

# Vikalp Sangam on Social Well-being and Justice

23rd - 26th January 2025  
Fireflies Intercultural Centre  
Bengaluru



*This report has been written and compiled by Pooja Kishinani and Milind Wani.*

*Photographic documentation by Pooja Kishinani.*

*The Social Well-being and Justice Vikalp Sangam was financially supported by Misereor and was hosted by Fireflies Intercultural Centre.*

## Table of Contents

Inspiration	3
Addressing contemporary challenges	4
Introduction to the Sangam	5
Day 1	7
Welcome and Introductions	7
About Vikalp Sangam	7
Intention setting	8
Day 2	9
The Activist's Dilemma: Choosing Between Peace and Justice in Changemaking by Urmi Chanda	9
Introspective Activity and Participant Reflections	12
Group Activity	14
What does it mean to be well in a time of climate breakdown? by Abhayraj Naik and Shalini Rao	14
Nature Mandala and Letter-Writing	17
Day 3	17
Exploring spiritual dimensions of social well-being and justice by Aspi Mistry	17
Group Activity - Debate	19
Democracy, Pluralism and Nature by Milind Wani	20
Film Screening	23
Day 4	23
Conclusion	23
Annexure 1: Participants	24

## Inspiration

Well-being and justice, as it were, are two sides of the same coin. It is because of the seminal importance of these issues that they are together considered one of the spheres of the envisioned alternative (Vikalp) society. Arguably it would not be too presumptuous to state that at the heart of all serious discourse vis-a-vis the human enterprise – whether the discourse be social, political, cultural, religious, ethical etc – is either the notion of human well-being or that of justice or both, whether at the level of individual, or the level of family, community, nation, etc. To what extent can such notions - given that they emanate across centuries and civilizations and have engaged some of the best minds from varied ideological, cultural, and religious backgrounds - help us work towards alternative worlds?

The notion of human well-being and the notion of justice have, through various constructs, hypotheses and postulations, found articulation in political discourses from ancient times to modern both in the west and the east; from the notion of eudemonia as “human flourishing”<sup>1</sup> as articulated by political thinkers and philosophers like Aristotle of ancient Greece, to Marx’s notion of communism as a society that overcomes alienated existence, to eastern political thought such as the Gandhian notion of village republic (swaraj through ramrajya, etc.).

It is necessary to appreciate how the notion of human well-being gets articulated in various spiritual and mystical traditions in the east and west - including but not limited to the concept of *Satori* of Zen-Buddhism, the Yoga of Action as articulated in Bhagavad Gita, the Vedanta of consciousness, Jainism’s concept of *kaivalya*, Sufism’s *fana* or freedom, the Tao as the non-path beyond words and concepts, the Jewish Kabbalah of transformation, Christian mysticism, pantheism, indigenous cosmologies, etc. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it is also necessary to explore what kind of creative reinterpretation (if any) of these traditions is taking place to make them socially relevant in today’s context. It is crucial to explore the emancipatory and radical possibilities of these traditions, especially in light of the fact that regressive

---

1 Eudaimonia (Greek: εὐδαιμονία [eudaimo'niá:]), sometimes anglicized as eudaemonia or eudemonia, is a Greek word commonly translated as happiness or welfare; however, "human flourishing" has been proposed as a more accurate translation. Etymologically, it consists of the words "eu" ("good") and "daimōn" ("spirit"). It is a central concept in Aristotelian ethics and political philosophy, along with the terms "aretē", most often translated as "virtue" or "excellence", and "phronesis", often translated as "practical or ethical wisdom". In Aristotle's works, eudaimonia was (based on older Greek tradition) used as the term for the highest human good, and so it is the aim of practical philosophy, including ethics and political philosophy, to consider (and also experience) what it really is, and how it can be achieved. Discussion of the links between virtue of character (ethikēaretē) and happiness (eudaimonia) is one of the central concerns of ancient ethics, and a subject of much disagreement. As a result there are many varieties of eudaimonism. Two of the most influential forms are those of Aristotle and the Stoics. Aristotle takes virtue and its exercise to be the most important constituent in eudaimonia but acknowledges also the importance of external goods such as health, wealth, and beauty. By contrast, the Stoics make virtue necessary and sufficient for eudaimonia and thus deny the necessity of external goods. For more details: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eudaimonia#Plato>.

interpretation of religion is invoked by authoritarian tendencies to serve the agenda of cultural and national chauvinism by 'othering' and the persecution of ethnic, gender, religious, race and caste minorities.

In a post-truth world of strife – including war, ecocide, climate and biodiversity crises, social and gender inequity, class and caste-based oppression and exploitation - and within a context of social, ecological, and psychological fragmentation that the aforementioned engender, what is **the interplay between the notion of well-being and justice in terms of the impact it creates vis-à-vis the psychological health of the individual?** It is important to study these questions and challenges of a post-truth world in terms of the sense of loss of meaning and purpose of life, loss of hope, existential crises, lovelessness, lack of empathy, alienation, etc. as experienced by many at the individual and societal level.

What insights do the studies of the human mind from ancient times (e.g. Buddhist Psychology) to modern (e.g. Freud et al) have to offer to help combat this, in terms of therapies for the present troubled times or recommendations for alternative futures? In short, how can an understanding of the human psyche within the present scenario (which provides a fertile ground for individual and social psychoses and neuroses) help us to move towards a saner world of human flourishing where, as Marx put it, the “free and full development of each is a condition for free and full development of all” – that of sentient and non-sentient beings on the one hand, and of nature on the other. What does an understanding of the human psyche have to offer as to how to overcome the “metabolic rift” in the primordial oneness of the human and natural sphere, which creates a world of dualism, strife and injustice?

### **Addressing contemporary challenges**

Hitherto, most progressive, left, and radical groups and people in India have tended to shy away from the spiritual and cultural dimensions of socio-political action and challenges. In the process, they have limited themselves to the definition of secular dimension as being the absence of faith in their struggle for social and environmental justice. Unfortunately, this suspicion of religion and spirituality has led to the co-optation of many citizens into a majoritarian and homogenizing agenda of extreme ideologies. For a country like India, which is marked by a rich, syncretic, and pluralistic religious and spiritual tradition, to bypass the spiritual dimension of a radical political imagination is both counterfactual and counterintuitive. This is especially true in light of the fact that many social reformists and revolutionaries over the past centuries like Buddha, Kabir, Nanak, Basava, Gandhi, Akkamahadevi, Mira Bai, Sarada Devi, etc were people who sought to bring in the spiritual dimension to their socio-political work. This was not only because they realized that material struggles required spiritual strength but also

because they acknowledged the role of the exploitative dimensions of false spirituality in maintaining the unjust status quo.

In the Indian context, the two most worrying factors considering the size of the country's population and distribution along communal, class, and caste lines are:

1. The devastating effects of climate collapse such as food insecurity, large-scale migrations, resource riots, pandemics, famines, etc.
2. The current atmosphere of suspicion, mistrust and intolerance among people and the inevitable social breakdown between communities from various religious denominations.

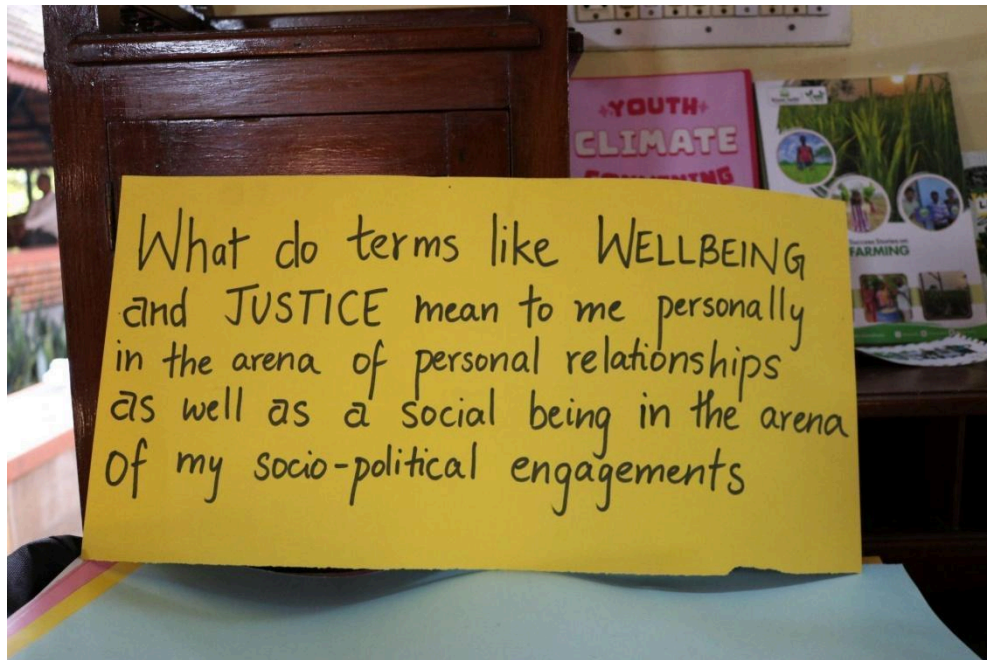
The crisis is not only social, political, and ecological, but also moral and spiritual. There is thus an urgent need for regeneration and restoration work at a deeper and more profound spiritual level.

## Introduction to the Sangam

The Social Well-being and Justice Sangam took place at the Fireflies Intercultural Centre from January 23rd- 26th, to discuss the above two issues. The Sangam brought together 17 participants from across India. Prior to the Sangam, participants were invited to reflect on the following ten questions on justice and social well-being to deepen and enrich the exploration over the three days:

1. What do terms like **well-being and justice** mean to me personally as an individual in the arena of personal relationships and as a social being in the arena of my socio-political engagements and interventions?
2. What is my **idea** of a good life? What is my **idea** of a fulfilling life? (buen vivir, ubuntu)
3. What do I **understand** by words like freedom, peace, compassion, forgiveness, love, etc? How do I relate to these words? Do I embody them in my daily life? If not, what resistance within myself or society limits their expression?
4. What kind of society can create **opportunities** for individuals to grow and mature fully as human beings – **emotionally, intellectually, psychologically and spiritually**? How do we get there?
5. To what extent do I experience **alienation** from myself, humans, non-humans and nature? How does this alienation find expression within me (anxiety, fear, grief, dread, indifference etc)? What can I do to overcome it? How can I help others deal with it?





6. How can I **participate** in building **communities of hope** within the ambit of my individual work and influence (including family, community etc)? How can I give meaning and purpose to my life? How can I live courageously?
7. What **role** can I **play** in building individual and social resilience in face of climate and political crisis? How can individuals engage with grief and mourning and emerge as strong, loving and compassionate human beings?
8. How do we **nurture** within ourselves the qualities and virtues of hope, faith, forgiveness and love?
9. What is my relationship with the **sacred dimensions of life**, whether conceived in terms of God, Emptiness, Allah, Consciousness, Nirvana etc? Is it necessary to have a sacred dimension to my life? Can I be an atheist and still believe that certain things are sacred –for e.g. nature, ecology relationships, friendships, love etc?
10. What **measures** will I need to take to build my emotional and spiritual resilience?

## Day 1

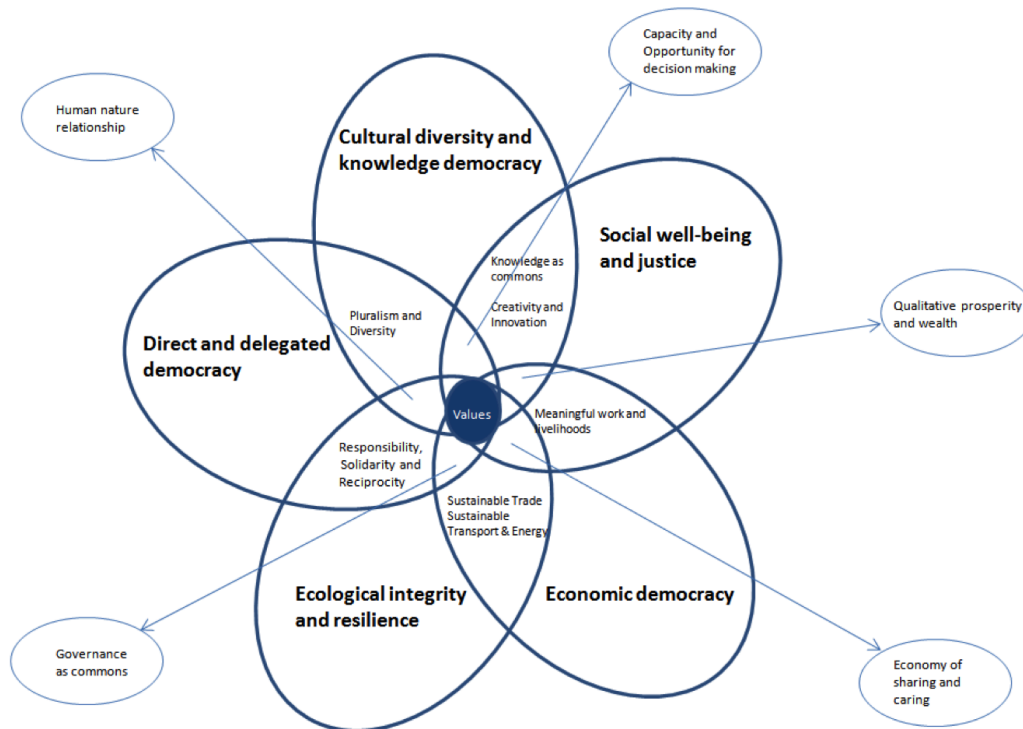
### Welcome and Introductions

The first session began by opening up a space for participants and facilitators to introduce themselves and their vocations, and share their conceptions of 'well-being'. The answers ranged from peace and communal harmony to movement and somatic practices, self and community care to creating safe spaces for difficult conversations. A common thread across all responses was **the connection between personal and social well-being**. As one participant aptly put it: "There is no separation between personal and social well-being; both are deeply intertwined like one's outer and inner worlds."

### About Vikalp Sangam

After a round of introductions, Milind Wani of Kalpravriksh shared the story of Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence). The VS process began in 2014 to address a gap in social movements and resistance struggles. While these spaces often focus on crises and problems, not enough attention was directed towards documenting and platforming **constructive alternatives** to dominant, exploitative systems. Thus, the VS process - which began with 10 members and has now grown to a network of over 90 collectives - is actively engaged in the process of constructing, imagining, and building alternatives as well as bringing people working across different thematic areas to share knowledge and co-create responses to systemic challenges.

The [Vikalp Sangam website](#) has over 2000 stories that showcase initiatives across education, health, democracy, and other themes. Two remarkable examples of alternatives include the [Maha Gramsabha in Gadchiroli](#), Maharashtra and the [Deccan Development Society in Andhra Pradesh](#). With the help these examples, Milind introduced the [Flower of Transformation](#), a framework that is used to highlight five spheres from which alternatives are likely to emerge (see image below). Importantly, the overlap of the petals also reflects the deep interlinkages across various spheres of transformation. Right at the centre are the values and principles of transformative alternatives.



*The Flower of Transformation*

## Intention setting

Over the last decade, more than 30 sangams<sup>2</sup> have been organised either thematically or regionally. What brings us to this space, Milind continued, is a shared desire to dig deeper into inquiries and ideas on social well-being and justice, especially in the context of the climate crisis. The themes and questions central to this sangam include:

- How do we address the serious challenges posed by the climate crisis?
- How do we look at the challenges of justice-based peace-building amidst an atmosphere of conflict?
- How do we look at the spiritual crisis of present times? What role can spiritual resilience play to help face the climate crisis, the interfaith conflict and other conflicts?
- What needs to be done to protect, deepen, strengthen and harness our democratic traditions to address the above concerns?

While these complex questions may not have any neat answers or clear-cut solutions, the goal is to renew and deepen a sense of hope that each of us can carry into our vocations and communities.

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-reports/> for more details about each of the sangams.





*Milind Wani of Kalpavrish shares the origins of the Vikalp Sangam process*

On this note, we watched an inspiring [short film](#) capturing the Vikalp Sangam process, following which we proceeded to dinner - a feast of sabzi, dal, and locally grown millets.

## Day 2

### **Plenary Session 1: *The Activist's Dilemma: Choosing Between Peace and Justice in Changemaking* by Urmi Chanda**

The first session for the day, facilitated by Urmi Chanda, a doctoral researcher and scholar of Interfaith studies, explored the themes of justice and peace in the field of activism and changemaking.

Urmi offered some frameworks and tools to help participants define and think through the concepts of well-being, justice, and peace, which are often abstract and ideological.

### **Wellbeing**

While there are several definitions of wellbeing, the model introduced by Corey Keyes in 1998 conceptualised wellbeing through five components - **social integration** (feeling connected to society); **social acceptance** (positive attitudes towards others); **social actualization** (belief in societal progress); **social coherence** (making sense of the social world) and **social contribution** (belief in contributing to society).

Social contribution, in particular, is the component most strongly associated with change-making. It raises questions about the organisations and people one works with and the values underpinned by one's work.



*Urmi Chanda delivers a presentation on justice and peace-based activism*

### **Justice and Peace: Models and Frameworks**

Justice and Peace are values, means, and goals within the change-making space. Most changemakers deal with these two values while thinking about their approaches and often face the dilemma of choosing between justice-based or peace-based approaches. But are these two values mutually exclusive?

Peace and justice are not mutually exclusive, shared Urmi. They are overlapping concepts, flowing into each other; how people think about these ideas defines how they engage with the world. Here is usually where the conflict arises.

Justice is often interpreted as retributive justice; however, there is also **restorative, transitional, and distributive justice**. Similarly, peace is often visualised as a state of tranquility or freedom

from external disturbance or the absence of conflict/war. But there are different conceptions of peace as well, such as inner, relational, societal, social, and cultural. Furthermore, peace is a subjective experience and can mean different things to different people at various points in their lives.

Urmi introduced two frameworks that have been helpful in her research and thinking on peace. The first one is by Johann Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist and the father of peace studies, who defined peace in two primary categories: **negative peace** (absence of war or violence) and **positive peace** (attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies and enable human beings to reach their full potential). The second framework by the Institute of Economics of Peace (IEP) is called the [eight pillars of positive peace](#) which include: a well-functioning government, equitable distribution of resources, free flow of information, good relations with neighbours, high levels of human capital, acceptance of the rights of others, low levels of corruption and a sound business environment.

Weaving together the concepts of well-being, justice, and peace, Urmi emphasized that clarity on *what, how, and who* we work with is important. In particular, **alignment between the ends (goal) and the means (approaches) creates a sense of well-being** and purpose within the practitioner. One's inner world is reflected in one's outer world.

### **The Four Rs of Activism**

Building on the need for alignment between values and goals, the second half of the session focused on the four Rs of activism: reform, resistance, reimagination and recreation. Urmi invited the participants to discern which category (or categories) most of their work falls into:

1. **Reform:** Working within current systems and structures to change them. This strategy addresses the immediate and real needs of people who lack food, housing, well-paid work, safety and opportunity by changing the current social and political institutions to offer remedies to pervasive social problems. (e.g., human services and policy development).
2. **Resist:** Confronting the current system. This strategy analyzes and challenges our current political and social institutions by contesting their legitimacy and directly confronting how they perpetuate inequity. (e.g., direct action, community organising and campaign work).

3. **Reimagine:** Conceptualizing new systems. To move towards a just world requires imagining what a society based on partnership, inclusion, and interdependence looks like. This strategy engages how we think about ourselves in relation to each other and the whole, and taps one's individual and collective ability to dream and engender new cultural norms (e.g., the arts, creative processes, media, academia, and cultural and spiritual traditions).
4. **Recreate:** Creating new institutions and practices to replace the broken ones that have not been serving us. This strategy enables us to experiment with new ways of constituting our society by building entirely new models, forms of governance and leadership structures, bringing in alternative paradigms and institutions (e.g. democratic schools, restorative justice processes, local economies and open-source technologies).

### Introspective Activity

For the next half an hour, participants and facilitators alike journaled in quiet, meditative silence on the following prompts:

1. Which of these four areas do you currently inhabit? Why do you work here? What is your motivation? What is driving you? Where is it coming from?
2. What are the skills you possess, and what skills are required to work well in this sphere?
3. What emotions are associated with this approach?
4. What keeps you here? Where is your next area of growth in this work?
5. Think of someone whose work you don't understand or agree with. What would you like to ask them to understand their work more? What are you curious about it?

### Participant Reflections

These prompts were followed by a round of heartfelt and moving reflections:

- One participant shared that they are in the 'reimagine' sphere, working on addressing language barriers that limit their community from expressing and communicating their thoughts. They shared that painting - a non-verbal form of creative expression - has been helpful for their community to present ideas and thoughts without the hindrance of language.
- Another participant shared the spectrum of emotions that arise in their work in the 'recreate' sphere - disgust, self-doubt, feelings of power, the thrill of accomplishment,



and the satisfaction of good work. At the same time, there is worry, guilt, and feelings of inadequacy.

- One participant shared that what keeps them in the space is the love and support they receive from the people they work with, which gives them hope despite the challenges, lost battles, and pervasive oppression.

Urmi thanked the participants for engaging in this activity and sharing their reflections.

Confronting oneself is often one of the hardest things to do, but it is important to ask oneself the hard questions, to assess if the motivations, methodology, and missions that one began still feel aligned or need to be revised.



*Participants engaged in a group activity*

### **Group Activity**

After chai and snacks, everyone was invited to split into four groups - each representing one of the Rs. Participants had to move to the category they felt most excited about, the category their heart felt called to. Each group would then explore the following questions:

- Why do you love this work? Why is your heart here?
- What are the challenges with this approach? What is the value of this approach?
- What is the shadow side of this approach?

By reflecting on these questions, each group worked on creating a presentation in the form of a skit, a poem, a song, or any form of creative expression that captured the essence of what was discussed and surfaced during this exercise. The group presentations would take place on the final day of the Sangam.

## **Plenary Session 2: *What does it mean to be Well in a time of Climate Breakdown?*** by Abhayraj Naik and Shalini Rao

The session began with a gentle somatic practice. Abhayraj introduced Shalini Rao, a psychotherapist, theatre artist, writer, and activist deeply interested in liberatory politics and praxis. Shalini named her intention to be in conversation with us, and her positionality within systems of power, emphasizing that *“everything that we experience is a consequence of where we come from, what our environment is, what has happened to our communities and our families and our bodies.”* She shared that the methodology she uses - gestalt existential therapy - politicises mental health; psychology and psychotherapy are deeply incomplete without community dialogue and community support networks.

While coping mechanisms can support a person in responding to a situation momentarily, the complex realities we live in require collective efforts, such as **developing better habits of grieving** as we confront systemic crises and losses. As Jiddu Krishnamurti said: “It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a sick society.”

Abhay inquired about the title of the session: What does well-being even mean in times of climate breakdown? How do you see your work as an offering of care?





*Abhayraj Naik (left) and Shalini Rao (right) in conversation*

To this, Shalini responded that while it may not be possible to be 'well' in a time when the world is systematically crumbling, the experience of non-binariness' might offer an answer to well-being. Witnessing loss and change in the world will inevitably evoke strong feelings. The categorisation of negative versus positive emotions in itself is violent because it involves categorizing an internal experience as good or bad, negative or positive. Rather than binaries, it's important to recognise that a person rarely feels a single thing at once; they contain multitudes. What we need to move towards, Shalini emphasized, is being able to **hold a feeling lightly enough so that it flows through us, enabling us to discover what else is true by moving beyond binaries.**

### **Access Points of Care**

Shalini shared how she perceives her work as an access point of care by **supporting people in holding gently, lovingly, and lightly their emotional experiences to feel them fully.** Such a practice enables a person to build a relationship with the self, with the body - physical, emotional, spiritual - rooted in trust. Being intentionally witness to systemic injustice of any kind, whether it is climate injustice, casteism, or religious violence, can cause immense stress. But to feel something fully does not have to mean flooding oneself.

With everything going on in the world - wildfires, massive deforestation and species extinction - do we have the luxury of focusing on our feelings without taking any action?, Abhay asked.

The response to devastation cannot be simply sitting with one's feelings, Shalini responded. That would ironically involve avoiding the feeling of wanting to do something. The practice of building a relationship with one's emotional affective landscape is so that each person can authentically choose how they want to show up, how they can be of service and then be responsible for that, rather than engaging from a place of 'should' or 'must.' Only focusing on solutions while not tracking and paying attention to our feelings is a recipe for relational hazards or burnout. Thus, **accessing care - for each other and ourselves - is fundamental to organising, activism, and movement-building.**

### **Participant Reflections on Pathways of Care**

Shalini invited participants and facilitators to share how they see their work as access points to care or offerings of care.

- Abhay shared that his work is motivated by a desire to handle with care the extraordinary work that generations of environmental activists have done while encouraging the profoundly transformative possibilities that youth climate activists are bringing to the space. There is usually a strong tension between the older and younger activists; his work is motivated by the desire to hold space for difficult intergenerational dialogue, with care.
- One participant shared that their work is an offering of care because it creates spaces for women impacted by conflict in Kashmir to come together to listen to each other's stories, share their mental health and societal challenges, and build collective resilience.
- A young participant shared that being in a climate leadership position involves care-giving because one has to hold space for communities that have been excluded from mainstream narratives and decision-making.
- Another participant working closely with the LGBTQ+ community reflected that their work is an offering of care because it involves changing the perceptions of society around heteronormativity and patriarchy to create a society that is more welcoming of gender and sexual diversity.

Through these reflections, it became clear that an **act of care is often an act of justice too.**

### **Nature Mandala and Letter Writing Activity**

After a short tea break, the session concluded with two activities. First, everyone was asked to wander outside the meeting hall for a few moments in silence and pick up an object (a leaf, a rock, etc) from the natural environment that calls to them. Together, we created a mandala comprising leaves, rocks, seeds, branches, flowers and the objects gathered by everyone.

The second and final activity was an invitation to *write a letter to a young person in our lives offering them compassion and an acknowledgement that they have inherited an unjust world, sharing with them how our work is an act of care and our intentions of co-creating a more hopeful future with them.*

After 30 minutes of writing in silence, a few participants shared excerpts from their heartfelt letters and the plethora of emotions that came up in the process of writing.

The day came to an end with a campus walk led by Siddhartha, where he shared the stories of the sculptures and paintings on religious, social, and ecological themes.

## Day 3

### **Plenary Session 3: *Exploring spiritual dimensions of social well-being and justice by Aspi Mistry***

Following a quick energizer by Savitha, the first session of the day was facilitated by Aspi Mistry. He invited participants to meditate on the impulse or the motivation that drove them to work in service of their community or for a social cause. *Where did that impulse to do good originate from?* Aspi suggested that what brings most people to do the work in the space of social action is a spiritual impulse that arises from a deeper part of ourselves.

### **Social action and spirituality**

Aspi's presentation began by highlighting that all revolutions and social movements, including the civil rights movement, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and the Indian independence movement, have been underpinned or influenced by spiritual values. Freedom is incomplete without equality. As Martin Luther King put it, "Action brings faith to life in transforming the world."



*Aspi Mistry's session on the spiritual dimensions of social work*

While there are several definitions of social action and spirituality, it is important to have clarity for oneself on what these terms entail. Social action can be broadly defined as an action that creates and promotes positive change or is driven by ideals of justice, equality, well-being and freedom. Spirituality can be defined as a deep sense of connection with something larger than oneself (eg, one's community, humanity, and the rest of nature). Exploring the spiritual dimensions of social action has been a long-standing and important pursuit.

From a bigger systems-level perspective, Aspi shared that the systems we create and live in should reflect our deepest values. He shared the example of a community in New Guinea, who, despite being offered more efficient steel tools in the post-war period in 1950s to double their gross domestic product (GDP), chose to instead reduce their working hours by half instead of doubling their production. Their community values (need for time for rest and play, an aversion to inequality) trumped the economic values (growth, accumulation, production). We live in systems that don't reflect community values, hence, the connection between spirituality and social action is important.

## Non-dualism

Aspi questioned the dualistic notion of 'material' and 'spiritual' as two separate things. For example, Zen Buddhism expresses the non-duality of the material and spiritual with the Japanese term '*Shikishin Funi*'. Shiki means that which has form, colour and physical existence, shin means that which has neither form, colour or spiritual existence, such as the mind, heart and soul. Shikishin Funi represents the phenomenon of oneness, in essence, both the material and spiritual are one. Aspi asked: To what extent did religion influence conceptions of spirituality? Not only does religion include beliefs and doctrines, but it also comprises social practices of meaning-making, rituals and contemplative practices. Meaning-making is central to spirituality in both religious and non-religious philosophies.

Aspi concluded his presentation by sharing that the only way to stay hopeful in the face of breakdown is to act and create the hope we need. Without action, there won't be hope. Hope is a verb, not a noun. It has to be worked for.

## Group Activity - Debate

Following Aspi's presentation, participants formed two groups comprising three speakers each. Each team developed arguments for and against the proposition: *Spirituality can hinder effective social action strategies by promoting dogma and discouraging critical thinking and is often used by the establishment as a distraction.* Some of the arguments include -

### For:

- Spiritual frameworks often invoke religious authority figures and institutions (e.g. the church and clergy) that can discourage questioning or critical thinking about the status quo.
- Religious or sacred texts are centuries-old and encourage conformity rather than a critical examination or reinterpretation in light of current challenges. This can hamper social action.
- Faith-based systems mostly rely on doctrines that are considered beyond scrutiny or confrontation. Social action should instead be based on objective evidence and scientific principles (physical and social sciences) rather than subjective experiences.

### Against:

- Spirituality should be distinguished from organised religion. Spirituality is an individual experience that cannot be forced upon by any social institution of family, society or nation. Looking at the history of spirituality, one thing is common: the notion of sacredness and oneness with the universe and all beings.



- The core of spirituality and social action is empathy and gratitude. The motivation behind both spirituality and social action overlap and can feed into each other to bring about greater social action.
- The social is spiritual, and spiritual is social; there is no real dichotomy between the two.



*Participants engage in a lively debate*

The debate ended with an open space for participants to ask questions and share comments and reflections on the various arguments raised for and against the proposition. This was an engaging, thought-provoking activity that showcased many perspectives on the themes of spirituality and social action.

#### **Plenary Session 4: *Democracy, Pluralism and Nature* by Milind Wani**

After lunch, the final plenary session was facilitated by Milind Wani. It began with a sobering reminder of the multiple crises that we find ourselves in – ecocide, biodiversity degradation and species extinction - it feels like we are going through an epochal change. As Gramsci put it: “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.”

The many crises we are witnessing - constitutional values being undermined, erosion of individual rights, curtailing freedom to dissent and expression, undermining of pluralist



traditions, threatening civil rights and liberties - point to a form of 'society-cide'. Furthermore, this is happening alongside an ecocide where natural conditions of social production are being undermined, and millions of species have been driven to extinction because of relentless extractivism and growth.

Worryingly, spaces that promote respectful dialogues and conversation are also being shut down. With growing intolerance of dissent or pluralistic views, the rise of authoritarian regimes and extractive capitalism, the curtailment of rights and freedoms, and the psychological distress that accompanies these processes raise the question: How do we face these challenges?



*Milind Wani's session on democracy, pluralism, and nature*

In response to this, Milind highlighted three key points:

### **Protecting plurality**

Society and nature thrive on plurality and decay otherwise. We need to recognise that we don't live in a universe; we live in a pluriverse. Reality is constituted by many *kinds* of worlds. There are many ways of knowing and being in the world. All of them are interconnected - natural world, spiritual, and socio-political.

### **Building ecological democracy**

We need to strengthen constitutional democracy, ensure that constitutional values are being upheld and address limitations as well. We need to uphold international commitments and rights-based approaches. We currently live in a democracy underpinned by capitalism which is serving the elite. We need to ensure that ‘democracy’ strengthens people-power and is rooted in more radical, ecological forms

There are pathways to strengthen democracy, namely, by building local solidarity economics, recognizing Indigenous rights, upholding the idea of the ‘commons’, legalising rights of nature (Bolivia and New Zealand are leading examples), implementing deep decentralization. We need to strengthen the webs of life and break the chains of slavery that constitute current unjust systems.

### **Drawing on dialogical traditions**

We need to learn from India’s rich history of pluralistic traditions; many ideas have grown through dialogue. The most prominent examples of dialectical engagement of contending philosophies include Hindu, Advaita, Gandhian philosophy, particularly his idea of an “honourable compromise”. Drawing on these traditions can help build inter-faith harmony, respect, and appreciation of differences and divergent ways of thinking.

Questions that Milind invited us to reflect on:

- What peaceful actions can be taken to propagate constitutional values to children and young people?
- Healthy and respectful conversations with those who belong to opposing ideological mooring and are yet unamenable to dialogue?
- In the face of impending climate collapse, what do we do? How do we build spiritual resilience?

### **Participant Reflections**

- Dialogue will and can work only if all those engaged are willing to listen and change.
- Religious leaders and religious discourses have the opportunity to promote climate action by integrating it within their teachings and messages.
- There is a need to create communal spaces to dream and grieve together.
- We need to create regenerative healthy systems that promote intergenerational dialogue and learning. Elders should show radical trust in the ability of young people to make decisions about the kind of world that they want to live in; young people have a lot to learn from the wisdom and experience of their elders.

- It is important to think about the pedagogies while learning/teaching about climate change.

### **Film Screening**

The session was followed by a screening of [Churning the Earth](#), a documentary depicting how 'ordinary' people in several parts of India are resisting the disruption of their lives and also constructing alternatives in the form of sustainable farming, community-led ecotourism and conservation, revival of crafts, activity-based learning, decentralised water harvesting, local governance and direct democracy.

## **Day 4**

### **Concluding Session**

Although substantively the Vikalp Sangam proceedings were largely over in terms of meeting the main purpose of the meeting, the group met on 26th January for a wrap up and concluding session. The poignancy of the last day was not lost on the participants as it was also India's 76<sup>th</sup> Republic Day.

As the underlying challenge of the Vikalp Sangam on Social Well-being and justice was how to maintain a spirit of hope in these trying times, this theme was creatively addressed by the participants through presentations, songs and music, dance and movement, and skits.

A closing statement was made by Milind Wani by way of expressing deep gratitude to all participants, members of the organising committee, the staff at Fireflies and the donor agency Misereor, whose financial support made the Sangam possible.



*Participants and facilitators at the Sangam*

#### **Annexure 1: Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation/Role</b>
Behzad Fatmi	Indialogue
Anjali Tripathi	Blue Ribbon Movement
Ahmad Shahbaz	Kashmir Student Initiative
Zahida Angkhtar	Kashmir Student Initiative
Akanksha Pandey	Western Himalaya Vikalp Sangam (WVHS)
Aditi Lokhande	Student and Climate Activist
Bhavana Tanwar	Climate Activist, There is No Earth B



Dhrstadyumn Khera	Climate Activist, There is No Earth B
Rev. Santosh Singh	Church of South India
Nikhil Shenoy	Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)
Pavan Vyas	One-Van
Mani	Lucknow Gender Initiative
Keerthi	Researcher, Government of Andhra Pradesh
Naveen	LGBTQ+ Activist, Nirangal
Delfina	LGBTQ+ Activist, Nirangal
Pooja Kishinani	Kalpavriksh
Urmi Chanda	Doctoral Researcher and Scholar of Interfaith Studies
Milind Wani	Kalpavriksh
Aspi Mistry	Senior consultant and Dharma teacher
Abhayraj Naik	Pipal Tree and Krea University
Shalini Rao	Psychotherapist
Siddhartha	Fireflies Intercultural Center
Savitha	Fireflies Intercultural Center