

A large, leafy tree with a thick trunk and a stone path leading through it. The tree's branches are spread out, and the leaves are green. The path is made of flat stones and leads towards a fence and a building in the background.

PLURALITIES, FAITH, SOCIAL ACTION

Report on Pluralities Dialogue 2023, organised by Kalpavriksh and Pipal Tree with support from Heinrich Böll Foundation. The gathering brought together voices from diverse spaces for a 4-day immersion from 19-22 July 2023.

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Context of the report

The Vikalp Sangam (Confluence of Alternatives) initiative started in 2013 with the help of organisations like Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF) and Misereor. The aim of this initiative was to create a platform for people who are working in different fields of social change and looking for alternatives to the existing systems of development, governance, health, education, etc. The platform was meant to facilitate dialogue, critical thinking, collaboration, learning and radical imagination among people who share a common vision of social transformation.

Recognizing two crucial challenges -the impending climate collapse and the growing mistrust and intolerance between communities from various religious denominations - threatening cultural, social and civilisation breakdown. In July 2022, a Vikalp Sangam took place at the Pipal Tree (Fireflies Intercultural Centre). Attendees, including young people, activists, feminists, peace builders, researchers, and others, acknowledged that these crises extend beyond social, political, and ecological dimensions to encompass moral and spiritual aspects of our world and cosmos. The overarching goal was to initiate intersectional conversations that reach out to a diverse audience, including bureaucrats, policymakers, and mainstream politicians. In doing so, the meeting sought to foster a collective vision for a more inclusive and harmonious world.

Emerging out of the Misereor-supported July 2022 discussions, was a felt need - that since the problems faced by humanity were multi-pronged – at once economical, political, social, environmental, cultural, spiritual etc. - there was an urgency of a response that took into consideration the multi-dimensionality of the crisis (crises!). Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF), who had sent two representatives, strongly encouraged the organisers (Kalpavriksh and Pipal Tree Trust) to bring out a dossier on the thematic of “Pluralities” by inviting some of the participants from the Vikalp Sangam to contribute to it along with non-participant thinkers and artists. HBF promised to provide the financial support for the same. The idea was to encourage a pluri-dimensional way of answering the multi-pronged challenges faced by the human and more-than-human world. The Vikalp Sangam meeting resulted in the identification of key themes for the dossier, on some or all of the aforementioned dimensions. A dossier entitled “Pluralities, Faith, Social Action” consisting of 12 medium-sized essays was put together in the months following the July 2022 meeting. It was jointly edited by Milind Wani (Kalpavriksh) and Siddharth (Pipal Tree). The essays and their contributors are given below.

Subsequent to the compiling of the dossier, a second meeting in the series was planned – in July 2023. This was dedicated to a collective exploration by all the contributing authors of the dossier, the range of issues covered by it with a view of deeper dive into each of the essay in order to arrive at a common ground of understanding regarding how to address the most critical of questions that underpinned the essays and stories, viz, what would be the nature of a radical and emancipatory vision to address humanity’s challenges, and what role faith-based social action can play in ushering a better world.

The contributions to this dossier try to address the challenges facing us in, well, plural ways. The crisis is multi-pronged- at once economic, social, cultural, political, ecological and spiritual. Individual authors have offered their own distinctive lens for the reader. The

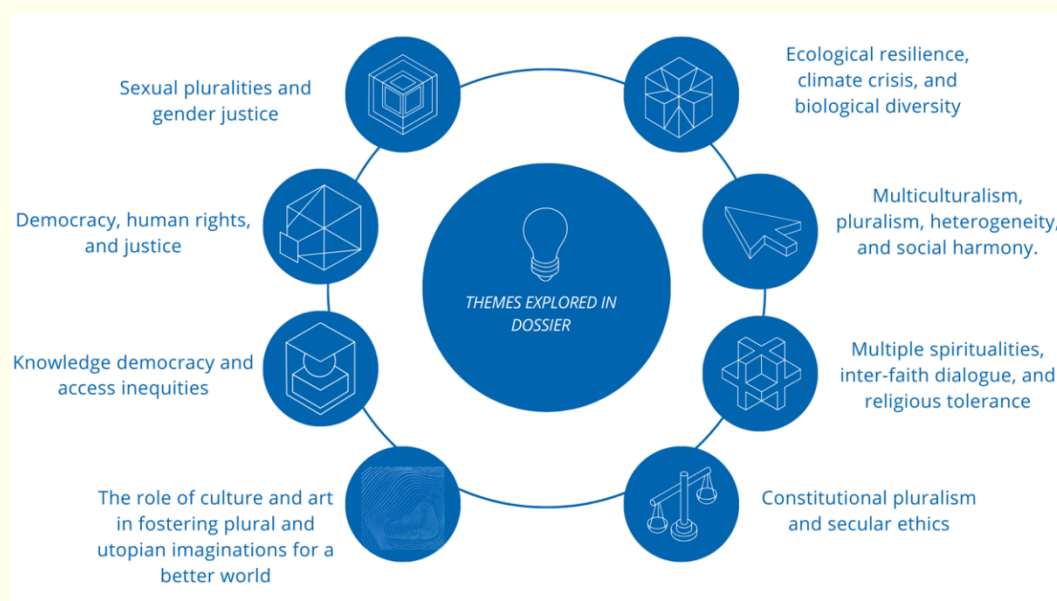
editors felt that these eleven essays can be grouped into three generic themes – those that ask questions about the kind of **Radical Vision** required to change the present dismal scenario, those that hint at the role of **Cultural Practices and Plural Imagination** in offering hope, and those that speak of the role of **Faith and Social Action** in ushering a better world.

This report is the output of the discussions, decisions and action items from the meeting.

Introduction to the Dossier

Day one began by Milind Wani of Kalpavriksh introducing the dossier and authors of the dossier, under the theme “Unity in Pluralities and Pluralities in Unity”.

The dossier is a product of this initiative and it offers a compilation of essays on critical perspectives on the current state of affairs and radical visions for the future. The essays in this collection offer a critical lens on a variety of issues such as democracy, ecological sustainability, cultural alienation, and the deep divide between communities practising different religious and cultural traditions. The collection also explores radical visions for the future, offering hope for the current dismal scenario and discussing the kind of imagination that is required to achieve these visions.



Between July 19-21 2023 a meeting was held at Fireflies (Bangalore) where individual contributors to the aforementioned dossier were invited to present their papers to the other contributors. Contributors to the dossier presented their essays from the dossier. The following papers were discussed:

1. ***The Plural Challenges of our Times*** by Milind Wani
2. ***Nature(s) in Us: Countering the Poverty of Ideology with the Plurality of Worldview*** by Annie James
3. ***Unity at the End of False Beliefs*** by Kalle Blomberg & Milind Wani

4. ***Utopia and Climate Civil Disobedience*** by Siddhartha
5. ***Ecological Pluralities*** by Jon Clammer
6. ***Plurality in the Context of Indian Folk Culture and Marginalized Traditions*** by Jyoti Sahi
7. ***De-story and Re-story*** by Maya Joshi
8. ***Let Go*** by Sucharita Dutta-Asane
9. ***The Hinduism Paradox*** by Urmi Chanda
10. ***Spirituality as Fearless Enquiry for a Plural and Just World*** by Ananya Bhattacharya
11. ***Between the Boundaries of Religious Worlds*** by Bharadwaj Iyer
12. ***A Meditation on Social Action and Spirituality*** by Aspi Mistry

Theme 1: Radical Vision

This section consists of salient points from the presentations by the contributing authors who believe social science and imagination can provide imaginative vehicles for thinking about subjects which are of pressing concerns today.

1. Nature(s) in Us: Countering the Poverty of Ideology with the Plurality of Worldview

By Annie James (Presented by Anannya Bhattacharjee)

As Annie James who is based in Barcelona could not attend the July 2023 meet, her paper was presented by Ananya Bhattacharya.

Annie James' essay "Nature(s) in Us: Countering the Poverty of Ideology with the Plurality of Worldview" challenges the common sense understanding of nature and argues that different understandings of nature can help us transcend the crisis of the Anthropocene. *Her essay points to the homogenising tendencies of capitalism that reduce nature, including humans, to the category of a resource which feeds into capitalism's profiteering logic. James seeks to understand what is going on today and how it has resulted in inequality, climate related disasters, privatisation, xenophobia, and essentially, and basically a sense of deep alienation.*

James began by rejecting the dualistic notion that humans are separate from nature. She also rejected monism, which is the view that humans and nature are the same thing. Instead, she argued that nature and society are in a dialectical relationship. This means that they are interconnected and interdependent, but they are also distinct. James then discussed the metabolic rift, which is the irreparable rift between human activity and the natural world that has arisen under capitalism. She argued that we can learn from forest dwelling communities and indigenous communities about how to live in a way that respects the metabolic rates of surrounding nature.

The essay cites the example of Ebola to highlight the fact of how science and indigenous communities (or local people's knowledge) can actually come together often. James rues that we unfortunately do

not explore such possibilities because of our lack of openness to understanding the term of discourse, values, frameworks and cosmo-visions indigenous people are alluding to. So, for example, in the case of Ebola, the scientific explanation was that it's some viral zoonotic disease caused by the bodily fluids of infected forest animals, with bats being one of the animals cited. However, the locals believed it was caused by evil human-like spirits who infected people, bad human-like spirits and groups who accumulate and do not share. This is how local people would talk about Ebola. What was interesting was that the people who were most vulnerable to Ebola were those working for mining companies including the miners who were doing the work. These employees were basically going into areas which had not been disturbed for a long time, and opening, disturbing, and fragmenting them through deforestation. Obviously, all kinds of stuff was coming out, including bats! In other words, the scientific community and the local indigenous community people were both coming at a causal explanation based on different world-views. James stressed that we need to be able to understand these different ways of seeing nature, the world, and making sense of it and not see them as oppositional theories.

James concluded her paper by urging us to go back to the wisdom of our heritage and to work towards dismantling capitalism. She argues that radical, transformative change must take place both at the inner level of the individual and the outer level of society. She also argued that the priority must be need-fulfilment, not the desire to possess more and more. Overall, James' essay is a powerful call for a new understanding of nature and our relationship with it. She argues that we need to move beyond the dualistic and anthropocentric view of nature that has dominated Western thought, and to embrace a more pluralistic and holistic worldview.

2. Unity at the End of False Beliefs

By Kalle Blomberg and Milind Wani

Kalle Blomberg, is based in Sweden and could not attend the July 2023 meeting at FireFlies Ashram. The paper was presented by Milind Wani.

In his presentation on Kalle Blomberg's essay, Milind Wani stated that the former's paper explores the concept of a binding force that connects all of humanity and the natural world. Blomberg argues that while people generally believe in the existence of this binding force, it is often misidentified as Money. Blomberg however suggests that Money, the commonly accepted binding force, is, in fact, based in false belief. In fact, to believe that Money can be a binding force is itself an expression of false belief.

Blomberg takes a counterintuitive approach by considering false beliefs as points of convergence. He doesn't outright discard these false beliefs; recognizing that they can still serve a purpose. To deconstruct the seemingly contradictory view that something of negative value (false belief!) can still be made to serve something of positive value (for e.g. distributive Justice), Milind Wani took recourse to the example of how just as in many spiritual traditions encourage the practitioners to not reject but work with negative emotions as if they are a kind of manure to generate positive spiritual well being, similarly 'false beliefs' can still work in the service of truth, if only one knows how to make them do so. Wani referred to the term 'false consciousness' or 'ideology' as two terms that have often been put to use interchangeably by Marxists in order to indicate something which creates false meaning and enables conditions for the exploitation of the toiling masses. He elaborated how the term 'Ideology' has different definitions used by different people. But one way of looking at ideology is a world-view which is false but presented as true. For example, one falsely believes in the superiority of the Aryan race and thus creates a sort of an optical delusion of consciousness that

comes to believe as something true when it does not have a basis in truth. This is the reality of the world, which is something we need to discard.

Wani shared a passage from Marx's essay entitled "Power of Money (from the book Economic and Philosophical manuscripts of 1844)" as the source of Blomberg's thesis that underscores the idea that money is the essential bond in society, with God-like power to transform human and natural properties. Marx's view is that returning to the true human essence would require relinquishing the power attributed to money. Marx has attributed ontological significance to what it means to be a human being. However Marx points to how in capitalistic society the human essence gets reified (by money) thus leading to alienation. Referring to the mention of alienation and metabolic rift made by Annie James, Wani stressed that Marx speaks about the effect of money creating this kind of alienation.

Blomberg's argument centres on the need for personal and social transformation, emphasising the potential price to pay for abandoning a money-based economy. He suggests that a deep renunciation of the current economic system is essential to address issues like environmental degradation, economic inequality, and exploitation. Kalle's position challenges common notions and encourages a shift toward a more solidarity-based economy.

Comments by the group included:

1. Bharatwaj: We think of other possibilities of bonding and others, and it looks like money is the universal point.
2. Anannya: We are talking about the power of *prakriti*, a concept from Sankhya philosophy. How do we look at the multifarious ways that nature manifests itself in society, culture, etc.? Kalle argues that there is a dialectical relationship between these different aspects of nature, but also a unifying substance. If money is the corrosive bond that is causing many of the problems we face, then that is also the place where we need to focus our efforts to bring about transformation. This echoes the Sankhya philosophy, which teaches that the location of bondage is also the location of transformation.
3. Urmi: Building on Kalle's exploration of money, she shared the potential of love as a force for transformation.
4. Aspi: I agree that we cannot renounce one bond without renouncing the system that creates it. However, I think it is possible to use money without getting attached to it. Kalle's essay suggests that money can be a tool for bonding, but it is important to be mindful of its potential for corruption.
5. Ashim: We need to locate Marx in the anthology, as his ideas are never explicitly discussed. Marx's concept of contemplation is important here, as we cannot have the notion of transformation without knowing the agents of transformation. We need to ask ourselves who are the people who are driving this transformation?
6. Siddhartha: Annie's essay points out that the sacredness of nature is lost (indicating this as evident by how humans are treating nature). (But) if you asked a woman or man from this village, they would likely say *Bhumita* (mother earth). Even scientifically, we know that the earth is our first point of origin. We evolved from it.

3. Utopia and Climate Civil Disobedience

By Siddhartha, People Tree

Siddhartha began his presentation by discussing the urgency of the climate crisis, citing a number of examples, including the recent heat wave in Europe and the melting of glaciers in Antarctica, to show that the crisis is worsening faster than expected. He emphasised the urgency to act immediately, as the threat of extinction, including human life, becomes more apparent each year.

"..there was a 40 degree rise in temperature in the Antarctic from -70 to -30. One of the largest glaciers there is melting very fast which made scientists say that it's not impossible that by 2050 all coastline cities would go underwater. So you can imagine if in a country like India with Mumbai, Calcutta, Chennai, Kochin, all go underwater. These are the economic engines of the country. 2050 is just another 30 years away.."

"..There are already climate refugees. Parts of Karnataka, farmers are migrating. There'll be a collapse of governance, collapse of democracy, caste wars, religious wars, language wars.."

Are things going to change? Or, as some are saying, are we heading for the fixed extinction that all life forms or most life forms will disappear, including human life forms? And with each passing year this looks possible.

Siddhartha explored the concept of utopia as a means to envision and work toward a better future. He points out that utopian ideals, such as Marx's classless society and concepts like Ram Rajya by Gandhi or the Kingdom of God of Christians, have been part of various ideologies.

"Although utopia may appear daunting and unattainable, an ideal can actually help one to take practical and realistic steps towards a better future for humanity and the biosphere; it suggests a refusal to accept reality as it is and a willingness to believe that another world is possible. ."

Siddhartha shared that he finds appeal in the Gandhian notion of utopia due to its nonviolent foundation, in contrast to some interpretations of Marxist notion of classless society that entails violent class warfare. He shared that even India's constitution can be considered utopian as it aspires to establish justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity within a democratic republic, despite the current reality falling short of these ideals.

"The directive principles of the constitution echo the ancient Indian wisdom of Vasudeva Kutumbakam: the world is a family."

Siddhartha suggested that in the face of the climate crisis, mass nonviolent civil disobedience might be a necessary response, demanding a fundamental overhaul of the economic system heavily dependent on fossil fuels.

"Sal Cohen, who has written about nonviolent civil disobedience, writes civil disobedience is an act of protest, deliberately unlawful, conscientiously and publicly performed. It may have as its object the laws and policies of some government body or those of some private corporate body whose decisions have serious public consequences. But in either case, the disobedient protest is almost invariably nonviolent in character. Martin Luther King used Gandhian nonviolence as a method of action. Non cooperation, civil disobedience and fasting are some of the major nonviolent means employed by the Satyagraha movement. Noncooperation include actions such as strike, walkout hartal, involuntary closing of shops and businesses, and resignation offices and titles. Noncooperation is a refusal to follow a requirement which fundamentally violates truth and is against mass conscience. Civil

disobedience is a non observance of certain specific laws which are dehumanising and against one's conscience."

"The most effective means of achieving systemic change in modern history is through nonviolent civil resistance. We should call on academics, scientists and the public to join us in civil disobedience, to demand emergency decarbonization and degrowth facilitated by wealth redistribution."

Theme 2: Cultural Practices and Plural Imagination

The section on "Cultural Practices and Plural Imagination" explores the concept of pluralities in various contexts, including ecological pluralities, art, literature, and fiction writing. Authors examine how pluralities manifest in these disciplines and how they challenge and expand our understanding of the world.

1. Ecological Pluralities

By John Clammer, Jindal University

In John Clammer's presentation on "Ecological Pluralities," he discussed two key ideas; the first idea emphasised the value of biodiversity, not just as more "stuff" in nature but as a crucial element in ecological systems, underlining the interdependence of all elements in these systems. He pointed out that biodiversity and cultural diversity are closely related and inform each other. John Clammer cited the example of indigenous languages, which often encode ways of talking about nature that embody the wisdom of long-term sustainability.

Clammer spoke on the topic of interspecies communication. He argued that this is a reality in many cultures, and that it has important implications for our understanding of our relationship to nature. He suggested that interspecies communication indicates our embodiedness in nature, and that it has ethical implications (such as, the question of animal rights), as it means that we have ethical relationships to other species.

"..there's a very large body of emerging anthropological work particularly in Amazonia, other parts of the world which shows the way in which people do in fact practice interspecies communication..first of all, we are not separate from the rest of nature because we're constantly in a process of interaction with not only other animal species, but also with the plant world.."

Clammer also touched on the emerging field of bioesthetics, which explored the relationship between art and nature.

"The extent to which ideas about beauty, for example, forms of performance, forms of all sorts of things are in fact either derived from or closely related to forms we've taken from nature."

He rued the extent to which contemporary art has retreated from nature and alienated itself from one of its major sources of creativity.

"..and as art retreats from nature, it's alienating itself in many ways from one of the major sources of its own creativity. It's not just creativity in a vacuum, it's actually drawing on those kinds of resources."

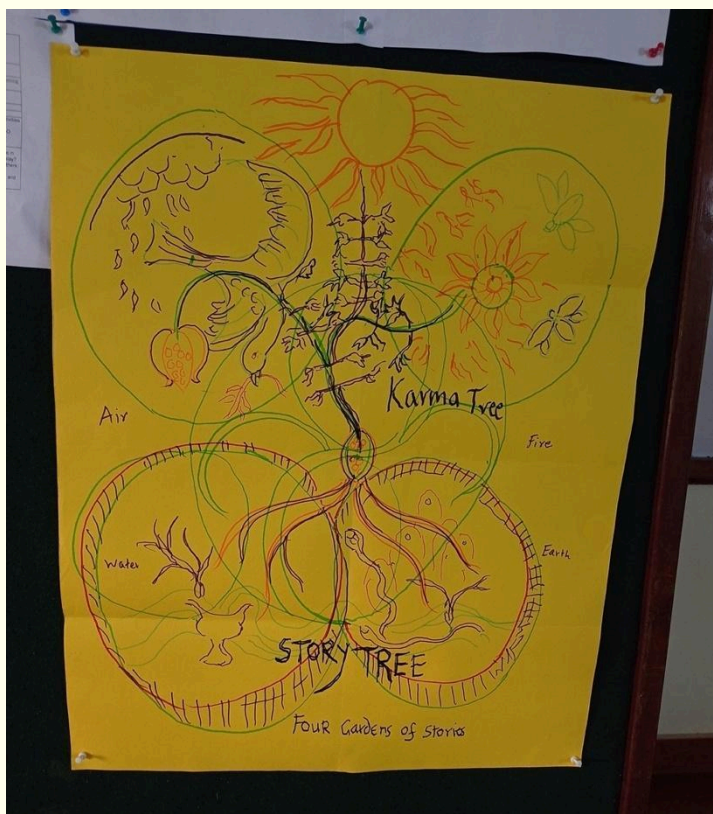
In his paper Clammer discusses the One Health project, which is a multidisciplinary project that brings together people from the fields of veterinary medicine, medicine, and environmental studies to have dialogue between areas that have previously been separated. He opines that there is a need to consider how we communicate with animals and how this interaction might affect their health and vice versa (for instance, can warm nurturing interactions have healing properties), such studies can help us to develop a more holistic understanding of our relationship to nature.

2. Plurality in the Context of Indian Folk Culture and Marginalised Traditions

Jyoti Sahi, Visual Artist

Jyoti Sahi's presentation paper explored the relationship between art and contemplation, particularly in the context of Indian folk culture and marginalised traditions. He argued that the crisis of contemplation that we face today is connected to the "rationalisation" of our relationship to nature and culture.

Jyoti, interested in tribal and dalit art and traditions, shared that we (human beings) are so focused on the rational and discursive that we have lost the ability to listen to our intuition and to feel the interconnectedness of all things.



Jyoti depicting a story tree

He referenced an instance from a website known as "Contemplation and Action," in which the term 'the dark night of the soul', (aka John of the Cross) is used to describe the experience of being lost in the dark and unable to see a way forward. There is a crisis of contemplation, which leads to the

inability to find solutions to issues like climate change or democracy due to an overreliance on the discursive propositional mind over the intuitive heart.

Taking inspiration from Byzantine aesthetics, he mentioned its relation to the contemplative idea that a force of the mind has to come down to the heart. He also mentioned the importance of stopping thinking and focusing on feeling, drawing parallels with Buddhism.

Jyoti's paper also discussed the work of Susan Langer, who argued that art is a form of feeling. Langer's theory suggests that art can help us to communicate our feelings in ways that are not possible through language. This is particularly important in the context of marginalised traditions, where people's experiences are often silenced or ignored.

"Now, what do we feel? And this feeling is we cannot call it, shall we say, a money economy or capitalism or so on, as Marx would analyse it. But it is something which is intuitive and that intuitiveness is in as I understand this discussion of impossibility that the way through is not discursive but intuitive. And this would perhaps relate to what Jung also suggests that at certain points in a psychic crisis we cannot understand how to get through it. But there is a force within us and outside us. It's not only human reason which suggests a way through which we cannot rationally understand."

Jyoti shared his perspective on art and contemplation, drawing parallels with the Quaker tradition where silence often leads to a shared revelation, something innate within us that requires expression. This expression, he noted, cannot be achieved through analytical processes. He then shifted to discussing the concept of speed, referencing Gandhi's view that excessive speed equates to violence. He remarked on the irony of perceiving the ecological crisis as unfolding faster than expected, leading to a rushed call for immediate action.

"Ricker talked about time and narrative and he said, as I understand it, that narrative is to do with time. But there is. A kind of poetic intuition which is not related to time. It's timeless. And that doesn't come through a terrible anxiety about things going to happen in 20 years time or maybe even next year. So it's a kind of thinking which goes back to a rhythm which is basic to the whole of creation, not only in human beings, creativity, but also in a kind of pattern in nature...a pattern of thinking."

Jyoti delved into the link between creativity and an intuitive understanding of what animals, birds, flowers, and plants feel—an inherent sense of rhythm or "Hritu." He expressed concern that contemporary society has severed its connection to this cosmic rhythm, which is intuitively established. Concluding his presentation, Jyoti advocated for contemplation, not only in terms of slowness but also through silence.

"How can one get to a kind of vision which is coming out of a sort of silence?"

He referenced Joseph Boyes and his belief in art as a form of enchantment and magic. He proposed that this magical aspect, akin to Maya, offers a perspective of creation that transcends rational description and articulation. Jyoti Sahi left the audience pondering their own thoughts and feelings on these topics.

3. De-story and Re-story

By Maya Joshi, Lady Shree Ram College, Delhi University

Maya Joshi teaches literature and approaches the concept of pluralities through the lens of her discipline; she integrated her experience of reviewing a book that had won the International Booker Prize in English translation (*Tomb of Sand*), aligning with the theme of her discussion.

Maya started the presentation by sharing a video of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian novelist and delved into the power of stories, emphasising that narratives hold the potential to exercise power and can be both hegemonic and marginalised.

"..she speaks as a modern Nigerian woman with a legacy of colonialism behind her and speaking to the Western world and at the same time coming from a very hierarchical society where they were privileged within that culture. And she's really talking about how stories are modes of power. Stories aren't just for entertainment. Stories have power. There are ways of exercising power. The moment we say, whose narrative? The entire discussion this morning has been on epistemic violence, whose episteme, whose system? So story in that wider sense, not story as in a fictional construct, but whose story do we hear? Do we listen to the tribals? Do we hear the money story? Do we hear the Marxist or the capitalist story? Whose story gets so hegemonic? Stories, powerful stories versus marginalised stories."

Literature, she explained, is a unique space for exploring this concept, as it presents various perspectives and operates through emotion and affect, rather than just intellect. Literature's complexity and ability to transcend boundaries were also highlighted, with references to epics like Mahabharat and Ramayan that exist in multiple versions and Shakespeare's adaptability across cultures.

She asserted that literature poses questions, fosters critical thinking, without offering simple answers.

"..there is a reason why dictators don't like writers, why so many writers have been jailed and put in prison and banned and so on. So we need to think about a relationship of literature to power. It's obviously a recognition of the power of literature and the arts that makes tyrants so uncomfortable."

Maya Joshi went on to mention that literature opens up spaces for exploring living narratives and the hegemony of stories. It offers a counterpoint to efforts that aim to restrict narratives. Literature often ventures into creativity and creativity is inherently disruptive to power, because it is chaotic and destabilising. Creative writers are inherently disruptive people, which is why they are often bohemians in their life choices. One example of a creative writer who used his art to shake up society is Premchand. He was a progressive writer who was clear about the function of art to change society. He did this by questioning orthodoxy through his fiction, particularly his humorous fiction. Premchand shook up the patriarchy, feudalism, and class structure of his world through his writing.

Maya spoke about Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*, discussing the novel's defiance of generic classifications. She described its style as 'diffused and diverse,' 'conversational,' and drawing upon storytelling methods from oral traditions. She noted that this style can be frustrating for readers who expect a linear plot, but that it is also a way for the author to 'slow us (readers) down' and bring our focus in order to appreciate the work of art. Maya then connected this idea of slowing down to Jyoti's earlier discussion of silence. She argued that literature compels us to cultivate silence, which is necessary for both creating and appreciating art.

Joshi pointed out that literature is inherently plural and open-ended, as the meaning of a text can change depending on the reader's perspective and the context in which it is read. Maya then turned to a discussion of the novel's themes and discussed the novel's pluralities, which she sees as evident

in its open-endedness, its diverse cast of characters, and its questioning of stereotypes. She highlighted the example of the novel's protagonist, an 80-year-old widow who reinvents herself, questioning stereotypes about what it means to be an 80 year old woman in India and crosses the border into Pakistan to reunite with a lost love. Maya also discussed the novel's exploration of borders and boundaries, both literal and figurative, and its use of humour to subvert patriarchal structures.

Maya concluded her discussion by underscoring the novel's potential to engage wonder and provoke profound contemplation. She found it to be a remarkable work that sparks critical inquiry, particularly with its capacity to question societal norms and challenge patriarchal structures.

4. Let Go

By Sucharita Dutta Asane, Writer-Editor

In her presentation, Sucharita discussed the intricacies of writing and editing, emphasising the cohabitation of multiple voices and the role of contemplation in the creative process. Sucharita began by addressing the essence of writing, stating,

"The act of writing, especially when you are writing fiction, is engaging with pluralities and going beyond. We live in the skin of so many characters. We live in the minds of so many diverse characters. We understand their thoughts."

She highlighted the writer's constant conversation with both 'the world' and the characters within it. In addition, she pointed out the writer's engagement with 'multiple selves' within their own psyche as they craft their stories, acknowledging,

"We are also in conversation with multiple selves within ourselves in our mind."

Sucharita emphasised the importance of "silence" and "contemplation" in the creative process, as writers must navigate the cacophony of voices within their narratives. She stated,

"But then we need to reach that point of meditative silence and contemplation from which to create. You are living with this din of voices. You are living with the clamour of voices. Everybody, every character in that world you have built up - that 'world building'; you've done every character, and every place in it is clamouring with its own story."

Sucharita recognized the writer's ability to create 'empathy' and offer 'possibilities' through their work, which can be unsettling to those in power. She noted,

"And so, of course, governments are scared of writers because we create empathy and we offer possibilities. And because we are also writing from a position of contemplation and silence, we become dangerous, I think, to people."

She shared her experience of crafting a story based on the "Nandigram" violence in 2007, how it impacted her and the realisation that the story needed to accommodate 'multiple voices' to do justice to the subject. She discussed the challenges of shifting between 'first person' and 'third person' perspectives to convey the complex narrative of a village and its people.

"I stepped into the editor's shoes rather than the writer's. And I realised that the single story, it was my story, it wasn't Nandi Gram's story. It was the way I was responding and bringing my thoughts and emotions and responses which had actually killed the story, flattened it completely. And I took

many years to finalise the story. But every time I went back to it with my added “year” to the page, I realised somebody else is again speaking to me. The village, the fictional village I had created that was speaking to me, that was demanding of me! So slowly the story took shape in multiple voices.”

Sucharita then shared an example from the story for the Dossier. It was about a woman who works in multiple houses and aspires to have the same kind of luxury she sees in her employers' houses. She began writing the story from the woman's perspective, but soon realised that her story couldn't go ahead unless there were others responding to what she was doing.

“So this place where she lives, between this low cost housing, between a cremation ground and a fertiliser factory, that is its own story and what is her life like with her kind of aspiration? What is her life like there? So there is a lot of plurality happening within that space. She comes to work at her employer's house. She is friends with the employer's daughter and there is much more than friendship between them. But the employer doesn't know that although the employer is a liberal woman. But when she sees this girl's lingerie, when she gets to know later about the relationship between her maid and her daughter, what would she do? And that's when I realised that negotiating pluralism or pluralities is not a one-off thing. It's not something that you restrict to a field of work. It is an everyday necessity. At every point in your everyday life there is something or the other that challenges your sense of how liberal you are or not. And it either brings it out or it suppresses or it challenges that sense of pluralism which should be inherent to everybody.”

In conclusion, Sucharita emphasised the importance of challenging and exploring one's sense of pluralism through writing and provoking self-reflection.

Theme 3: Faith and Social Action

This theme delves into the works of various religious philosophies and their contributions to pluralistic practices, highlighting the transformative power of fearless inquiry and the role of spirituality in promoting social justice. Additionally, it examines the concept of religious dynamism and its impact on contemporary religious landscapes.

1. The Hinduism Paradox

By Urmi Chanda, Seeds of Peace

Urmi Chanda, a student of interfaith studies, delves into the complex dynamics of Hinduism and Hindutva in her thought-provoking narrative titled "The Hinduism Paradox."

She introduced her exploration with the following observations.

Urmi set the stage for her comprehensive analysis of the complexities and contradictions within Hinduism and its political manifestations, urging readers to confront and understand the nuances of this multifaceted landscape.

Urmi discussed her political transformation, shifting from a left-leaning perspective to a more centrist one as she engaged in peace-building efforts. She acknowledged the importance of engaging

with differing viewpoints and embracing her Hindu identity, even while grappling with the challenges of doing so. Urmi says,

"It is important no matter how different the other's point of view is to be able to sit with it. I don't have to agree with it, but I have to make room for it."

She underscored the significance of owning one's identity and embracing the complexities of Hinduism, both its strengths and weaknesses. Urmi expressed her motivation for writing about this topic, emphasising that rejecting Hindutva effectively requires an understanding and acceptance of Hindu identity. She delved into the historical background of Hinduism and Hindutva, tracing the origin of the term Hindutva (Hindutva, the term came from Bengal, by Chandranath Basu) and its evolution, along with its vision of a homogeneous culture that erases diversity.

She highlighted the multifaceted approach employed by Hindutva, involving the use of mythical figures, cultural symbols, and issues like the Ayodhya temple, cow protectionism, and anti-conversion laws to shape a particular narrative of Hindu identity. Urmi had some thought-provoking views to share during her presentation:

First, Urmi opened up about the prevailing sentiments and challenges faced by her generation, who are increasingly distancing themselves from their Hindu identity due to the violence perpetrated in its name. However, she argued that distancing ourselves from our Hindu identity may exacerbate the issue. She stressed that not confronting these challenges won't provide solutions, and we need to stand up for our identities as Hindus and counteract negative forces.

Next, she delved into the complex history of Hinduism, like the Varna and Jati system, highlighting that it has not always been non-confrontational as some believe. Urmi shed light on historical instances like the colonisation by the Chola kings and internal conflicts that contradict the peaceful image of Hinduism. Urmi discussed how Hinduism has utilised a unique tool, "sanskritization", to assimilate tribal mythologies. She revealed that local goddesses were declared forms of Parvati, reshaping indigenous beliefs, fitting within the Hindu fold.

Furthermore, Urmi explored the incorporation of Buddhism into Hinduism, explaining how Buddha was sometimes considered the 10th avatar of Vishnu. This strategic move allowed Hinduism to absorb a major rival religion.

Regarding contemporary issues, Urmi shared insights on the manipulation of census data. She explained that the BJP's attempts to control the census were driven by pushback from communities like the Adivasis, Sardanas, and Jains who no longer wished to be identified as Hindus. These attempts to redefine and control the Hindu identity in modern India demonstrate the evolving nature of the religion.

She also touched upon the notion of "love jihad" and "gharwapsi," highlighting the irony of simultaneously fearing conversions and engaging in reconversion efforts.

"As a student of interfaith, realising the Hindutva mandate under BJP - beef ban, yoga day, etc., identity-driven points and used it to reach out to the liberal Hindus. The counteractive voices in the Hindu community are going away, but we should hold that identity and push back these attacking forces. Hinduism's favourite tool - sanskritisation - reached out to the Indian tribal communities, their village/forest goddesses were declared a form of Parvati. Buddha appears as the 10th avatar of Lord Vishnu. Census figures have been pushed up in an attempt to bring others into the Hindu umbrella. Love jihad, gharwapsi - anti-conversion laws, reconverting them back to Hindu. Given this, we cannot eliminate religion, but must own up Hindu identity while pushing back Hindutva practices."

Urmi eloquently summarised this, saying, "We are full of hypocrisies." Despite these inconsistencies, she emphasised the importance of not rejecting religion entirely, noting that it can be a positive force for social change.

Urmi celebrated the decentralised nature of Hinduism, noting,

"There is no one pope, one temple, one scripture. So there will never be one narrative, never be one way of being Hindu."

This diversity of interpretations and practices within Hinduism enables pluralism.

Urmi closed her presentation with a plea for engagement and activism within the Hindu framework to create change in a religiously diverse society. She stressed that countering the BJP's strategies requires creative and progressive competition.

2. Spirituality as Fearless Enquiry for a Plural and Just World

Anannya Bhattacharjee

Anannya commenced her presentation by addressing the notion of secularism and its original intent. She pointed out that secularism was conceived as a means to foster pluralism and act as an antidote to religious domination. However, she noted that today it is challenging to find a truly secular state that has not been influenced by a dominant religion.

"Secularism came about in order for people who wanted to see pluralism. Today we are really hard pressed to find a secular state that has not been coloured by a dominant religion."

The Sacralization of Secularism: Anannya pointed out that secularism has become a "sacralized orthodoxy," despite its failures, and that, "The problematic of faith facilitating pluralism remains." Furthermore, Anannya expressed her concern about the dominance of secular reasoning, stating that it has narrowed our capacity to understand the world fully. She emphasised,

"Secular reasoning is privileged over other ways of perceiving the world."

Engaged Spirituality: Anannya introduced the concept of "engaged spirituality" as a term that opens up a space for non-denominational or multi-denominational dialogue. She also stressed the need to critically evaluate and redefine the term "engaged" to avoid it becoming a mere catchphrase, highlighting the significance of identifying the unique contributions of various traditions. She emphasised on redefining "engaged" spirituality,

"It's an overused word. We have engaged Buddhism, we have engaged this, that... I don't want to use it in the common sense way of how do we engage with the world."

...and spirituality I'm using here as a term that is gaining currency when we don't want to use the word religion. However, for me it's not a replacement for the term. It's more of an opening up, a non-denominational or multi-denominational open to exchanges and dialogue."

Contestation of truth: Anannya explored the contestation of truth and how it is perceived. She drew upon modern philosophers like Foucault, who argued that understanding oneself is more of an attitude than a rigid doctrine, and this attitude remains aware of imposed limits while yearning to

transcend them. She contrasted this approach with the ancient wisdom of various traditions, which view truth as an ever-evolving process rather than an object that can be conclusively captured. In her own words, Anannya shared,

"Our everyday realities and the multiplicities we live in are a doorway to the truth, to our understanding of the truth. And yet the truth can never be an object that is available for its triumphant arrival and the exclusive capture. It's a never ending process. It is never a capture and a triumphant arrival."

Anannya elaborated on the attributes necessary for a journey towards truth, drawing inspiration from both ancient wisdom and modern scholars like Foucault and Charles Taylor. She discussed the importance of "viveka" which emphasised continuous discernment and alertness to ensure that one's actions and words align with the journey toward truth. Anannya emphasised,

"If one wants to go towards the truth, one has to be very alert to see that one is not led away from the truth."

Another crucial attribute discussed was "vairagya," often misunderstood as renunciation. Anannya clarified that it signifies non-attachment, especially to preconceived notions, fostering an openness to relearning and letting go of outdated beliefs. Her presentation touched upon the idea that truth is not limited to a specific ideology or worldview. It must be grounded in a plurality of possible bases and foundations, not exclusively secular or religious, according to Charles Taylor.

Moving on to the mode of the journey, Anannya introduced "self-inquiry" or "Atma vichara" as a means of self-transformation by removing ignorance and conditioning of the mind and body. She highlighted that this self-inquiry is a personal journey and not something granted by any authority or institution. Anannya also discussed the importance of collective inquiry and "Sarbhavichara", which means going from inner to the outer "Atma vichara". She spoke of a three-pronged approach. The first layer is the process of self inquiry.

However this should not be becoming a self centred, indulgent self inquiry where the person doesn't have the spiritual compassion to look outwards and help make the world a better place. The second layer includes being grounded on a plurality of possible basis and foundations, not exclusively either secular or religious or from any single orthodoxy. And the third is the attitude which one brings for this journey.

The presentation concluded by addressing the attitude toward struggle, emphasising the importance of solidarity and the limitations of defining collective identity solely based on a common enemy. It underscored the significance of loving those who oppose us and the rejection of rigid binaries of sin and virtue. Additionally, Anannya stressed the absence of a uniquely privileged agent of change and the necessity to find our own keys and openings for transformation.

3. Between the Boundaries of Religious Worlds

Bharatwaj Iyer, PhD Scholar at IIT, Bombay

Bharatwaj Iyer introduced the central focus of his essay, which examined the philosophical foundations of pluralism in Sufi thought through the lens of three prominent figures: Moiyuddin Ibn Arabi, Dara Shikoh, and Sarmad Kashani. He acknowledged the temporal and historical differences between these figures, with Ibn Arabi hailing from 13th-century Spain and the Indian Sufis emerging

much later in the 16th and 17th centuries. Notably, this temporal distinction prompted him to ponder the significance of this placement within the Sufi tradition.

Bharatwaj candidly shared that his engagement with the essay didn't end with its submission. In fact, it ignited a continuous exploration, sparking more questions for him to contemplate. He expressed his commitment to not just presenting these influential figures but also to understanding the philosophical rationale behind their embrace of pluralism.

"So first Ibn Arabi's talks about the diversity of beliefs, why there are multiple religions, why there are multiple beliefs. And he says that this multiplicity resides in the manyness of the real itself, that the real flows out into multiple forms. And he also says that perfection of belief of his perfect understanding of this excess,- that is the real requirement of you. 'The person who perfectly understands this recognizes him in faith, in proof and in heresy.' He is everywhere, right? He's there in heresy also."

"... Dara Shikoh says that he's there both in Iman and in Kufa. He's there in faith and infidelity. He's there in both. And this is a very important central understanding even in later Sufis in the subcontinent as well. One example could be Naz Khialvi, who is a 20th century Pakistani Sufi poet, thinker very much in the same tradition, who makes explicit claims that he is there in Ram and in Rahim."

Thus Dara Shikoh's pluralism goes beyond mere appreciation for diversity; it is rooted in a deep philosophical understanding, particularly drawing from the influential ideas of Ibn Arabi.

In the words of Bharatwaj,

"He is there in all these places of worship. And he also has a very ironic way of speaking about God. He says that he himself must be an atheist if he goes to every religious abode of worship."

This statement reflects Dara Shikoh's unique approach to religious diversity, challenging conventional notions and pushing the boundaries of understanding.

Bharatwaj delved into Ibn Arabi's concept of "tabarza," the in-between, asserting that all of reality exists as an in-between phenomenon, marked by edges and nuances. This, he argued, significantly impacts discussions on pluralism. The exploration continued with a reference to Sarmad Kashani, a figure closely associated with Dara Shikoh, who embodied a border identity—an Armenian Jew turned Yogi and Sufi. Bharatwaj noted Sarmad's contribution to the subcontinent's earliest interreligious text, "Davistani, mazahib," highlighting the complexity of identity as a dynamic, ever-evolving construct that acknowledges the existence of other identities,

"..And what is also an interesting fact, is that there is a 16th century text attributed to this person called Mohsin Fani. It is called Davistani, mazahib. It's a collection of multiple religious systems. So it is among the subcontinent's first inter religious texts. The Judaism chapter of that text is by Sarmad Kashani."

Bharatwaj discussed his research and how he grapples with the very meaning of pluralism and engages with scholars like John Connolly to distinguish between pluralism and relativism. Additionally, he reflects on the wisdom of choosing figures ambiguous about their identity and the potential political implications of such a choice,

"So that question arose for me. And also another question which really struck me was in a piece on pluralism, in a time like this, was it the wisest choice to think of three figures who are ambiguous

about their identity? Shouldn't the choice be of figures who are certain of their identity? Isn't there a political problem in that very choice? So I was wrestling with a lot of these things"

To address these questions, Bharatwaj drew upon two transformative texts—Shahab Ahmed's "What is Islam?" and Milard Milani's "The Nature of Sufism: An Ontological Reading of the Mystical in Islam." Ahmed's work challenges preconceived notions about Muslim identity, emphasising that ambiguity and paradox have always been integral to the Muslim identity. Milani's book provides a genealogy of the "religion of love" within Sufism, shedding light on how Sufism's discontinuity with legal Islam occurs through its analogy with Islam.

Bharatwaj concluded by emphasising the centrality of figures like Ibn Arabi, asserting that they are not marginal but central to the exploration of pluralism. He expressed a desire for his research to transcend a mere historical exercise, aiming to glean insights from figures like Ibn Arabi to inform contemporary discussions on pluralism, inclusion, and tolerance.

In the spirit of intellectual curiosity, Bharatwaj opened the floor to questions, prompting an inquiry into the meaning of the "in between." As this question becomes a gateway for further exploration into the intricate and nuanced philosophical concepts embedded in the research.

The concept of "the in-between" played a pivotal role in Bharatwaj's essay, and he explained both its epistemological and ontological dimensions. Bharatwaj elucidating this concept:

"There are two things. One sense of the in between is ontological for Ibn Arabi and the other is epistemological. So I'll begin with the epistemological. So Ibn Arabi says that in order to understand the identity of something, what is central is to understand the difference how A differs from B. So the other, which is the B from which A differs is a fundamental constituent of A's identity. And he says it in precisely these very philosophical terms. So in the sense that what this means is that A's identity is not insulated from out of its particular context and out of its particular relationship and encounter with B or the other. So in the paper I think I mentioned how the other is fundamental to self-worth. That's from Ibn Arabi. And one of the best works on this that has happened recently is by Salman Bashir, which is called Barzak. That's the word that Ibn Arabi uses for the in between."

4. A Meditation on Social Action and Spirituality

Aspi Mistry

In our exploration of the intersection between faith, political action, and spirituality, Aspi remarked, *"It's based on the discussions we had in last July and theme of faith and social action, political action*

and spirituality and so on." Reflecting on earlier conferences, Aspi observed, "two notions emerged, prompting a fresh perspective on the relationship between spirituality and social action.

"If one looks at the history of all social-political movements, all successful movements have always had or been inspired by spiritual values, including the Bolshevik Revolution."

This challenges the notion that spirituality is an optional addition to social action, suggesting an intrinsic connection evident in movements like Gandhi's freedom struggle.

John Clammers's assertion added depth,

"Economics does not sound like a spiritual practice, but in fact, economics is a profoundly spiritual practice because you can both reshape the world and your inner nature."

This challenges the dichotomy between the spiritual and the material, suggesting economic policies are rooted in human and spiritual values.

As illustrated by a case study involving tribal communities, prioritising social and communal values over economic gains resulted in increased productivity without a proportional rise in output. The example highlights how spiritual and community values can override purely economic considerations, showcasing the importance of understanding the interplay between economics and human values".

Aspi delved into life's fundamental questions and the spiritual dimension's significance, stating,

"This comes because we want to have answers to the questions about the major events in our life—birth, sickness, old age, death. What is all this about? What is this life all about? What is this universe all about?" He asserted that religions involve more than beliefs, encompassing social practices and rituals, quoting, "Religions consist not just of beliefs and doctrines, but also of social practices of meaning-making, including rituals and contemplative practices."

Highlighting the danger of nihilism, Aspi quoted Nietzsche, expressing, *"Nihilism arises out of this need for answers to these questions, which can only be answered in a transcendental way by going beyond materialism."* He observed a modern reluctance to embrace transcendental perspectives due to conditioning, leading to nihilism where "you don't believe in anything and nothing exists."

Aspi explored the contemporary use of the term 'spiritual,' emphasising, *"People use the word spiritual because they want to emphasise transformative personal experience apart from public religious institutions."* He acknowledged historical parallels, noting that spirituality without religion is essentially "privatised, experience-oriented religion."

Discussing burnout among activists, Aspi suggested, "Maybe spirituality is seen as something which will charge your batteries before you get into action again." Drawing from a Buddhist perspective, he introduced the concept of "shikishinfuni," stating, "Shiki shin (form and mind), except spiritual funi is an abbreviation of ninifuni, which indicates two in phenomena but not two in essence or otherwise—two but not two, one but not one. This is Shikisha."

Aspi reflected on synchronicity in conference papers, particularly the common theme of being in nature. He posed a question, pondering, *"If we have to put being in nature, what do we put at the centre of a mandala?"*

Moving beyond individual experiences, Aspi explored the idea of constructing a mandala of solidarity economics, where nature takes the central position, *"If we had to draw a mandala of solidarity economics or something like that, we would have to put in the centre of the circle what? So, initially, I had put human beings. Then Milind said, you know, aren't we limiting? Then I thought, what about sentient beings? Then finally, we agreed it should be nature. Everything about nature."*

Contemplating the feasibility of such a model, Aspi invoked the example of Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index, stating, *"In Bhutan, instead of counting GDP, they count Gross National Happiness."*

In conclusion, Aspi emphasised that our journey through these ideas invites us to question existing paradigms and consider alternative models that prioritise spirituality, social action, and economic practices in an interconnected manner.

Looking Ahead

Milind highlighted HBF's support and vision. Mirza provided insights into the foundation's activities, particularly its involvement in the Global Assembly commemorating the 175th anniversary of the German National Assembly in Frankfurt. This assembly is dedicated to fostering global dialogue on democracy and pluralism. Various NGOs from Germany initiated this assembly in 2022 and invited foundations involved in promoting pluralism (Donor agencies, including Miserior, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Bread for the World, Frederick Ebert's Foundation, and Rosa Luxembourg's Foundation, in collaboration with the Frankfurt City Council, are orchestrating the process). They invited participants from their global networks, resulting in a diverse group of 45 individuals from various regions, including Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, Canada, and some representatives from indigenous communities. A pre-assembly took place, and a final assembly is scheduled for next year. Mirza gave updates on the pre-general assembly, which featured six groups covering diverse topics such as ecological crises, gender, stories, democracy and pluralism, energy alternatives and crises.

The above was followed by discussing the future of the dossier. The following two ideas were discussed:

1. **Explore publishing the Dossier:** Explore possibility of publishing in print form. Zulfiqar Mirza of HBF also proposed the idea of promoting the dossier through podcasts and voice recordings of articles, preferably narrated by the authors.
2. **Share publications and videos:** The suggestion was made to engage more deeply with the dossier, focusing on discussions about pluralities and related topics. Mirza explores plans for sharing spin off material for the dossier with interested organisations or individuals.

Plenary session and discussion

In a plenary session led by Mirza, the guiding questions previously discussed in the pre-assembly were revisited. The representatives agreed to return to their regions and engage civil society in these questions, aiming to increase participation in the global assembly process. The three guiding questions were:

1. What are the key, alternative, complementary, pluralising, diversifying normative narratives?
2. How are they legitimised?

3. What gives them a binding force?

The broader goal was to emphasise transnational solidarities, given the limitations of existing national and regional solidarities. The focus was on basic principles that need further attention, including the extension of fundamental rights to nature. The interaction of human rights, democracy, and justice in today's context was also discussed, along with ways to underline transnational solidarity and underscore cultural diversity, social and environmental justice.

The discussion underscored the importance of considering diverse perspectives in global dialogues, re-evaluating established narratives, and fostering transnational solidarities.



The next session was devoted to discussing the idea of setting up a Centre for the Study of Spiritual Traditions and Interfaith Dialogue

This section discusses the idea to set up a centre that is for the study of spiritual traditions, interfaith dialogue and connected with social action, preparation involved and its plan to present the concept note to discuss further.

Concept note on the Centre

In Milind's engaging address preceding the sharing of the concept note on a Centre for the study of spiritual traditions and interfaith dialogue, he brought to the forefront a tapestry of critical issues. These concerns encompassed the spectres of social collapse and fragmentation, intertwined with Siddharth's dire predictions for the looming 2050 climate crisis. Milind acknowledged the weight of historical baggage, including war, corruption, patriarchy, poverty, and intolerance. In addition, he highlighted the emergence of communal and polarising intolerance over the past decade, all of which made the theme of plurality more pertinent.

The presentation then delved into the existential crisis affecting individuals, generating bewilderment and personal turmoil. While Milind admitted his own awareness of the sources of his existential anxiety, he underscored that he has the luxury of such self awareness time, something that the majority of the population, particularly living below the poverty line, might not have. The discussion shifted toward the intersection of personal liberation and spirituality, pondering the possibility of authentic spirituality bridging the personal and social dimensions. Milind raised a critical question, how do we progress in addressing these multifaceted challenges?

“Do we have a possibility of an authentic spirituality which somewhere connects with the dimension of the social? And if yes, what is the bridge between this authentic spirituality and the social?”

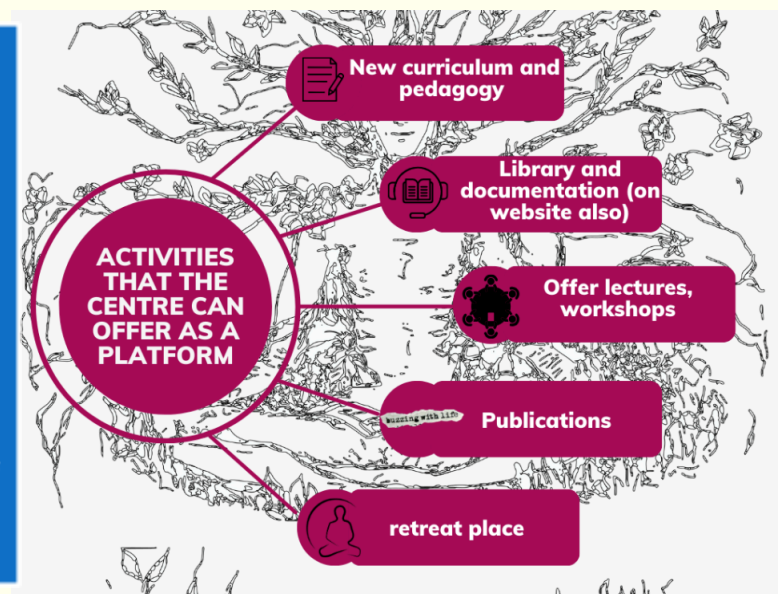
With all these reflections and inquiries, the idea for a centre for study of wisdom traditions was proposed and discussed.

The vision of the Centre is to:

1. Nurture an understanding of the union of wisdom tradition, compassion, and what it means to be part of a living, socially engaged spiritual tradition.
2. To create a space where we encourage dialogue of plural faiths and how to work towards creating an intersection point between the spiritual and the social.

The Centre would consider exploring:

- ↑ Develop a methodology for gathering feminine wisdoms.
- ↑ Explore deeper into living with differences and establishing a foundational value system.
- ↑ Work on indigenous ideas and cosmology, considering the lack of local words for concepts like buen vivir, ubuntu, interconnectedness.
- ↑ Address how to handle differences and pluralities. Explore the possibility of plurality within the sense of oneness.



The team brainstormed on the **names for a Centre** that focuses on pluralism, humanism, esoteric traditions, and wisdom traditions.

- CALM Centre (Centre for Academic Learning and Meditation): A Centre focused on academic learning and meditation, creating a space for both intellectual growth and inner peace.
- EICME Centre (Education, Inquiry, and Cultural Mediation) "This Centre is named EICME, representing its core values: Education, Inquiry, and Cultural Mediation. It's a place where these principles are put into practice.
- V-I-S-T-S which means something by itself. Vistas. It was visions and tasks. And the full thing was something like Village Improvement, something for something. The whole thing was expanded.

People also suggested Firefly, 'Centre' or Centre for Wisdom traditions or People Centre with a tagline underneath ("People's Interface Program for Action and Learning." This emphasizes the Centre's commitment to fostering interfaith dialogue and action among people from various backgrounds.)

The mission statement underscored the importance of pluralism and non-sectarianism and celebrated the concept of common humanity and work towards social justice. The presentation's exploration of the interplay between plurality and oneness aimed to determine whether these ideas were contradictory or complementary. Additionally, the Centre's role extended beyond participation, for instance, preparing the youngsters engaged in social action or activism through the development of pedagogical materials. For instance, If you are looking at the climate crisis, how can we excavate the resources in religious, spiritual texts in order to deal with some of the present challenges? Do we need to think about how to prepare such educational material?

In the discussion on the concept note idea, several speakers shared their thoughts. One of the speakers emphasised the need for a comprehensive pedagogy or curriculum to teach intersectionality across different traditions. They highlighted the challenge of reconciling the original intent of scriptures with their contemporary relevance, underscoring the need for a more effective approach. While another suggested starting from a narrow point, like the concept of "common humanity", and then expanding to broader topics. They believed that building from this common ground could facilitate discussions on non-duality and help the Centre evolve into a research hub. Aspi raised a question on whether we can be non-dualist while looking at all wisdom traditions and stressed the need for understanding and dialoguing about differences and beliefs. Jyoti Sahi delved into the gap between social action

and personal change, suggesting that the focus should shift from "changing the individual" to "changing the self," emphasising personal transformation as a key to societal change.

The discussion also touched on the importance of understanding, rather than just tolerating, cultural differences and beliefs. Siddhartha emphasised the significance of actions within the Centre, highlighting that religious thinkers and practitioners should engage in reflective processes. John asked whether we aim to expand or innovate within traditions. Anannya viewed the process as a dialectical one of growth and change, especially in social movement. She also advocated for inclusivity in the Centre's pedagogy, emphasising the importance of not limiting its scope to a specific group and identifying potential participants. Ashim discussed the Centre's scope, suggesting that it shouldn't be limited to interfaith discussions and should also include Indian perspectives in its framework.

Finding a balance between multiple traditions without favouring any specific one was also discussed. Milind shared his thoughts on linking spirituality issues to social justice questions. He discussed the need for careful thinking and sensitivity in presenting these ideas without being confrontational. The group also mentioned the importance of identifying people within their networks who could participate in these discussions. Reinterpretation is seen as an exciting aspect of the project, and individuals are encouraged to contribute based on their own limitations and interests.

The discussion began with the acknowledgment that the development process for the Centre will take time and require targeted outreach to individuals from different traditions. Here's the suggested activities for the Centre for interfaith dialogue and social justice:

- ❖ **Engage in regular meetings to discuss specific papers or topics.** This could be done in person or online to create workshops and develop short papers and talks as a means of answering questions. This could involve collating already available material on interfaith dialogue and social justice, and developing new materials.
- ❖ **Create pedagogy and curriculum modules** that can be accessed online or in person. This could involve video modules on specific topics, such as climate action, gender, and social justice for broader accessibility.
 - Build a larger circle of thinkers and doers at a senior level in both movements and spiritual traditions, and engage them in developing the curriculum and pedagogy.
 - Focus on the process itself as a form of delivery, and allow the curriculum and pedagogy to emerge organically from the group's work.
 - Be mindful of the audience, and focus on developing a curriculum that is relevant and engaging for young people, as well as those interested in issues like climate action, gender, and social justice.
 - Timeline: Approximately 10 months to create a skeleton or blueprint of the curriculum.
- ❖ **Broaden the community of people involved in the Centre.** This could involve reaching out to young people, as well as people from diverse religious and social backgrounds. "We emphasize involving young individuals in conversations about interfaith dialogue, climate action, gender, and social justice. This outreach should encompass teachings, workshops, and innovative interactions with a focus on interfaith dialogue."
- ❖ **Consider enriching and publishing existing materials independently or in collaboration.** This could involve adding supplementary content, such as rejoinders or additional ideas, to further enhance the existing materials.
- ❖ **Form a core group with set activities and deadlines.** This group would be responsible for developing and implementing the Centre's activities.
- ❖ **Identify funding sources** and involve others through advisory roles or mentoring positions.
- ❖ Explore ideas for disseminating the Dossier. Activities decided were **the voice recordings of papers for a podcast and printing and distributing a dossier.**

Challenges: Opposition due to controversial topics being addressed by the Centre. This is a concern that should be taken seriously, but it should not deter the Centre from pursuing its important work.

Perspectives on the role, possibilities, potential, limits of the Centre

Jyoti Sahi discussed the concept of “synodality” in the context of the Church’s structure. He mentioned that the Pope has advocated for a less hierarchical structure and more synodality, which involves different people speaking. This has been met with criticism, but also support, particularly in Germany due to its background of federal democracy.

Jyoti, as an artist, is interested in the intersection of art and spirituality. He has worked on bringing artists together and teaching art with a focus on how it relates to spirituality. He emphasised that change must come from below, from people who are grappling with societal divisions and their personal wounds. He referred to the “wound” as a source of creativity and suggested that it is more important than skill or technical ability in art. He further added that gatherings like the one like this should focus on individuals’ wounds rather than their knowledge or doctrines.

Bharatwaj expressed his excitement about the project, highlighting its potential as a space for reinterpretation, akin to a book that allows for rethinking from various perspectives. This aspect of the project aligns with his own work, and he showed interest in participating. He referenced the "Universal Flow" project at the Ibn Arab Society, where different texts from various traditions are allowed to interpret each other, highlighting the potential for interfaith dialogue, such as Rumi and the Gita. Bharatwaj also discussed the potential of platforms like YouTube in facilitating dialogue and building communities. Bharatwaj mentioned [Project Noon](#), a Karnataka based organisation that started with YouTube interviews as a platform for interfaith dialogue but has expanded to talking to scholars about the subcontinental questions of Hindu Muslim dialogue, conflict and so on, indicating the potential for such initiatives to grow and transform over time.

Siddhartha suggested identifying and creating a network of theologians or thinkers from diverse religious backgrounds who are open to social justice issues.

Ashim expressed his concern about the decline of Gandhian movements in India, attributing it not to the absence of Gandhian institutions or practices, but to the collapse of values. He noted that there is an imperative of engaging with individuals at the grassroots level in the discourse and pedagogical journey. It was his conviction that only through such involvement could fundamental values percolate and resonate within the broader societal context.

The Final session was devoted to understand the intersection of spirituality and social action and self realisation for collective transformation & world realisation – in this session participants split into break-out groups to discuss the th four universes of the dossier:



Arts and Culture

The focal point of the conversation revolved around the multifaceted role of arts and culture in disseminating stories and cultural narratives. The discourse commenced with a cautionary note, acknowledging the need to safeguard the innate energy of stories against undue instrumentalization and appropriation. As the dialogue progressed, the group delved into the intricate question of cultural ownership and copyright, particularly with respect to stories originating from marginalized tribal communities. The group pondered the challenge of reinterpreting these tales without eroding their cultural essence.

Ashim shared and gave examples of the power and strength, width of the exhibition to give back to the audiences who are not even around these issues. The use of exhibitions as a powerful medium for conveying cultural and historical messages,

"Exhibition is one of the most powerful mediums that has not been explored... There's a certain kind of thing which is larger experience has." An illustrative example was provided through a discussion about an exhibition on the Holocaust, which was highlighted for its impact."

One participant shared an experience where they had to reinterpret tribal stories while preserving their cultural essence. She emphasized the need for creative and sensitive animators to effectively convey these narratives. Another significant point was the potential of exhibitions as a powerful way to share cultural and historical messages. A great example was discussed, like the Holocaust exhibition that had a strong impact. Lastly, the group agreed that while participatory methods are valuable, there's also a place for more instructional approaches when it's suitable. So, in a nutshell, the discussion highlighted the intricate dance between storytelling, preserving culture, and the different ways we communicate in the world of arts and culture.

Activities

- **Storytelling:** Share diverse narratives, including community, climate, and experiences, through both spoken and visual forms, such as painting. A potent means to shape perspectives. Narrative concepts: For instance, reimagining the Sita and Rama tale, with Sita as the central figure and Rama as a tree, to explore gender equality and nature connections. Additionally, showcasing stories of various cultural festivals, emphasizing their values and traditions. Consider assembling these narratives into a collection for easy sharing and accessibility, using methods like website creation, book publication, or film production.
- **Cultural Activities:** Engage through drama, Lavani, and exhibitions for cultural and historical education.
- **Develop a strategy for combining participatory and didactic communication styles in arts and culture initiatives.**

Pluralities and traditions

The conversation was structured into four categories. The first category, "Pluralisms," highlighted the presence of everyday pluralities and the net of plural traditions and discourses, leading to various responses, including disengagement, indifference, tolerance, recognition, and creativity.

One speaker explained, "Plurality can also be creative, generative, and a place of mutuality and interdependence." The second category explored the "Impact of Plural Traditions," emphasizing how exposure to plural traditions can expand one's perspective and lead to world realization. In the third category, "Deep Exploration of Plural Traditions," participants discussed the importance of approaching traditions without preconceived notions to uncover what they truly offer, addressing common existential questions and a sense of common dwelling.

Lastly, the discussion delved into "Self Realization and World Realization," discussing the layered journey from the human self to the universal self and its connection to world realization. Some of the articulated ideas are given below:

"The idea that self-realization is a layered journey from the human self to the universal self and is related to world realization. It emphasizes the importance of plural engagement, discovery, revealment, and shedding."

"the need to consider humanism in the context of addressing existential questions and recognizing the importance of diversity in a modern notion, along with the political forms of diversity."

Humanism was considered crucial in addressing common existential questions and recognizing the importance of diversity in a modern notion, along with the political forms of diversity. Ashim noted, *"Humanism is an integral part of trying to work and address ecological and social issues."*

"The concept of "communist desire" is introduced as something to be internalized, similar to "spiritual desire", and the importance of philosophy in generalizing and conceptualizing human experiences."

Other key suggestions included avoiding overly specific terminology, embracing humanism, and recognizing the importance of diversity in a modern context, as well as considering political forms of diversity.

Some of the thought stimulating questions raised included:

- How can we deeply explore and search plural traditions to understand not just what our tradition does not offer, but also what it does offer?
- How can we overcome preconceived notions of problematic areas when coming into the tradition?
- How can traditions act as a common dwelling?

Spirituality & Politics: Intersection

Presented by Maya, who averred,

"We also must avoid instrumentalist deployment of religion, which is what is happening increasingly, and I think generally the sort of suggestion that instrumentalization is harmful. So what would be the areas of engagement? And so everything from texts to performances, which would include music, dance, storytelling, theater? There are lots of overlaps with the culture of people food practices. Because food is intensely political today. We have a situation where people's refrigerators are being investigated. And of course, food is political also in the sense of how we grow our food and how we access it. There's a whole political economy of food which one needs to look, including our clothing. The politics is really entering into everything. Pedagogic practices, unconventional experimental and traditional educational models can both be explored here. Then we have modalities, like specific modalities that we might want to deploy.."

Potential Modalities for Deployment (to be studied in interfaith context)

- Workshops focusing on 2-3 texts, conversations about alternative approaches, and readings on spirituality and religion.
- Talks addressing informed initiatives like Lakshmi Ashram in Kausani, Uttarakhand, Nahi Taleem, and others.
- Issue-based discussions or sessions involving people from different traditions Issue

The areas of engagement include:

- Texts and artistic performances, such as dance, storytelling, and food practices, recognizing the inherent political aspects of food.
- Pedagogical practices, embracing both unconventional and traditional teaching methods.
- Workshops and talks around various spiritually informed initiatives. The team would explore diverse spiritually informed initiatives like Krishnamurti schools, Gurjev-inspired projects, and Gandhian Ashrams.
- The group also recommended Interfaith workshops, dialogues, and discussions exploring the nexus of gender and spirituality and broadening the audience by involving youth as well.

In this group discussion, Siddhartha introduced the idea of exploring the intersection between spirituality and politics that can become an open ended space for thinking about these two nouns, emphasizing the need to move beyond shallow engagement. They propose defining key terms like spirituality and politics and consider the importance of addressing power dynamics in various aspects of life, not just in traditional politics.

Ashim shared his idea on the need to address political philosophy and theories, exploring the concept of antagonism leading to positive outcomes. The discussion revolves around the idea of evaluating political tasks from a spiritual perspective and introducing spirituality concepts into the current political disarray. Additionally, the idea of a solidarity economy was discussed as a means to blend spirituality with politics, while Maya raised questions about the powerful influence of holy figures in politics and their potential exploration. The discussion also highlighted the challenge of organized religion negatively impacting politics and the aim of exploring the positive implications of diverse engagements between spirituality and politics.

John's Idea of "Truth Test" for Political Promises: The concept of applying a "truth test" to political promises is mentioned as an educational approach to assess the sincerity of politicians. Additionally, they discussed the idea of a "truth test" for political promises to assess the sincerity of politicians, and explored the philosophical aspect of spirituality and politics, suggesting the incorporation of spiritual concepts into the ideological framework of politics.

Inter-faith dialogue and inclusivity

Presented by Zulifcar Mirza, the initial conversation revolved around the establishment of an interfaith centre, and the need to clarify purpose, and scope. He discussed whether the focus should be on faith, religion, or culture in interfaith dialogue. The potential for the centre to serve as a training facility for interfaith dialogue was also considered. The conversation explored potential entry points for interfaith dialogue, including peacebuilding, culture, art, music, food, and stories and what the potential areas of engagement for the centre to be inclusive could be:

- Identify the group that would benefit the most from these dialogues. This could be school children, community leaders, or even the general public.
- Establish the centre that serves as a safe space for interfaith dialogues in everyday life. This could involve hosting festivals and other events that promote interfaith understanding.
- Centre to consider capacity-building to address conflicts, vigilance in conflict-prone areas, and long-term peace education approaches.
- Encourage dialogues between different faiths, even those that might be difficult to engage with each other.
- Use the centre as a platform for building an archive of interfaith dialogues. This could help identify patterns and build on stories from the past.
- Consider using the centre as a training facility where pedagogies for interfaith dialogues can be developed.
- Include ecology in interfaith dialogues, discussed how ecology can be an important component in interfaith dialogues. This could involve exploring how different faiths view nature and the environment.
- Explore broader understanding of the role of interfaith frameworks in social movements.

The participants also discussed the challenges associated with adopting the term "interfaith," particularly in the context of politically sensitive issues like Hindu-Muslim tensions. They raised questions about how to navigate this terrain effectively.

Urmi emphasized three aspects of peacemaking within interfaith efforts, including peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peace building, calling for clarity on the objectives and levels of interfaith dialogue, with a focus on peace education. Peace building through education (partner with ngos, create modalities where we train people on peace and take it to communities) could be one way to look at.

Ashim shared insights about the dissolution of government interfaith dialogues, emphasizing the importance of training individuals to engage at the grassroots level. He highlighted the significance of peace building in urban areas and the need for confronting issues to prevent violence.

