Maya concurred that this was happening everywhere, as in Uttarakhand and deplored how the nature of pilgrimage which imbibed hard work was changing.

Mirza instanced how government action thwarted the concerned movement of the construction of multiple dams and spoke of the dangers of deforestation and monoculture forestry. He didn't resist the temptation to scorn at how people saw dams as temples of development!

Dominic acknowledged that traditional systems helped in farming but with erratic rainfall now, he feared that the system was collapsing.

Mirza expressed his concern on making the Namami Brahmaputra River a Hindu river and therefore removing the Muslim and indigenous communities from their connection to this civilizational source. This happened in 2017 and also happened in Sindhu festival. This way the government is saying that every river in India is Ganga... and therefore every river is a Hindu river. That is problematic."

Radhika said the intrinsic meaning of 'Ganga' denoted a confluence of every river into it. It has been an ancient concept. Therefore, we have Panchganga, Wainganga etc. she enumerated. She regretted how this divine bedrock of civilisation could be degraded for the purpose of political expedience.

Indavi, castigating the principles of capitalist production systems of today fuelling climate change, said, "No religion considers the principles of capitalism sacred. When we talk about our spiritual responses, we have to counter these driving capitalist forces and

use religion for that. We don't have to create a new religion...we have to use this idea of saying No! Use minimum, reduce, recycle and return to counter the capitalist forces. And we have to work on ourselves also before speaking with everyone."

Anannya added, "We have to counter different forces together and not separately. This is not an issue of theory vs.practice," she said. "We are at a point where a single uplift of any religion and burdening it is not going to be meaningful."

Ashim commented although the Satnarayan Puja was of Hindu importance, the leftist advocated its confines to the domestic realm in order to uphold secularism. "We need to address the need for divinity in a multi-religious way," he said, drawing the example of the Sarvodaya tradition of universal uplift. "Sanskritization process was always happening but the BJP made it a state sponsored process, contrary to Sarvodaya's 'Progress for all'."

Laxmi said there was a need for something new but we didn't know the ingredients and we were groping our way with all our practices and traditions. My response would be that we need change of consciousness. "It is a lonely place but now I am realizing that people are open to listening more and more to this now." Self-inquiry cannot come from 'without'. It had to come from 'within' she said. "It is an individual process but we also create a collective to scale up. There is tension, there is urgency but the process is slow. It is also a tension of what is dying and what is birthing," she believed and said interconnectedness was important in filling the emptiness in us. "We can reach out to people with interconnectedness and I am here to find that community."

While accepting that there was tension around spirituality and religion and the idea of capitalism, Annie, on an optimistic note said, "I would like to hear more of the underpinning values of respect, etc. and how do we make a transition...values could maybe help us find a common ground. Personally, I moved away from the Church where you were told 'Someone is watching' to spirituality where the values of love, compassion is not out of guilt but just the way to be."

John D'Souza said, "Our response to the current crisis is also influenced by economic factors and polarization of values amidst our societies. The older generation responds differently while the youth are preoccupied with the material world. We are not able to address this."

Maya summed up saying, "We have dealt with the inner self and the issue of scale. There is a sense of enormity of the crisis which cannot be dealt with individually: the economic issues, issue of polarization, nationalistic religion, loss of traditional etc.," and sought, "What can we pick up from some religion for example as response to escalating consumption vs. 'reduce and reuse' etc. From Anannya's presentation and Ashim's point about how many such opportunities are already there and how we just have to use them? We can have multi-faith prayers or go back to damaging lifestyles. No uplift of any religion is going to work." Maya saw the need to rethink and reckoned the need to invest in much more emotional, spiritual, intellectual and physical labour to reconcile the individual and collective and develop the ability to be on the razor's edge and be comfortable with it.

Following next was the session by Aspi and John Clammer on Well-being, love and justice.

Igniting the session, Aspi, said, "We are talking about changing paradigms here...trying to open doors with new keys." There were two paradigm shifts in development; the first being development, then sustainable development, he tracked. "We were talking about GDP, per capita income as an indicator in the old development paradigm. From there we drew the idea of Gross National Happiness from Bhutan as an alternative indicator, he said. The indicators of well-being were different from that of GDP, as a result of change in the paradigm which was closely linked to politics and not liked by the capitalists, he added.

"Then came the rights to river which was a shift in the legal paradigm, moving away from the anthropocene and considering rivers and mountains as living and judicial entities," he informed and quoting Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 13:13 "...and now as faith, hope, charity, but the greatest of it is charity," Aspi said, "This means love of all humankind. In a loose sense it means compassion."

John Clammer, in his lift off, iterated that the word spirituality was a strange amorphous word which disappeared as you tried approaching it. It was like the definition of time, he analogised, saying, it escaped when you approached it, having you trying to approach it from the things you avoid, e.g., religion.

"To some extent, the notion of well-being is also culturally relative," he said. "We have different notions of well-being but there is a core and how it connects to compassion, justice etc." The notion of a safe-space, where you were secure and rights were observed, instilled a sense of harmony and could be creative, he apprised. "This used to be the idea of well-being."

Moving into understanding of spirituality, John Clammer said he had two ideas from his work and practice. "First," he explained, "is the relationship between spiritual or material historically, not just philosophically but also practically." Narrating a story, he said, he had a colleague who wanted to walk around naked. She had been to a nun's school and when taking a bath, they had to be fully robed and in later life she reacted so strongly to it that she became a nudist.

"If you trace the issue of the position of body, you can find huge damages being done materially, and it is also a spiritual damage. Also, you rarely find spirituality and the economy in the same field. I work with solidarity economics, which builds on communes, mutual sharing of networks and commons, which can be drawn out and where economic life can be practiced in ways which aren't ecologically damaging or socially disruptive.

"When I worked in Singapore with one of my students, I noticed that the fishing folk would sell fish to a Chinese middle man as was done with vegetables, and not with each other. When asked, they said buying with each other would break their social relations- of both coastal and inland people. Stopping of the breakage of social relations led to the need for the Chinese middle man.

"So, these kinds of economies are ways of rethinking economics. Mainstream neoclassical economics is the dominant way of thinking about economic relationships, values and the world, and once you deconstruct it, you'll find it in a different way."

Virtual economy/ the neoclassical economies, John Clammer said, created a category called efficiency. "But in New Guinea," he recounted, "Australian aid agencies started a project from stone to steel to improve efficiency, thinking that if you gave them steel tools, they would be very efficient. But after a year, the progress was exactly the same as before the introduction of steel tools. The answer was that the tools allowed for harvesting in half the time. So, they devoted the spare time to their favourite activity: Dancing. And secondly, they were afraid people with the tools would become richer, and they didn't want to have this economic inequality."

"A huge number of our current crises and planetary problems are traced back to our economy," he said. "If I am hurrying someone, and say I am unable to talk to you because I am having fun, they might get upset but if we say we are going to work they wouldn't mind, because we use economic values to dominate our lives. So, we have to rethink on our economic values and practices."

Utopias were ways in which we could think what socio, economic and political alternatives would look like, John Clammer said. "Marx was opposed to it but in 19th century France there was many such utopian thinking although it was a bit totalitarian."

Art and solidarity economies were powerful mechanisms to open up possibilities for our alternatives and visions; he believed and held that, "Art is one of the few forms of fantasy which is socially legitimate. It is an imaginative act which gives possibility to intervening in the world."

Rumi wrote, John Clammer said, "When one spoke about fantasy and reality, fantasy was actually the stronger." That was because we lived much of our emotional life in fantasy and daydreaming, he said. "We are not rational creatures, we are emotional and imaginative creatures, and secondly, to change society, we need a vision of what the alternative would look like," he said and referred to Octavio Paz, Mexican poet and ambassador to India on whom India had a huge influence who stated in one his essays that imagination was the faculty of humanity to change itself. "We must think seriously about art in the context of spirituality, but should not confuse spirituality with art. It is not the same, but it is the vehicle."

Shifting his trajectory to psychology, John Clammer noted that it was one of the ideas rarely discussed. On the question of what does trigger change, or why do people resist change, or why don't they adopt new ideas, etc., he said, "To find the mechanism of change, or giving a vision of what the future will look like will of course trigger change. No one follows your blueprints/ what happens is that they will become the co-owners of the idea."

Mentioning his former UN boss when working in Sudan for a Canadian aid agency, John Clammer said he had looked at a number of projects which were started and saw constructed roads being abandoned even though much time and money was invested. The reason was that they hadn't involved the people in the planning process, he said. Providing an example of an architect, he said, "If someone comes to you to hire you as an architect of a house, the first thing is to give the client a piece of paper and see what they want to see as a house, and then do a second draft on how it would look professionally. So, always ask what is it that the people would like? The work of the professional is to help that flourish and not impose what they think is relevant and important."

A trail of discussions followed the seismic touchdown with Rukmini moderating the neuron dust.

"We have a few questions to direct the conversation. Chiefly, how do we move towards reflective and purposeful practice in terms of bringing the spiritual dimension into our lives?"

That raised, Bharatwaj touched on Sufism with Orhan Pamuk, the centrality of imagination and the whole universe being imaginary. He expounded on Ibnarabi's talk about the 'bazrakh', the intermediate, how everything was in the state of intersectionality and how it could change, and imagination (khayal) as things not static and identities fluid and always allowing for other manifestations. "Imagination becomes a very important source for that and other new possibilities in the fields of art, cinema and literature, and then other disciplines," he concurred.

Maya followed with, "My contribution to the book is literary utopia and thinking of the romantic poets. Shelly gives us the slogan

"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Thank you for recognizing this, and not pushing it into the margins or forms of escapism. Literature along with humour can stimulate ways of creating solidarities. It is, of course, a subversive tool for totalitarian regimes because they censor humour."

John D'Souza remarked that solidarity economy was an expression of spiritually coming together which is a certain notion of well-being. "We haven't touched on the dimension of cyberspace, with algorithms being the new religion of the digital world," he said.

Srilakshmi mentioned of Anish who wasn't present, describing him as an artist and somatic healer, and recalled an earlier conversation on what is it that he wanted to do. "The initial response was about the problems we needed to solve, and how to use art. But then he took the conversation to another level, asking, what was the world we wanted to imagine for ourselves? And the conversation totally changed, changing the language of what he had to work with."

Dominic said, "Walter mentioned serendipity the other day which has been a part of my life for many years. I was in Goa, at my sister's place when I got a call enquiring whether I wanted to be an Executive Committee member of a South East Asia network. I suggested my partner's name. But they said they wanted a man for this, as they had already found a woman. And then I spent eight years of my life in that position. So if it isn't serendipity, than what is?"

Laxmi expressed that we were all 'Imaginators' and artists. "Sometimes I do workshops to bring together imagination and visioning but as soon as I use the word art or imagination, people shrink saying they are not artists. I do visualizations and there are such intricate ideas and visions that come out. We all have that ability, and collectively we have had that ability to imagine what it feels like to be another being or animal. So we know what it feels, we have these collective memories." she said. "We are rich repositories of all these imaginations, and it might be a good way to reach some sort of a collective space where imagination can take us."

Milind, speaking on starting work on a book ten years ago said, "I and the other editor had thought about putting together a work of fiction and approached some people to write stories of their utopias. The dismissal of our idea anchored on scepticism such as...Who writes about utopia? They are not interesting enough! But things have since changed on what comes under speculative fiction. I was also thinking where something like the Kashmir files can be slotted. How does it play with the human psyche?" he wondered and in afterthought said, "It can be used to create a kind of dystopia within living realities."

Srilakshmi said, "The word you brought out is trauma, and the idea of collective wounds. When you look at trauma psychologically, it is how a person felt of an event. It is not a rational recollection. Imagination is necessary for how it is felt. And that is what is coming out. How BJP coming into is how things happened in Congress."

Mirza, referring to the partition, mentioned that there was the notion of the long partition and instanced CAA-NRC as a continuation of that partition where fears and traumas visit and revisit us. "Lack of dialogue is a prolonged conflict," he asserted.

Rukmini said, "My background is psychology and intergenerational trauma and in trauma we distinguish imagination from fantasy. Imagination serves to create a new reality whereas fantasy allows escape from reality. So, we have to see if we are escaping fantasy or imagining a new reality."

The session after lunch continued with Rukmini explaining the Polyvagal theory on adaptive behavioural strategies of mammalian autonomic nervous systems where the rear part of the anatomy pulls back in the way as if someone is hitting you. Similarly, the psychosomatic system also withdraws. The only way to heal the trauma is to activate the ventral system which activates when there is co-regulation and community to work with. And spirituality in psychology is always associated with connecting with the life force that animates us."

Explaining further, she said, "When I am in the state of disengagement and can't reengage, it needs a community to engage again. A lot of community building work is about ventral engagement: Singing together, or hugging a tree or any sort of engagement which brings us back into engaging with life again. Because a large critical mass of humans has gone dorsal due to intergenerational trauma, a lot of our work needs to be about reengagement with systems and be in a space which enables us to generate alternatives; actually beginning with the spiritual practice which can be with nature, other people etc. The question we are exploring now is *Can the spiritual dimension help in bring out a fuller articulation of the personal, social wellbeing and justice?*"

Urmi shared that she was engaging with spirituality to step out of her own prejudices. "It has made me more open, to help me able to look at another person with more than another ideology," she said and added "Spirituality helps in making me a little kinder, a little more patient. It started at the level of being aware with the practice of yoga."

Sensing negative terms like 'backward' and 'indoctrination' when religion was talked about, Walter said, "I also perceived the distinction between theology and philosophy. So, the next step was to realise that the good part of religion was philosophical; the world views it provides, and some of the things that come from our imagination. And because the imagination of today is different from the ones in the yesteryears, we think the imagination of the past is backward. Yet, the strong support it provides at the

individual and collective level is a testimony of the genuine feeling of solace that religion gives." Walter said his approach to spirituality came through inner work and connecting to his psyche.

Dominic shared his seminary past, the breakaway providing an advantage to have a good mix of inner and outer work.

John D'Souza, on a retro journey, reminisced, "When I look back at the spiritual experiences I felt, I recall that most of them were group experiences; encounter groups, ISAPS, music meditations etc., and I find that a good trigger. Some of the discussions we had in Vikalp Sangam, in Udaipur or Auroville and a couple of sessions on inner work enrich your personal work. This kind of an exchange is important. I think we have to come up with another term more magnetic than 'inner work' to engage with other groups and initiatives of the Sangam."

Ashim said, "In a movement there is interiority and exteriority: There is a person you believe in first; mentor or buddy who gives you a healthy sense of things. For me left thinking has been liberated thinking. One incident in my first strike that comes to my mind was of an UG activist during the emergency. We didn't know where we were going and I was late, he waited for 22 hours for me which depicted his unquestioning sense of responsibility. I had a panic attack but I realized I was responsible for 600 people who gave me the feeling that I was their leader. I had to make a quick situation assessment. "Belief in what you do prepares you for how to countenance it when you are jailed," Ashim said. "It is when your beliefs crack the crisis happens, irrespective of whether the person who made you believe in something did or didn't do the job. In every movement such a process happens, and it is not necessarily only for the spiritual journey. And for me this works, and I will keep working on it since I am committed to it. I am a first-generation refugee, and lived in slums, and those elements also reflect who I am. So how you engage with exterior work depends on what you have in the interior world."

Anannya resonated with, "I was talking about the building of the healthy ego and definitely activism saved me. I have a degree in computer science which didn't save me. My activism was my therapy. Engaging with the exterior world can be highly therapeutic. Since I faced violence in my life, and my antenna of injustice was always a bit sharp, when the opportunity to fight for justice was offered, I started working on political prisoners' rights and later on I transitioned to the women's struggle. What was therapeutic was the opportunity to address injustice. So, when I returned to India from the US, I went to organize workers in Gurgaon, which is the largest industrial hub. I built a union there over the years. There was raw violence just 20kms away from the parliament. In one of the struggles we had, workers were locked out of the factory and the labour contractors came and kidnapped one of the workers, threatening that once they were kidnapped, you would never get them back. We were in a state of shock. I declared at the gate that we go on hunger strike!

"At that time, I assumed that the decision was coming from me. Now when I think about these moments with complete clarity, the moment of that logical call for a hunger strike came from an unthinking source of insight. I recognize those sources of insights now. We have to recognize those sources and that each one of us has it. This source is like a well. Use a bucket and take water from the well and use it and once it finishes, fill it again. What works best would be to have the bucket full of water always. The interior and exterior are highly connected but recognizing the source of things is important, as nothing can really stay unless it is recognized," she advised.

Milind vectored on the book 'Diamond approach' of A.H. Almaas, an alias of Hameed Ali, Kuwaiti American author who taught that any inner work lead to getting closer to one's essence. He recommended acknowledging it as a necessity.

Bhim, long on the silent side of the articulations said, "I work with Panchayat workers. I grew up in a joint family where there was wife beating and there was the law in Maharashtra which stated that one Panchayat woman needs to be elected. And one Patel woman was elected and within two months she finished the work. Interpreting the imagination of masses is how we do that." He recited an Udaan poem, 'when you work with the people, it can't be for them, but always with them.' The source of spirit comes from my childhood," he asserted.

Dominic, on the recognition of violence in us said, "I dreamed of annihilating the person who was responsible for being unjust to many tribal people. When I came to know that he was killed by the Naxalites, the lesson was how much of his violence was there in me. We really recognize the violence in us when someone provokes us. But nothing changes; violence begets violence despite the futility of violence.

Siddhartha, on the notion of imagination in the context of Hindutva said "Gandhi's imagination was Ram Raja. The Hindutva utopia is also Ram. Gandhi was fascinating because he drew from his imagination and from tradition. Hindutva is using similar ways of interpretation. In Fireflies, during the Ganesh puja, we used to have a celebration here when we would have this discussion with the villages around us: If Ganesh represented knowledge and it is linked to vision, what is our vision during this puja? If Ganesh is the symbol of removal of difficulties, what are the difficulties we have in the family, village, panchayat and world? And how are we going to be responsible in dealing with these problems? If Ganesh is half human and half nature, he is the bridge between it and yet we are going around polluting the lakes with these idols with toxic paints. So these villagers stopped using paints and decked the statues with flowers.

"Religion and tradition are interpretations," Siddhartha said. "Lokmanya Tilak extolled by Gandhi as the maker of modern India but considered as the father of the Indian unrest by the colonials, used Ganesh to rally against the British, and now Shiv Sena has used Ganesh as anti-Muslim symbol. Everything is an interpretation. We had a discussion on World Earth day almost 20 years ago on our responsibility to take care of the earth. But, I noticed that there was no passion in the discussion. And then some of us sat together and thought of Site who emerged from the earth and reclaimed by the earth. So, we put up a Site temple. People have weddings there now, and do puja, and it have become a symbol of the strength of womanhood. A Latin American example is the 'Pachamama', revered as 'Earth Mother' by the Incas of the Andes in South America.

"Our discussion is on building an alternative to Hindutva. Ten years ago, some of us would have frowned upon it but if this discussion is to navigate to larger circles, we need to share this with other groups. I am a founder of Fedina, which is involved with trade unions and we could look at it."

Rukmini said, "It is only when we are embodied that there is the possibility for co-creation and imagination. A lot of the examples are also how we are immersed in reality."

Ashim said, spiritually was about linking with divinity and humanity. "We could have engaged more with the economics of it and how we linked."

Decelerating from sonic velocity, Srilakshmi and Radhika looped into a Sufi spin for a reengagement of the body, inviting each of the participants to find their rhythm and movement. The moment called for each to find their anchor and space as they received and gave from the sky and the earth.

Resettled, the participants broke into small groups to put on chart paper schematics on the initiatives that could be taken around the theme of 'Integrating spirituality into social justice work'.

In the evening, a tour of the Fireflies campus was conducted by Siddhartha, acquainting the participants with the representative art works which exuded with spirituality inspiration and the secular intellect.

A Film was screened by Aspi after dinner.

DAY 4 – the last day of the conference

The toll of the bell reverberating on the campus at 9:40 AM that morning signalled the participants that it was time for presentations and discussion on day 3's chart exercises.

Presenting their chart, Bhim, Aspi and Augustine outlined their inquiry.

We spent time in getting clarity about the consensus between us about our idea of human values which should be at the centre, and what emerged was:

- Educating ourselves on the meaning of spirituality and its relevance
- We can plan many things but how to apply it and relate to spirituality values
- We first need to train ourselves: we need to do homework, analyse and critique it to infuse spirit in our work
- The importance of worldview of spiritual and economic systems
- Use of skillful means - for example in Maharashtra we use kirtan for social reform
- We ourselves need to be clear about economic aspects integrating with spirituality before we engage with conversation
- Taking the story narrated by John Clammer about the tribals who did not increase their production but spent their time dancing in order maintain economic parity, we need to discover our source of ideas and inspiration
- Note the mandala on our chart. In our mandala we saw spirituality in economics so we put the human at the center and other values subsequently in other circles around it
- And to bring this to the community we can use skillful means like kirtans, bhajans, dance, storytelling etc.

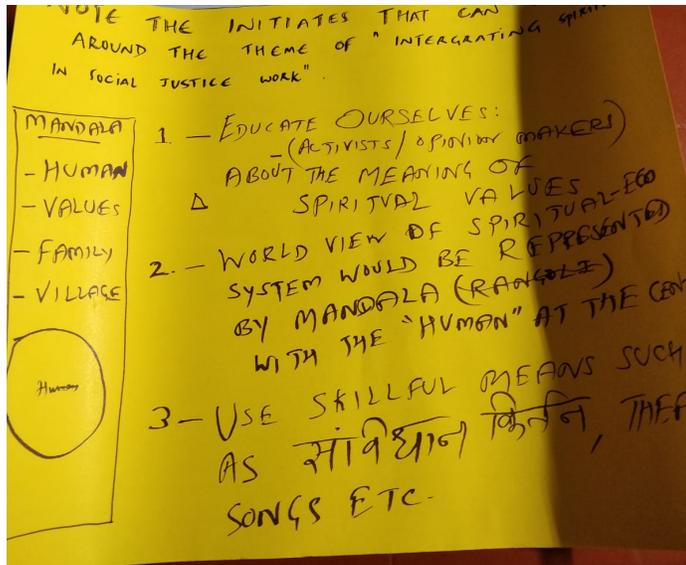


Illustration of the chart.

Brototee, Pankhuri, Ashim, John D'Soua and Walter followed with their chart.

- Spirituality in economic initiatives
- When we are talking about solidarity economy, what does that mean, and what is local area economy?
- See some initiatives on the VS website
- Local co-ops, small producers, food networks
- Idea would be to understand how can there be exchange and planning for these initiatives and what spiritual values will work in these systems
- How do we conceptualize economic initiatives and different values which will be needed to energize them?
- What are the ways in which decentralized IP systems function?
- We would like to do a regional Vikalp Yatra - our group will engage with initiatives which are similar to this framework and find solidarity between them and us

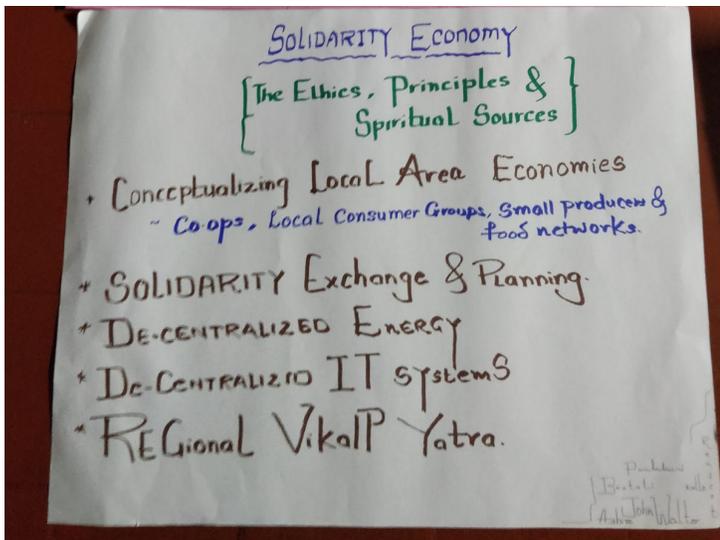


Illustration of the chart

Maya, Siddhartha, Urvi and Rukmini delved into the contents of their exploration

- Discussed the importance of the heart of the other
- Many upper caste Hindus have a sense of victimhood and humiliation — maybe this sense of victimhood has to be addressed since this is used as tool now
- Is there a way to say that response to victimhood is not Hindutva and that these things happened several hundred years ago?
- We can't change history but we need to deal with it. If we don't deal with it, it will be hijacked by others and therefore it is important to look at it
- Be more inclusive and bring faith leaders into the fold
- All religions need to do hermeneutic and bring out what is relevant
- Knowledge of the fundamentals of Islam and its interpretation within the community and outside
- Also include interfaith leaders and Muslim practitioners and non-practitioners, etc.
- Importance of inner work
- Need for more interfaith events and opportunities

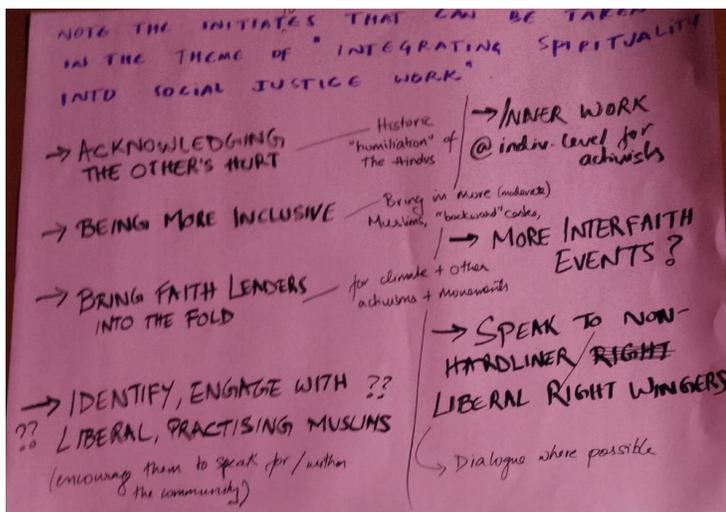


Illustration of the chart

Bharatwaj, Annie, Radhika, Jala and Laxmi offered their work next

- Questions and relationship between theory and praxis and values and interpretation
- Build intermediary space between theory and practice - the relationship between the two needs to be nurtured
- We structured that in a Sufi form –Barzakh is an intermediary space so creating such spaces is important
- We talked about core of theory and core of practice informing each other
- For example, LGBTQ movement has informed the theory. Similarly how spiritual theory can inform practice and vice versa?
- The relationship between theory and practice must be circular
- The values of theory and practice should feed each other
- We wanted it to be a fortuitous circle as a step forward
- Create safe spaces for youth discussions about different religions, etc.
- The interpretations between theory and practice should not stop and one should keep the 'Go further' story from RamakrishnaParamhansa
- Even Freud spoke about interpreting dreams. We should not stop even if we feel the interpretation is over

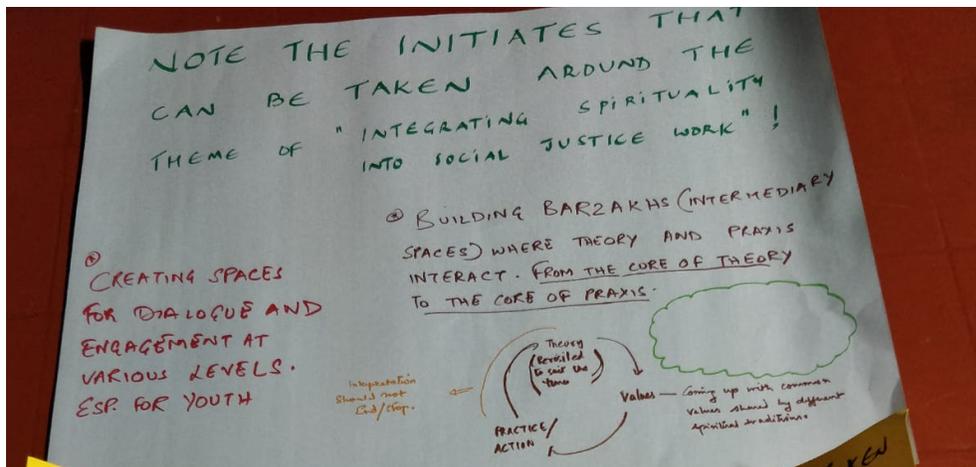


Illustration of the chart

Conversations were exchanged among the participants after the presentations, moderated by Srilakshmi.

Aspi recommended reading 'History of Islam and Life of Christ' by Raza Aslan and The Essence of Sufism by Karl Ernst. Other authors to be read were Rusmir Mahmutcehajic, Seyyed Hossen Nasr and Syeda Hamid.

Milind offered to start study circles within Maharashtra related to Marathi saints, poets, etc. which can be taken back to the field. He mentioned about reprint editions of some rare books like Tukadoji Maharaj.

Ujwala said, "There is an initiative to invite students to the library, and for the public to start discussions around the values of the constitution of India."

Srilakshmi said, "Symbolic re-interpretations are needed for example reinterpreting Sita as a power not as a victim."

Siddhartha noted, "This is a rich discussion and the Maharashtra group should immediately work on this study circle."

Anannya agreed saying, "These discussions and exercises are great. We want to educate, broadly speaking, without any goal orientation. But there is also a way of structuring our education - values, human, solidarity in terms of economy, interfaith, theory and practice. Perhaps there is a way of using these themes for education. The idea of victimhood spoken by Siddhartha needs to be addressed deeply. Regional yatra for understanding initiatives and educating the people is also a good idea. The issue of skilful means and reinterpreting symbols are all good ideas."

Siddhartha asked, "Can there be a VikalpSangam on all these points with this focus in mind?"

Indavi asked, "What is tribal faith? How do we educate ourselves with some authentic history and theories of tribals? When we say we should understand tribal religion/faith, we also need to read literature about it to understand it better. So, how do we go about it? When we speak about the climate crisis, we say that we should all follow tribal traditions. Where do we find these tribal traditions? In every religion there are some basic values. We have to have easily accessible documents which speak about these basic values which are in our constitution and are also in all the religions."

Milind said that Vikalp sangam could help educating on indigenous worldviews. "Torger A. Olsen and several others have written a lot about it. The Gondi tradition in South Central India has some writings also," he said.

Dominic said, "From a constitutional perspective, each of us have a right to follow whichever religion we want but there are these sub layers of Hindu and Christian push in tribal hamlets. There are specific perspectives of how tribals relate to the environment and the seasons in which they sow and harvest and have particular festivals. You can notice a transition because of this push." He expressed concern over the conflict that between the right to have one's own religion and of those who get converted. "With the conversion you interfere with the calendar of the tribal festivals and their cultural rights," he stated.

Laxmi ventured, "There is some answer in the tribal traditions with respect to the ecological crisis, for example, their association with land, forests, etc., yet, despite the thinking about indigenous traditions on a global scale, we might not find it in the tribal communities around us but that does not mean that we put the entire onus on them for the answers." She recommended reading Tyson

Yunkaporta of the Aboriginal Apalech clan on 'How indigenous thinking can save the world' and informed that there was a lot about this in Latin America as with VS here.

Annie probed, "How do we inform the anti-capitalist transitions? How do we look at our transition about land? That link with indigenous traditions will be useful. The tribal traditions have believed that we are not separate from nature but are a part of it."

Maya expressed her concern over losing indigenous dialects. "Losing them is loss of traditions," she said and drew comfort from the work on this by Ganesh N. Devy, known for setting up the Adivasi Academy and the People's Linguistic Survey of India. "Folk tales are a good place to begin," she remarked.

Ashim examined, "Do we have an organised framework coming out of this discussion? All that we have been talking about needs to work in an economic framework and this was missing earlier. Only when we talk about education (whether of tribal traditions or something else) and build it with the economic solidarity process, alternatives will come up." Seeing the need for a solidarity economic framework to hold all these worldviews together, he contended, "Can we think of 10 areas within India which can project concrete examples of solidarity economy? Unless we move away from the capitalist economy, we won't be able to work on these education or knowledge systems. "How do we socialize the area of solidarity economics and how can these local traditions inform solidarity economics," he pursued, acknowledging the importance of the framework for theory and practice to come together. Citing Roy Bhaskar's philosophy on how frameworks could be brought down to objectives and strategies, Ashim opined that the Interfaith framework looked very dispersed at the moment and factoring on the core elements needed for the interfaith framework, he raised the banner, "Global and social peace, nation building and how can solidarity economics be built?"

Srilakshmi asked, "Do we want economics as a base? Can there be a spiritual base on which the 'Social' and the 'Economic' can be held?"

Anannya, agreeing with Ashim said we needed some kind of a holding frame for whatever we might do to have a sense of direction. "This can be conceptual or structural, she said. "Ashim postulated solidarity economics as a conceptual holding frame but it could also be an integration of 'social', 'political' and 'economic' in this frame. Can we have some kind of geological and ecological mapping in our head as to what is holder and who is the holder? If it comes from the communities, how are we making space for them?"

John D'Souza thought of creating a small session in Mumbai to discuss what we were doing here and relate around that. "Also address the IT systems which are becoming the religion of tomorrow and establish how all this is relevant to the IT world and their interest in the area of local economics."

Laxmi, revisiting the issue of scale said, "We tend to look at the big scale immediately but we are talking about subtle reorientation and positioning to see the world changing slowly."

Dominic, in relating to issue of scale and the tribal context said, "The initiative of indigenous worldview is evident, dealing with the larger scale but we also have to do our ground work. On the idea of peace spoken by Ashim, we have to rediscover what peace. We also have to rework the notion of nation building and 'Economic Solidarity' is one arena most likely to succeed if done properly. Feeding all this into the indigenous perspective will be a great way forward."

Urvi surmised that globally interfaith and climate justicemovements were accelerating. "We can play a role in that," she affirmed.

Bhim informed on his grass root dynamic, "In the context of nation building, we are working with local government and we are getting some ideas and using them. We are working on 'SavidhanSaksharGaon' to create good programmes for people. We are working with the Election Commission and on democracy. We are working on how voters are categorised just as voters and not citizens. That needs awareness and we are working on that through fellowship, etc. Dalit movement, women's movement, youth movement needs mobilization. 'Hargharsavindhansakshar' campaign is also going on."

Stepping back a bit, Walter voiced in reflection, "We spoke about exploring and educating ourselves and that we should not imitate the other side and jump into symbols and totems, etc., and needing to centre ourselves on solidarity and localization. We are all discharging actions but how do we coalesce these actions and bring them together and form a framework. How do we localize food, energy in local areas in our cities and integrate with the rural areas and not be parasitic?"

Radhika, also taking a step back said, "Maybe first we need to secure our good ego through various spiritualpractices or religions and then look at the outer world. Especially for the younger generation, we first need to do our own inner work in order to address the challenges which lie ahead of us in terms of climate change and social justice. Maybe that framework is also important."

Siddharthaasked, "How are we dealing with these crises at an individual level? Some of us chant, read, and meditate."

Anannya holding up her frame, entreated, "While we are holding frames, we have to intersect various scales and locations. I am still struggling to hold the conceptual and geological, location-based interventions."

Dominic sensed, "We have addressed some of these questions inorganically and informally. We have individually shared what one is experiencing but there has been some kind of sharing on these questions already."

Walter, unconvinced of the case for a common frame as yet, asserted, "We can do that later but maybe we need to do some sharing of the personal right now: **what we came with, what did happen here, what are we taking with us?**"

Brototee, on solidarity economy said, "Our idea was to go back to the petals of transformation. Going to the example given by Radhika about the Vankar weaving community of Kutch on the first day, it would be interesting to see whether they had a spiritual basis which formed their collective and impacted their profession?"

Milind contemplated on the possibility of maybe imagining these frames in pictures. "We came here to talk about spiritual dimensions of social justice and climate crisis and how that will help us deal with our own spiritual dimension. What if we look at integrating our own spiritual dimension in our work and hold that as a framework?" he enquired.

Maya gathered that Anannya and Walter focused on the 'personal' and that Rukmini spoke about our own language that was so violent. "We are still thinking about fixing the world. But we first have to address our own vulnerability and not knowing and practice what helps us keep hope, resilience and grounding as an individual," she affirmed.

Dominic said, "We were focusing on inner and outer work and we were looking for an institutional framework to hold these processes but if there are already institutional processes holding frames, then use them. If not then create new," he advocated. "We need to look at it from a larger institutional framework. We spoke about starting a wisdom centre which will be an institutional support to hold these frames."

Aspi ruminated, "Integration...integrating and spiritual dimensions - words spoken about! But we never speak about integrating time and space because it is already there but sometimes we lose track of time. The integration has always been there but we have forgotten it and we need to be reminded of them... so we have to RE-REMEMBER the Spiritual dimension in our work, not to integrate because it was always integrated!"

Ashim spoke of his path, "I will work on myself in my own way but I am looking for a collective which is interested in bringing this inner work which we all are forging into a 'togetherness'. I am looking at it from the portal of economic justice and I am not motivated to come back to a gathering or discourse unless there is something coming out of it meaningfully. I am taking the responsibility of working on some of the commitments to take this discourse further. I came here to collectively transform something with the spiritual tradition."

Bharatwaj shared, "I am taking away the relation of theory and practice. My question is that working in the theoretical space, when I take back the question of whether theory itself can be praxis, how can we improve our theoretical engagement? Theory is also associated with organizations and networking but for me the core is the theoretical aspect."

John D Souza, assembling the digital information inflow, scripted vocally, "As I recollect the process of activist relooking at their work and filling a void, and a need for inner work which translates into the spiritual dimension and also how spiritual world is used in the outer world and perhaps consumed and contrived by the masses, a need for intervention is clear," and added, "In the last one or two years, the meetings which we held has been a deep search for that meaning personally." Today, he affirmed, "I feel I can come back to a base and relate to meaning of being that and the entailing social work. I see some things to take forward is how IT guys can relate and not necessarily need to shift to organic farming completely."

Urmi said, "This place has wonderfully dissolved the dichotomy between spiritual space and outer work. The need to do something else is not needed, my work itself is spiritual and I don't need to chase the spiritually. I have to work on myself but I don't look at it separately now. This is what I take away."

Indavi said that when she read the concept note, she had questions of whether she was a spiritual person and coming here, she figured whatever she did was connected to her spirituality. "The tribal women I live with wake up in the morning and immediately go to the shed and collect the dung, missing the making of morning tea. So, I searched for a solution. Now, I have biogas and I ask neighbors to put their biowaste in a box and this is something that I do now as soon as I wake up. This ritual itself is a meditation for me...recycling nature, cleaning the environment. In personal life I do many things that are similar to this and therefore thanks to this group, I can say that I am a spiritual person."

Aspi recited a poem of Rumi perhaps with the intension of awakening the aromatic senses of the sublime amidst the cerebral storm of deliberations: "All day I think about it, then at night I say it: What did I come from, what am I supposed to be doing? My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that, and I intend to end up there."

Ujwala said she had a sense of Vikalp Sangam but was disoriented when she read the concept note. "So now I have mixed feelings. I may have to take a step back and look at my lifestyle and find some clarity. Perhaps I am doing some things already but have to find it consciously and integrate it with my future steps," she reckoned.

Mirza connoted that we are all witness to the sharing that was done with cross-cultural frames which was important to find solutions. The role of being a witness has importance in traveling and in disseminating it. "In that sense for me it is an accomplishment because I see myself as a vehicle to travel into other intercultural spaces and share. Bearing witness to such a space is important."

Pankhuri, sensing an awakening in her said, "This is my third time here in the past 7 months, I did not know how to connect interfaith and climate change, and I was thinking. We need to educate ourselves with some religious texts, create study circles and bring in people who can share their insights on the deeper understanding of what religion means. I have some clarity now and am grateful to be here."

Annie, recognising the experiences which people have brought in at the conference accepted that her generation had so many fears about climate crisis and professional crises and felt out of depth at times. "Some kind of support and assistance is needed to cope with these fears and it would help if people shared what they have been through and how they dealt with it."

Laxmi added, "Not only are we facing all this, we have to contend with our families which don't understand what we are doing and why. Most youngsters don't have that support from our families and that is why we look up to you."

Dominic advised, "Engage with where you are, what you are involved in and use them as metaphorical headlights."

Radhika said, "I can relate with Annie and Laxmi on many of the fears and but I also feel that as youngsters we want quick answers and I have been impatient and frustrated with so many things but coming back to this space after so many years, I will go back with a lot of memories, experiences and reminisce them and trust that when I need them they will come to me."

Ashim prompted, "Do not lose sight of why you started doing something. Just have a pivot and a sense of responsibility and keep working towards it. The anti-CA movement has shown that spontaneity has worked and that spontaneity is something that we should work towards."

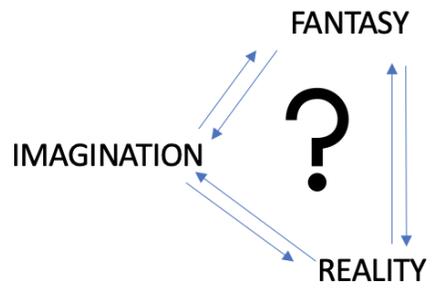
Milind said he felt grateful at the end of it! "We will share contact details of everyone and a report will be shared," he said.

The Harvest

The four days of the conference was a tidal surge of intellectual, psychological, emotional and spiritual inquiry into finding new value systems, new paradigms of economics, politics, ethics and practice, social and cultural integration. At the centre of it was the human element, conditioned by the constructs of self, society, hierarchy, religious bigotry and material power which distorted the quintessence of social justice and wellbeing. Regardless of the devastation of wars, revolutions and pestilence, the temples of materialism have soared, fragmenting societies and foundations of faiths at the cost of an ailing humanity. And with the spectre of climate change accelerating with apocalyptic proportions, there is an incandescent need to discover paths for dialogue, reconciliation and bridge spiritualities of the human heart. In spirituality lay possibilities of a new language, the indigenous pristine (original) language of humanity uncorrupted by the edifices of cast, class and race. The Vikalp Sangam conference examined that and concluded with some important points for contemplation and initiation of action.

- **Is dialogue Universal?**
- **Is the individual separate from the collective?**
- **Is spirituality a tool/strategy?**
- **Is crisis an opportunity to transform humanity or a war to win?**
- **Outer crisis is an expression of Inner Crisis**
- **I change → Others/Outside change**
- **Bonding – Bringing People Together**
- **Wounded Collective Ego – Individuals Manifesting It**
- **Collective Action – Individual Inquiry**
- **The power of imagination distinguishing fantasy from reality:**

Submitted
Kalpavriksh



by: