

Designing for Life in Urban India: An Introduction to Ecological Responses to the Metacrisis

**3-7 April 2026
Sambhaavnaa Institute,
Palampur, Himachal Pradesh**



Course cohort including facilitators and organizers

Introduction

Designing for Life in Urban India: An introduction to ecological responses to the metacrisis was a five-day residential course in collaboration with Sambhaavnaa Institute of Public Policy and Politics. The intention was to bring together a cohort of participants to critically reflect on the metacrisis in urban India, and to reimagine what cities would look and feel like if they were designed for the flourishing of human and more-than-human life. Using urban life in India as an entry point, the course explored ecological design as a relational way of seeing and living. Drawing from grounded alternatives across India and frameworks such as the Flower of Transformation (FOT), participants explored how food, energy, governance and care can be reimaged as regenerative processes.

This course was organised by [Kalpavriksh – Environment Action Group](#) in collaboration with [Sambhaavnaa Institute of Public Policy and Politics](#). It was co-created by the subgroup of The Alternatives Learning Collective (TALC) and hosted under the [Vikalp Sangam](#) process.

Course aims and intentions

This course was designed with the intention for participants to:

- Gain a systems-level understanding of the metacrisis and how it manifests in the Indian urban context
- Engage with the metacrisis in key thematic areas: urban governance, food, energy while developing tools to analyse crises from multiple perspectives
- Understand ecological design, Flower of Transformation and other frameworks as ways of engagement in the metacrisis
- Encounter grounded alternatives and their design
- Reflect on individual and collective values, roles and forms of agency
- Build relationships with a network of peers exploring regenerative futures

This report documents some of the key learnings emerging from the sessions.

DAY 1: Arriving into the Metacrisis

The objective of the day was to build a shared understanding of the metacrisis as one temporal condition shaping urban life in India. Not separate crises, but nested consequences of burning geological time at speeds we can't perceive, and feeding back into systems we depend on.

Introduction to the Polycrisis by Soumya Dutta

Some of us in Indian cities live behind impenetrable shutters. Our walls and neighborhoods don't just house us; they *shield* us from the planetary interactions that make our choices possible. We shampoo our hair without seeing the aquifer being drained beneath us, or the carbon-destabilized monsoons that facilitate our deliveries.

This is the metacrisis: the city's demands feeding a planetary destabilization that eventually circles back to poison its own rivers. It is one loop, playing across scales we can't perceive from inside our shutters. Between 1750 and 1850, we moved from current sunlight to "fossilized time" burning millions of years of accumulated energy in a geological heartbeat.

Because we are consuming energy at speeds our human perceptions can't track, every system dependent on it —water, food, biodiversity— is forced to accelerate. We see this in India, where several districts are already water-stressed. The carbon powering the city warms the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, where intense cyclones have increased by 90%. This warmth disrupts low-level white clouds; the planet's "self-limiting" cooling system scrambling the hydrological cycle. As the monsoon fails, we use more electricity to pump groundwater from two meters deeper every year, releasing more carbon to fix a problem caused by carbon.

We've built an "invisibility machine" where we fragment our perception into "individual footprints" while the massive structures of extraction remain unquestioned. Modern enclosure privatized land and patented seeds severed the connection between act and consequence.

Soumya Datta's session highlighted these intersecting crises and ended with the 1986 Lake Nyos disaster. In Cameroon, carbon dioxide built up under pressure for decades, invisible, until a silent cloud rolled down the valley and suffocated 1,700 people. We are currently trying to store our waste and our pressures under high pressure, hoping the shutters hold. But as the oceans acidify and the Atlantic currents weaken, this session made it clear that we are just living above the lake, waiting for the pressure to release.

Walk to the Hydropower Plant Station by Mohammad Chappalwala

The walk to the Kandbari station was a study in contradictions: the crisp, mountain air of Himachal Pradesh set against the intrusive presence of run-of-the-river

infrastructure. We followed the heavy concrete arteries of the hydel plant, noticing how riverine alterations have effectively silenced the original flow of the water.



Course cohort at the Hydropower plant walk guided by Mohammad Chappalwala (Picture by Jayvyn Nathaniel)

Later, we watched *Ho Gayi Hai Pir Parvat Si*, which documented exactly what we had just stepped over: hydropower tunneling, drying springs, and the exhaustion of communities living inside development corridors. The film stripped the green veneer off these projects. It showed how the Sutlej Valley is being hollowed out, forests sacrificed and riverbeds dried to feed a grid that powers urban India.

We discussed the irony of clean energy that acts as a new form of enclosure. The mountains are treated as a wilderness to be mined for convenience elsewhere, while the villagers are left with a geography they no longer recognize.



*Hydropower plant walk followed by discussion by Mohammad Chappalwala
(Picture by Pooja Kishinani)*

DAY 2: Frameworks for Ecological Design and Interconnected Systems

What does it mean to think and live ecologically? The day's objective was to introduce ecological design as a relational framework for understanding and reimagining how human societies live within natural systems.

Introduction to Ecology by Bipasha Majumder

The session delved into the evolution of ecology as an academic subject - evolving from a colonial extractive background to a subject that now understands the interconnectedness of Earth cycles and systems. Bipasha touched upon the importance of Gaia theory in changing and challenging the colonial reductionist narrative, and shared glimpses of radically alternative narratives developed by women scientists and indigenous elders/experts that are completely changing the way we look and engage with ecology.

Through stories from her field experience, Bipasha wove the key tenets of the living philosophy of Indigenous Peoples across the world and their deeper connection with the more-than-human world. She ended with a short exercise with participants aimed to help them understand and relate to ecology in urban spaces.



Session on Ecology by Bipasha (Picture by Jayvyn Nathaniel)

Ecological Design by Keta Kant

This session invited participants to reflect on what entails “ecological design” in everyday life and how it can respond to environmental complexities that exist within social, infrastructural, ecological, structures. Participants were introduced to the multi-disciplinary backdrop of ecological design, some of which include: social (the people network, community, behaviors); environmental (the landscape in its geology, hydrology, etc; infrastructure, finances, resources, supply chains); systemic (e.g. the position and journey of an intervention in a system); economic; risk assessment, etc; and to some of the challenges facing ecological design approaches.

Using urban waste infrastructure models, focusing on the Residents of Kasturba Nagar Association (ROKA) — a neighbourhood effort in Chennai to segregate waste at

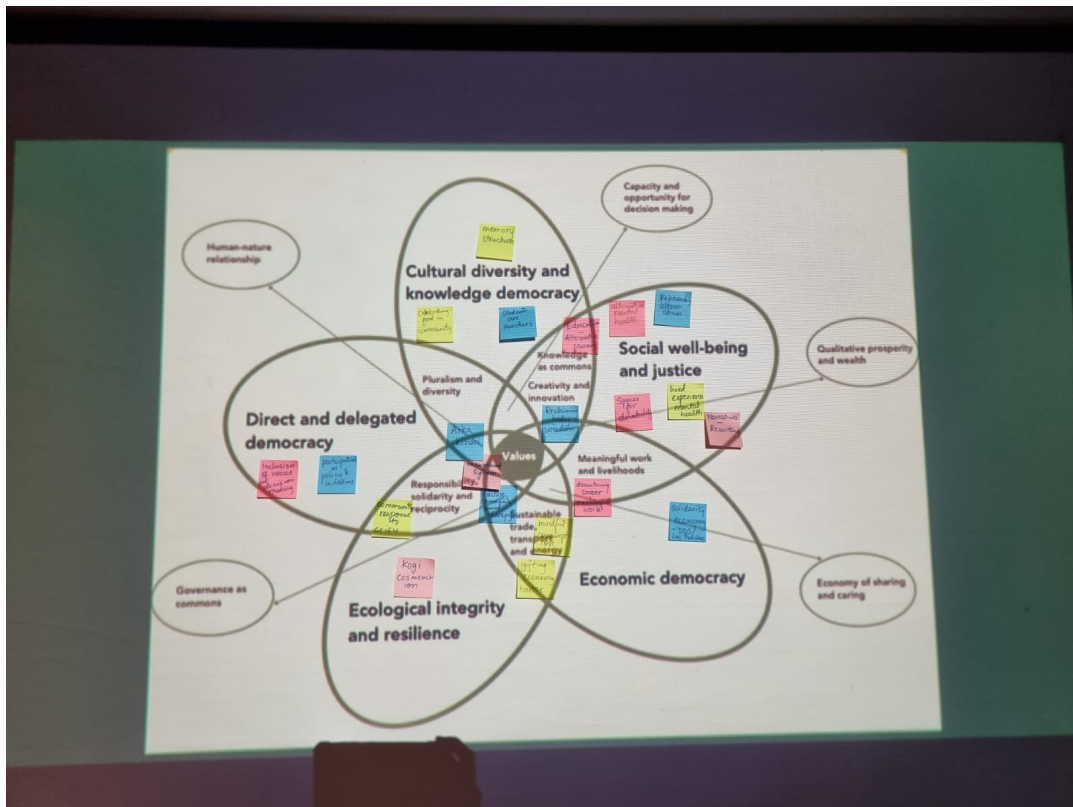
source— Keta invited participants to reflect on the factors and considerations while designing ecological interventions to address urban problems.



Session on Ecological design by Keta (Picture by Jayvyn Nathaniel)

Transformative Alternatives by Pooja Kishinani

In the midst of the polycrisis and breakdown, what are the alternatives that are being imagined and practiced by communities in India and beyond? This session focused on stories of alternatives to unjust and inequitable systems. Weaving in examples from the Ogiek in Kenya, Deccan Development Society (DDS) in India, the traditional governance system (goba) in Ladakh, Pooja shared the common principles and patterns across these alternatives and the ways in which they aspire to transform systemic injustice. The 'Flower of Transformation' was also introduced as a framework and method to help make sense of the different dimensions of systemic transformations. In smaller groups, participants shared and reflected on examples of alternatives — worldviews, livelihoods, economic and social practices, etc — from their lived experiences. These examples, and the values that they embody, were mapped on different petals of the Flower of Transformation.



Mapping examples and values on the Flower of Transformation framework.

Day 3: LIVING THE CRISIS IN CITIES

For the third day of the course, the objective was to examine urban life as a culturally, socially, economically, politically and ecologically designed system that produces injustice, vulnerability and crisis of the 'self'.

Urban Governance by Dr Sanskriti Menon

Who makes decisions? Whose knowledge is involved? Whose vulnerability is accounted for? These were some of the questions that were central to Sanskriti Menon's session on urban governance. Highlighting the spectrum of citizen engagement, from informing and consulting to designing and decision-making, participants discussed in smaller groups how governance bodies in cities work. At the heart of the discussion was also the values guiding decision-making in these bodies, with participants reflecting whether governance (as it currently functions in Indian cities) is transparent, accountable, and inclusive. Sanskriti also created space for participants to reflect on what justice and dignity would look like in decision-making,

and how to practice true democracy where decisions are not top down but made by and for people.



Session on Urban Governance by Sanskriti (Picture by Sarthak)

Food by Ishan Aggarwal

Food systems in urban India rely on a map of relationships that extend from the local (mandi bazaars, farmers, etc) to the global (supermarkets, tariffs, etc). Ishan Aggarwal invited participants to reflect on the plate as a political document by tracing the journey of each component to map the agents, web of relationships and pathways that made the availability and access of particular food possible. In a small group activity, participants critically reflected on the different power nodes within urban food systems and highlighted factors such as labour and ecological costs which are often invisibilised or externalised in supply chains. They also designed one element of what an alternative food system could look like– one that embedded a different set of values (e.g. food sovereignty).



Session on Food by Ishan (Picture by Jayvyn Nathaniel)

DAY 4: Alternatives and Worldmaking

If this system is failing, what already exists beyond it? With this as the guiding question, day four explored grounded alternatives and collective imagination as living responses to the metacrisis beyond dominant development models.

Energy and Economics by Gurudas Nalkar

Gurudas Nalkar's lecture unpacked how the economy shapes urban life and drives unequal energy use. It highlighted how high-value, GDP-boosting jobs rely on an invisible "shadow economy" of undervalued labour. An energy audit lens revealed stark inequalities; upper middle-class households use far more appliances, while energy consumption data shows that low income households cannot access appliances for convenience and comfort. The session also examined how economic systems concentrate value toward industry, with many people indirectly complicit through investments. Overall, the discussion challenged Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a

meaningful measure of well-being, offering a more grounded understanding of economic structures, their inequities, and their everyday implications in urban contexts. He also explained how the entire energy based economy and our urban lifestyle are standing on the shoulders of the plant kingdom.



Session on Energy and Economics by Gurudas (Picture by Jayvyn Nathaniel)

Embodied Alternatives by Ashima Vishnoi

Ashima's session explored what it means to live through a polycrisis by moving beyond discussion into embodied experience. Through theatre exercises, participants navigated loss of control, giving up sight and speech, relying on trust, and feeling both disorientation and relief in finding their way. These activities built connections while surfacing vulnerability. In role plays of diverse Delhi communities, participants negotiated pathways forward from different perspectives. The focus was less on solutions and more on the process of listening, dialogue and negotiation. The session underscored that responding to the polycrisis depends not just on outcomes, but on how we relate, collaborate, and move through uncertainty together.



Session on embodied Alternatives by Ashima (Picture by Margherita Fammoni)

DAY 5: Pathways Forward— Agency and Action

The objective of the final day was to support participants in translating their learning over the last four days into collective and sustainable forms of engagement and action.

Poetry Walk and Pathways Forward by Rachit Sharma

We ended the course with Rachit Sharma, moving away from the mechanics of the crisis and toward the textures of the land itself. We spent an hour in a nature immersion supported by poetry, looking for the specific, gritty textures of the soil, trees, and the river, things usually blurred by the speed of urban life.

We discussed Mary Oliver's poetry, specifically the idea that "attention is the beginning of devotion." It felt like a necessary counterweight to the Lake Nyos warning. If the metacrisis is built on an invisibility machine, then the only way forward is through a radical, stubborn kind of observation. We talked about pathways forward as a commitment to stay answerable to what we see. By the end, the immersion didn't feel like a retreat from the problem; it felt like the only way to build the relational necessity required to live through what's coming.

Closing and Reflections

Rachit facilitated a reflective closing through solo and paired activities. Participants reflected on their own, then sharing and listening deeply in pairs, guided by questions on what went well, what didn't, and the seeds they are carrying forward. The process created space for honest reflection and connection. The session ended with collective gratitude for all that made the journey possible, marked by warmth and shared hugs.

Daily Activities beyond the sessions

Some of the most meaningful parts of the course happened outside the formal sessions. Conversations during meals, walks around the campus, late-night discussions, and moments of silence often became spaces where participants continued reflecting on the themes of the course in more personal and grounded ways. These interactions helped build trust within the cohort and created a sense of collective learning and care.

The nature-based activities gave us opportunities to slow down and pay attention to the landscape around us. Spending time outdoors in Sambhavana, away from the pace of urban life, helped many of us connect more deeply with the ecological questions the course was engaging with. These moments often felt just as important as the classroom discussions.

The open sessions created space for participants to share their own experiences, work, ideas, and practices with the group. These exchanges brought forward diverse perspectives and helped us learn from one another beyond the planned structure of the course. Altogether, these activities contributed to making the course feel not only educational, but also relational, reflective, and deeply human.



A snippet from one of the daily reflection sessions (Picture by Sarthak)

Testimonials

“As someone who is transitioning into the world of sustainability and social impact from the corporate sector; “Designing for Life in Urban India” program at the Sambhavana Institute provided the right foundation to the Meta Crisis and what entails within it with respect to energy, ecology, governance, food systems etc. The program brought together a diverse set of facilitators and participants to engage, connect and debate with each other. These discussions were extremely enriching and enabled me to think in different directions, often leading to more questions and ideas. The program provided the right pedestal for me; got me thinking, nurturing different ideas that I hope would help me in my journey ahead in the impact sector.”

— Neeharika Nandyal

“The course connected me with like-minded individuals and allowed me to understand the policy crisis at a beginner's level. I appreciate the reflection time that was allotted. All the outdoor activity and theatre work felt absolutely necessary. There were moments when sessions became too content heavy. In future iterations, the session design, course structure and participant diversity can be improved.

Overall, the team moderation was beyond appreciation and I loved how carefully the space was being held. The question I was thinking of - what next with this course?"

- Anonymous participant

"I arrived thinking the polycrisis was a complicated problem for smart people to solve with smarter planning. Instead, I found a complex predicament that requires hospice for dying systems more than it needs a new technology.

I didn't expect to understand how urban loneliness is woven into global supply chains. I didn't expect a call to slow down when every instinct I had was to hurry up and fix things. I'm still sitting with questions I can't answer, like how to live in a city without being a taker from the hinterlands that sustain it.

Something concrete has changed in how I move and I attribute it to the course. I find myself noticing the heat islands on certain streets and the lack of shade where outdoor workers stand all day. The course didn't make me feel better, but it made me see differently. And once you see the entanglements, you can't go back to pretending they are the world."

-Nehla Salil

Learnings and Feedback

The feedback for this course was overall positive, with most participants describing their learning experience as "very meaningful" or "transformative." Sessions that stood out most included the hydropower plant walk and documentary, energy and economics, urban governance, embodiment practices, and discussions on ecology and indigenous knowledge systems. Participants appreciated the balance between theory, experiential learning, reflective exercises, and informal interactions. Activities such as shramdan, film screenings, open-space discussions, and cohort conversations were repeatedly identified as valuable parts of the learning journey.

A major strength of the course was its diversity of perspectives, facilitators and participants, which helped create a collaborative and hopeful learning environment. Many respondents highlighted feeling intellectually stimulated, emotionally connected, and more hopeful about the future after the course.

Constructive feedback focused on improving course design and depth in certain sessions. Participants suggested simplifying complex language for newcomers, including more technical and policy-oriented discussions, offering clearer implementation frameworks or practical toolkits, and improving time management and facilitation in some sessions. Several respondents also expressed interest in staying connected through WhatsApp, LinkedIn, hosting opportunities, and future collaborations. Overall, the course appeared to have successfully fostered reflection, community, and a deeper engagement with urban, ecological, and social issues.



Participants engaging in an activity (Picture by Margherita Fammoni)

Conclusion

Designing for Life in Urban India created a shared space to collectively reflect on the intertwined ecological, social, political and emotional crises shaping contemporary urban life. Across five days, the course invited participants not only to analyse the metacrisis intellectually, but also to experience it relationally, through conversations, walks, embodied exercises, films, poetry and encounters with the landscape of Sambhaavnaa Institute itself. The campus became more than a venue; it acted as a living classroom that grounded discussions in place, slowness, observation and interdependence.

Through diverse sessions and perspectives, participants engaged with ecological design, governance, food systems, energy, embodiment and transformative alternatives as interconnected pathways for imagining regenerative futures. Equally important were the informal moments of learning and care that emerged within the cohort, fostering trust, solidarity and deeper reflection.

Rather than offering fixed solutions, the course encouraged participants to sit with complexity, uncertainty and responsibility while recognising the importance of collective agency and relational ways of living. As participants returned to their respective contexts, the course left behind not just new ideas, but an ongoing invitation: to remain attentive, connected and accountable to the human and more-than-human worlds that sustain urban life.



Participants getting to know the campus (Picture by Jayvyn Nathaniel)

This report has been co-created by Chaitali Chaudhari, Anushka Kale, Pooja Kishinani, Bipasha Majumder, Jayvyn Nathaniel and Nehla Salil.