Youth Ecology & Politics of Ecological Movements
SEPTEMBER 10-13, 2022
FIREFLIES ASHRAM, BENGALURU
The name ‘Vikalp Sangam’ is Hindi for ‘Alternatives Confluence’.

As the world hurtles towards greater ecological devastation, inequalities, and social conflicts, the biggest question facing us is: are there alternative ways of meeting human needs and aspirations, without trashing the earth and without leaving most of humanity behind? Across India (as in the rest of the world), this question is being answered by a multitude of grassroots and policy initiatives: from meeting basic needs in ecologically sensitive ways to decentralised governance and producer-consumer movements, from rethinking urban and rural spaces towards sustainability to struggles for social and economic equity.

Vikalp Sangam is a space for individuals and initiatives to come together and engage on these subjects and topics that helps to journey towards a more just future. It is a space to share, dialogue, discuss, learn from each other and more; build friendships and solidarity.

Youth Vikalp Sangam is particularly designed for youth in alternatives. The biggest hope we see in the country today is that more and more youth are questioning old ways of being and doing, networking to advocate for change and using diverse means of expression to bring about change. This was the fourth Youth Vikalp Sangam that was being organised, the first was held in Bhopal in 2017, the second one was held in Bengaluru in 2019, and the third was held online in 2020.

More about Youth Vikalp Sangam and its associated processes on: https://vikalpsangam.org/youth-vikalp-sangam/
We are going through a critical time where we experience the degradation of our environment and the degeneration of political institutions. There is unrest among the youth regarding the current socio-political situation in the country and the looming climate crisis. While there is a general consensus regarding the future we wish to see for ourselves, a world which is sustainable and ecologically resilient, equitable and just, there is a need to build practices that will help us move towards that.

While many of us strive towards making such a world happen in various ways possible by ourselves, the role of political establishments in making or breaking the possibility of such a future cannot be unseen. **The situation demands several areas to be attended to, which includes a youth articulation of shared futures, a youth engagement and leadership in actions and activities, an active citizenry which holds itself and the establishments accountable, and tools and values which shall guide us in this process.**

The Youth Vikalp Sangam on Ecology & Politics of Ecological movements was co-created in this context, which opened up immense possibilities and learnings. Meeting with the elders in the movements space and more comrades and co-travellers, all working towards a more just world, listening to and engaging with the lived experiences, dialoguing, discussing contradictions, singing, dancing, envisioning, creating art, experiencing plurality.
Day 1

The Youth Vikalp Sangam 2022 started with sharing the history of Vikalp Sangam and Youth Vikalp Sangam processes, and sharing of contexts, intentions and expectations for the sangam. This sharing happened in groups of 8 with people who did not know each other prior to the sangam.
We further delved into the exploration of the Alternatives Framework or the Flower of Alternative Transformation. A deep conversation that followed the framework discussion related to the production of knowledge, epistemic hegemony, and who has the power to name and decide terms. Moving forward as a collective of young people, we hope to have more such crucial discussions in order to challenge dominant systems of knowledge and power.

The Framework proposes that alternatives are built on five key elements or spheres which are interconnected and overlapping:

- Ecological integrity and resilience
- Social well-being and justice
- Direct and delegated democracy
- Economic democracy
- Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy
What is an Alternative?

“Alternatives can be practical activities, policies, processes, technologies, and concepts/frameworks. They can be practiced or proposed/propagated by communities, government, civil society organizations, individuals, and social enterprises, amongst others. They can simply be continuations from the past, re-asserted in or modified for current times, or new ones; it is important to note that the term does not imply that these are always ‘marginal’ or new, but that they are in contrast to the mainstream or dominant systems that are exploitative and extractive.”
Alternatives Transformation Framework  
(Recorded presentation)  
- English - https://youtu.be/CRIGP_1coag  
- Hindi - https://youtu.be/LhcDyKbcChM  

The Search for Radical Alternatives: Key Elements and Principles  

मौलिक विकल्पों की खोज: मुख्य पहलू और सिद्धांत  
The first session on the second day of the Sangam was by Sreeja Chakraborty on Environmental Law & Litigation.

Sreeja Chakraborty is an environmental lawyer and founder of Living Environment Advocacy Foundation (LEAF), a collective of young environmental lawyers and law students who advocate for transparency in India's environmental governance and decision making. She represents Civil Society Groups, activists and citizens collective in environmental litigation before the High Court of Karnataka and Goa and before the National Green Tribunal (a specialised environmental court in India).
All environmental injustices are social injustices too. In this context, Sreeja shared her experiences in the area of environmental litigation and the importance of building movements against violations of environmental laws.

**Strategies to be adopted by movements:**

- Never make one person a leader or face of the movement. Roles and responsibilities in agitation should always be split among the members.

- Never bring the research group in the forefront to ensure they are not identified and actions taken against them.

- There will be attempts to convert a mass movement into an individual movement. A participatory movement in which everyone is equal is important in its resilience.

- Build understanding of the laws and the legal procedures. Have a lawyer by your side.

**Provisions in The Constitution of India against Environmental Injustice:**

- Right to clean and healthy environment (Article 21)

- Protection and improvement of environment and safeguarding forests and wild life (Article 48-A)

- Fundamental duty to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life, and to have compassion for living creatures (Article 51-A)
The session that followed was a panel discussion on Learning from Ecological Movements, Past & Present. The members of the panel were Nandini Oza, Anand M and Nityanand Jayaraman.

Social worker by training, **Nandini Oza** was a full-time activist of the Narmada Bachao Andolan for close to 12 years. Former President of Oral History Association of India (2020-22), Nandini is a researcher, writer, chronicler and an archivist and has been working on the oral histories of the Narmada struggle for over a decade. She is also a keen observer, student and commentator on contemporary social and political issues. Her books have been published in Marathi and English. In December 2017, she was selected for the prestigious writers' residency at Sangam House, Bangalore. Since 2005 she has been associated with the Zindabad Trust which supports individuals and groups that work for social, cultural and political change.

**Anand M** is a senior activist working in Gujarat for several decades on issues of environment and social justice. He is part of a collective called Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti and many others. He believes in transformative action and sees a reason for hope even in the midst of this all-enveloping adversity. He is a member of National Alliance of People’s movement and has been a convenor for the collective in the past.

**Nityanand Jayaraman** is a writer and researcher based in Chennai. He investigates and reports on corporate abuses of environment and human rights, and is part of an anti-corporate collective called Vettiver Koottamaippu (Collective).
Nandini shared about the history of the struggle of Narmada, resistance movements against the Sardar Sarovar Project and other hydroelectric and dam projects in the region that has displaced people, submerged villages and razed forests. She spoke about the tradition of protest as celebratory, as a space to form new relations, and a place of hope.

One of the biggest takeaways from the session was the need to keep memory alive, because the fight of the oppressed against oppression is a fight of memory against oblivion.

Strategies adopted:
- Mass resistance
- Non-cooperation
- Fasts
- Dialogue
- Debate
- Collective decision making
- Information sharing
- Consultations with the people

Anand shared how Development is about dispossession, displacement, disemployment and dehumanisation, and the importance of continuity and connectedness of movements.

Strategies adopted:
- Fermenting disaffection
- Address the emotions of people
- Get people on the other side of the fence to join you
- Use scientific tools such as measuring pH to showcase the bad state of rivers
- Ensure impact assessments and public hearing
- Publish reports when government officials visit

Nityanand shared his journey as a solidarity worker and campaigner, and how they used creative mediums to address issues of ecological and social injustice.

Strategies adopted:
- Slow Solidarity
- Deep Solidarity
- Humble Solidarity
- Work with small groups of young people

Explore the oral history of the Narmada struggle: [https://oralhistorynarmada.in/](https://oralhistorynarmada.in/)
Having to perpetually be out there resisting injustice can be taxing and alienating. How do we navigate such situations? Following are some of the responses that emerged from the discussion.

- Identifying when a break is required is important.

- One may need to keep realistic work boundaries and personal boundaries.

- Work towards community resilience, nurture the space of community-care, care that is reciprocal and relational.

- Be prepared to face retaliation.

- There are certain positions that movements should take in order to recognise privilege, class, and caste. This determines who engages with the movement and in what capacity.

- There are more solution-impacted communities rather than problem-impacted communities. More understanding of problems is required before coming up with solutions. Hence building long-term resilience becomes crucial.

- Don't take yourself too seriously. The burden is not on you. Surround yourself with people with a sense of humour.
Check out the English and Marathi versions of the book by Nandini Oza on the Narmada Struggle.

Drums of Resistance: https://youtu.be/p94Q31B_wmM

Kodaikanal Won’t: https://youtu.be/nSal-ms0vCI

Check out the songs of resistance and solidarity by Vettivar Collective.
Day 3

On the third day of the Sangam, we explored the possibilities in The Constitution of India to support movements and facilitate advocacy.
As we proceeded, several questions emerged:

The creation of a text, a written Constitution that can only be understood by someone who can read and comprehend, is political. Is it reaching the masses?

Why do we consider written to be non-interpretative/concrete and oral to be interpretative or something that could be miscommunicated?

There are several communities being targeted using provisions in the Constitution, the very same Constitution that is supposed to uphold their right to live in dignity. How do we move forward in such situations?

The word 'secular' has a colonial background. Can we propose the word 'plural' as an alternative?

Is it necessary for worldviews to converge? Can plural worldviews co-exist, provided one doesn't dominate or dictate the other?
Following a short activity regarding the Constitution, participants self-organised into focussed discussion groups. Some of the topics included "strategies for organisation", "The political in the constitution", and "oral vs textual culture". There was a deep recognition of the role that formal and standardised education plays in erasing identities and cultures. Additionally, there were conversations about storytelling, the sensory experience of the world, public consultation processes, the power of oral culture, and the imposition of scientific, written, language.
We later had an arts-based exploration of building ecosystems for collective action.

To begin with, the entire group reflected on what the words "ecosystem" and "collective" meant for them individually. People opened up to the group and shared some deeply moving, beautiful, and painful thoughts and experiences. Conversations about caste, human-ness, displacement, emotion, love, nature, grounding and more were nurtured and supported by the group.
We held deep discussions in smaller groups and expressed our pathways for reform and alternatives to the existing dominant model through art. Groups presented songs, skits, visuals, stories and more.
The penultimate day was closed with singing, dancing and celebrating togetherness.
Day 4

The Sangam was concluded by sharing our reflections, experiences and feedforward.

Enriching, glad and grateful space to share and be

Feel humbled seeing the commitment, work at such a great cost

People were kind to criticisms

Ways of living and being that came out was enriching

Platforms like these give the strength that you are not alone, motivates you

Taking back a lot of possibilities

Laughed a lot and had a lot of fun, was energising

Got a space to express myself and received confidence, the space enabled me to speak

Grateful for the informal conversations

Hopeful

It is really important to understand our political stands

The issue of marginalisation was quite well addressed

Looking forward to share my learnings with my team

Engaging with contradictions was a beautiful experience

Connected to my own life stories, where I grew up, my relationship with the environment

As a person living in a city, my mindset on the environment changed, received a broad understanding

Constitution, legal laws, provisions - they help us a lot, but, our own indigenous legal/justice/governance system(s) should also be valued

I could really be myself here

Happy that I/we were asked how we were feeling, it very rarely happens
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<td><strong>Megan D’souza</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Nandini Oza</strong></td>
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<td>Navendu Mishra</td>
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This document has been compiled, edited and designed by Ashik Krishnan with inputs from Anjali Dalmia and Sujatha Padmanabhan based on the notes taken by Anjali Dalmia, Kopal, Pankati Jain, Urvi Shah & Ashik Krishnan. Photos by Kopal

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