

## FIREFLIES DIALOGUES ON WELLBEING AND JUSTICE 2019

February 7, 2019

The 2019 Fireflies Dialogues (7-10 February) was jointly organized by Dialogues-In-Humanity, Vikalp Sangham (Kalpavriksh) and Pipal Tree. The theme of the Dialogues was: 'Wellbeing and Justice'. For about three and a half days participants deliberated on the crucial issues intrinsically connected with well-being and justice: climate change, climate justice, social justice, gender justice. They attempted to find inspiration for the challenges ahead from the various religious/spiritual traditions as well as from secular humanism. The report below attempts to present the highlights of the various presentations made and a few discussions and conclusions.

### The Eve of the Dialogues

Every year in February, people from across the world touchdown on the idyllic campus of Fireflies Intercultural Centre to dialogue on paradigms human societies have practiced in the name of development which, in our times, threaten the eclipse of our civilization.

Nearly a hundred congregated this year in the tradition of the dialogues to seek for alternatives which can mitigate, if not avert conditions that will inevitably make our tenancy on our planet untenable. The dialoguers will draw from the schools of literature and the sciences; ecumenical, eclectic, social, cultural and esoteric wisdom traditions, the schools of activism and advocacy, to see how change in value systems within the individual and societies can nourish and restore democratic foundations to make life more livable.

The participants then introduced themselves.

Siddhartha, Genevieve Ancel, and Milind Wani spoke on the quintessence of the dialogue in humanities.

Siddhartha said, 'We have seen alternative environmental movements all over the world to bring about change, yet we find that things appear difficult. **Climate Change** is kicking in by the day. With all kinds of conflicts, religious fundamentalism, prevalent authoritarian regimes, **the question is where does one find hope? Where does it come from and what does hope mean to us?** Like Gandhi, we can draw inspiration from the Bhagawat Gita's **Nishkama Karma**: We act because it is moral to act, because it is right and ethical to act, not because we may live to see the results. **In action there is hope.**

'Christian theologian **Jurgen Moltman** said that **central to Christianity is 'hope'** but sometimes uncertainty borders on despair and at other times, a fluctuating hope. **This tension between uncertainty and hope perhaps is the condition of our existence and the dialogues are efforts all over the world to take little steps which will lead to a sustainable universe.** Technological breakthroughs can also compliment social breakthroughs to bring about change.'

Milind then presented **Kalpavriksh**. 'We started in New Delhi as a group of youngsters taking on governments and bureaucrats on development, advocacy, policy and ecological sustainable issues but realized in 2013 that our actions were confrontational and invariably led to a bad taste which ruled out

hope. We then transitioned to **Vikalpa** meaning alternatives, a platform for civil society, with the objective to create a critical mass which would transcend despair and make **hope** possible.

Genevive from Lyon said, **'It is important to be connected in our minds, our hearts and our bodies for true wellbeing. While it is important to be connected intellectually, it is also important to be connected with different spiritualities.** Explaining their work around the globe, she shared her vision of the collective action of students, artists, scientists, law makers, journalists, professionals from different walks of life making that change possible.

## **Day I**

The core of the Dialogues started on the morning of February 8, 2019 with the **inaugural session by Siddhartha on 'Consciousness, Identity and Peace' chaired by John Clammer.**

Siddhartha launched his talk saying, 'Today we are faced with big challenges. You have climate change which can be felt already in India and other parts of the world. We will see the phenomenon of climate refugees and climate justice will become major issues in the near future. Yet at another level, in India we seem to have issues of a completely different order.'

He pointed out that deep rooted conflicts related to religion and caste in India. 'How then do we deal with these realities which seem to be at the forefront on one hand and on the other, the long term challenges of climate change and social justice?' Siddhartha asked.

The **Self is largely a construction**, Siddhartha emphasised. Our prejudices, our biases, our sense of collective hatred is all constructed. Our Family, school, friends, social class, religious upbringing all play a role in who we are, this constructed Self. **'Can we move to the real challenges of planetary citizenship, or dealing with climate justice, or social justice without dealing with this constructed self?'** he asked. **'Carl Jung talks about the shadow**, the side of us which we are not proud of: Envy, hate, greed, lust for power. 'The constructed Self, which is partly the shadow, is not only individual but also collective. So you have caste or race or religion with a collective sense of identity and the collective sense can be often negative which can militate against another group, another society and this is a huge challenge. Hence, the exploration of the Self is as important as the outside changes we want to bring about: changes in the economic, political, cultural and social structures.

'At Fireflies we often use the metaphor of the bow and arrow. **For the arrow to shoot outward it must be drawn inward. The outward journey of the arrow depends on the inner journey.** What is this inner journey? What is this exploration of the shadow; the exploration of the self? And what are the values that must enrich this inner journey? Sometimes we can discover these values through interacting with each other, through our own quiet reflections but we also have references like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the UN or the Constitution of India,' Siddhartha said.

**'Religion has progressive and humanistic aspects but also has the potential for oppression and exclusion, and sometimes makes truth absolute, but truths that are absolute are also rigid with no place for democracy or participation. Religion and culture also play a role in bolstering authoritarian**

structures. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal said ‘Men never do evil so openly and contentedly as they do it from religious conviction,’ Siddhartha concluded.

John commented, ‘The Buddha says in Pali scriptures **“Enter with joy into the suffering of the world”**. I think that helps define the way in which a feeling of negativity or lack of hope can be countered when facing the size of the issues presented by Siddhartha.’ Referring to the **Inner and the Outer, he proposed, ‘One of the issues we can confront collectively over these three days is how, in fact, we overcome the opposition’.**

## **Session II: ‘Buddhism, Wellbeing and Harmony’ by Aspi, chaired by Namrithna.**

‘When it comes to the earth’s system, the ecology and climate change, is there something in the understanding of Buddhism which disconnects us from these issues or rather see it connected to them at the intellectual level?’ Aspi asked. **‘Wellbeing and harmony is the core of Buddhism,’** Aspi said. ‘When the Buddha tried to find answers to the question of suffering or the end of suffering, the answer he found was the **Four Noble truths and the eightfold path.**’

Observing that there are literal misconceptions of the four noble truths including the Buddha saying that everything is suffering, Aspi clarified that the Buddha didn’t say everything was suffering, but said **‘all compounded phenomena are marked by suffering’; phenomena that arises out of causes and conditions.** ‘A seed is a cause, soil and sunlight are conditions. So, all phenomena including the Self arise out of causes and conditions. **Climate change is an example of causes and conditions at work,**’ he explained.

Defining the term ‘marked’, Aspi said ‘Water is marked by wetness but wetness is not water. Similarly, in the most joyful experience there is an element of suffering for the simple reason that they are compounded. So when it is said ‘marked by suffering’, suffering of the earth, the environment and humanity emerging from climate change, social injustice, political structures and caste issues all arise from causes and conditions, he said.

On the question of desire, Aspi remarked, ‘Many quote the Buddha and the Rishis saying that desire should be given up but isn’t the quest for enlightenment also a desire? But the desire for enlightenment is not a desire but an aspiration! In the Buddha’s eightfold path, one of them is of the right effort and the right aspiration.’ He differentiated desire, hope and attachment from aspirations like enlightenment, compassion, love and kindness which are based on wisdom and not on false views based on misunderstanding of what is ‘Self.’

Questioning what is ‘Self’? Aspi spoke about different Buddhist teachings ranging from **everything is a projection of the mind but only the mind is real to the self does exist but not in the way you are conditioned to think it exists and suffering arises because of this misunderstanding of the self.** He described the Buddha’s description of three types of suffering; **One, the suffering of birth, death, illness and old age,** the regular suffering which we understand, the second, **the suffering of change** denoting that as the suffering of environmental change because of causes and conditions which we have largely created and third, **the existential suffering.**

Aspi said it was important to understand them if we were to engage in changing the world. **'First you have to accept that there is suffering. Second, you have to engage with that suffering and third, understand the cause of that suffering.** So, when you come to the cause of suffering, the Buddha says it is because of the root ignorance of the ultimate reality of 'Self' and the 'Other' phenomena, and that 'Self' is also the cause of conditions, and all other phenomena and are interconnected. We are not all one, we are interconnected.'

Aspi then narrated the story of **Thich Nhat Hanh** who described **interconnectedness as inter-being.** Pointing to a sheet of paper, he asked 'Do you see a cloud in it?' When most said no, Hanh explained, 'There is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow: and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So, if you take away any of these conditions you would not have this paper.'

He said, the ideal of Theravada Buddhism was to achieve enlightenment, to escape this cycle of birth and death. Hence at the individual level one could ignore climate change by saying 'Buddhism is training of the mind. So, let my mind be peaceful; I will meditate, I will go higher and higher in my spiritual evolution, I will have complete peace of mind. Anyway, the world is impermanent and will end one day. So, what role do I have in it? I will renounce the world.' That could be one view, Aspi conceded but projected another view which said if we were all interconnected how could we escape the world by abandoning everybody who is suffering. 'From the idea that we are interconnected, arose the idea of 'Bodi Sattva', Aspi explained, 'A Bodi Sattva is a person who has the aspiration to develop an enlightened mind, to bring all sentient beings; humans, animals and cosmic entities, to enlightenment and even postpones the entry into Nirvana and the exit from this cycle of birth and death till he has led everyone to enlightenment.'

Aspi quoted from Roy Scranton's **'Learning to die in the Anthropocene'**: *'The situation we find ourselves in is beyond our power to change. The planet will get warmer, the icecaps will melt, the seas will rise and the global fossil fuel consumer capitalist civilization we live in will come to an end. It is precisely in recognizing this situation that the insights of Buddhism can help us move forward.'* (Scranton states that the Buddha way underlines: the only possible free choice we can make is to choose to work for the freedom of all humankind, indeed of all sentient beings. Failure may be inevitable, but recognizing that is the first step in becoming free.)

Cautioning of spiritual traps like **'There's a spiritual world' ... 'There's another plane of existence beyond that of this one'** which are dualistic thinking, the only plane is realistic thinking, the Buddha plane on which we have to work, Aspi said. 'We have the choice to change the world and harmonizing with it. Or if everything is a projection of the mind and suffering is because of our mental delusions and afflictions, why change the world? Let's change our minds. So, do we change the mind or do we change the world?' Aspi contended. 'But if you think of an individual approach to enlightenment, then you can say 'I will change my mind. I'll have my coffee at **Starbucks** and go home and meditate.' But if you say, 'No, I will be interconnected. I want to be a Bodi Sattva, then there is no choice but to engage in political activity. Even if 20% of the world is politically organized to fight this greed, ignorance, the fossil fuel industry and the military industrial complex, there will be a major change. We can at least prolong our

joyful existence on earth. Aspi concluded his dissertation saying, **'This is the meaning of entering with joy the world of suffering, to engage with it, understand it and not run away from it'**.

**Session III: 'Sufi and Veerashaiva approaches to Peace and Harmony'** by Ramjan Darga, chaired by Mohammed Abdul Naeem.

Ramjan Darga presented the Veerashaiva social reformer revered as Lord Basaveshwara as a **harbinger of hope** in his times. **He said Basava talked about hope in individual transformation towards one god, a single universe and a single human kind and about the inner journey without which we can't struggle against injustice in the society to avoid gender, racial, class and caste discrimination.**

Explaining the concept of **Kayaka**, Ramjan said it stressed on working towards physical and mental balance and living with dignity, taking care of our families and taking care of our society without ego but with compassion. Taking care of everything encompassed ecological balance, all creatures and all human beings.

'Basava described matter as the physical form of spirit and what manifested from spirit will end up in spirit and talked about matter in motion and that there is no metaphysical experience without physical experience.' Ramjan said.

Religion in 12<sup>th</sup> Century Karnataka was decadent, practicing religiosity without spiritual essence and in this decadent time **Basava created hope**, Ramjan said. He said Basava was not just a reformer but the father of alternative society, a society without a caste system, without class, gender and racial discrimination. As the prime minister of **the Kalyani kingdom**, he created a model society where a cobbler was equal to him.

**Ramjan defined Basava's movement as that of spiritualism and social consciousness.** Founding the **Istalinga** yoga system that practiced equality in all walks of life, Ramjan said Basava also founded the biggest parliament in the world, **Anubhava Mantapa, a socio-religious-economic parliament** which had 770 community leaders, 71 of them women. He was himself one of the 770 community leaders that he built from a wide cross section of society regardless of caste or class. He upheld human rights, the right of women, equal rights of children, whether legitimate or illegitimate.

But the problem started when Vedic philosophy which Basava, although born in a Brahmin family, saw as racism, clashed violently with his own egalitarian philosophy. Ramjan said. 'According to Basava, the three upper castes, Brahmana, Kshatriya and Vaishya never worked, never produced. The Brahmana read and wrote, the Kshatriya killed and died, the Vaishya procured commodities and sold them but all three never produced whereas, the 90% Shudras, or lower castes, produced what human kind needed. Despite this the Shudras were humiliated and degraded.'

The upper castes reacted violently against Basava's philosophy. One hundred ninety six thousand followers of Basava were butchered. Of the literature of two hundred and twentyone writers who were his followers hardly 5 % remain today. The rest were burnt.

Nayeem asked, 'Could you also draw some parallels between the Basava movement and Sufism because the **Bhakti movement** has also been part of the Sufi movement?'

Ramjan replied saying that there was no difference between Sufism and the Basava movement except that Basava's struggle was collective whereas the Sufi movement was individual rebellion. In contrast to **Ishq** in Sufism, Ishq meaning eternal love, Basava spoke of compassion towards everything in the world, Ramjan elucidated that while 'Ishq' was the heart of Sufi traditions, 'Mind' was the core of Basava's teaching and through the development of the mind, one becomes a citizen of the world, **Vishwa Manava**.

**Siddhartha commented, 'I have always seen India as a spiritual laboratory rather than as a religion and I think Basava's movement was one of the finest examples emerging from the spiritual movement. Unfortunately it's a paradox that a revolutionary spiritual movement ends up becoming a caste. This is the contradiction in India. Yes I think Basava spirituality is one the whole of India can embrace.'**

**Session IV 'An Encounter with Buddha via Marx: An ongoing Journey' by Millind Wani, chaired by George Kunnath.**

Millind said, 'My earlier years had an influence of Buddhism and social reformation but my encounter with Marx was not at all related to any social justice or anything like that. My discovery of Marx is ironical because Marxist regimes were collapsing around the world in the late 80s. I learnt of Marx from his writings which opened a new world for me helping me to understand society and the world in terms of estrangement, historical materialism, production and trade, class struggle etc., prompting a new intellectual adventure in my mind which acted like a therapy for my inner turmoil of self blame and guilt, one of the reasons being the difficulty in getting a job. It lifted a burden off my shoulders. I started reading more of Marx which led me to his **insight that social reforms can never be brought about by the weakness of the strong but by the strength of the weak.'**

Coming to current times, Millind said being a beneficiary of a booming IT sector the past ten years and materially affluent, he experienced another crisis. He saw the contradiction in his attempt to engage with social movements yet being a part of an exploitative system driven by profit made him feel a hypocrite. Millind recounted visiting a bookstore during a training program in Delhi where he discovered **Train Your Mind**, a commentary by a **Tibetan high monk Chyogam Trungpa** on **8<sup>th</sup> century AD Buddhist philosopher named Atisha** on how to engage with the world in a more mindful way which sparked his interest in eastern ways of thinking. Having engaged with Buddhism a decade ago, Millind thought of reengaging with it and find solutions to the crisis he was undergoing. 'I started my reengagement with attending a **Vipassana** course which opened a spiritual way of looking at myself. If Marx gave me a vocabulary of looking at the world in an outer way, the Buddha gave me one of looking inwards,' Millind said.

'It occurred to me that if you can't change yourself, you can't change the world. Buddha speaks about self and compassion and that hatred does not cease through hatred but through love. Having engaged with both of them, my next effort was on how to reconcile them. This is where the **Marxist social**

**psychologist and philosopher Erich Fromm** came to my rescue, who said that a Marxist is actually a spiritual being,' he continued.

Delineating the attitudinal similarities between Marx and the Buddha, Millind said, **'While Marx says you can't rest at the level of idea, you have to go out and act reflectively and mindfully and not act with gestures, the Buddha, in his address to the Kalama community tells them not to listen to him because he is the Buddha but only if it related to their reason and experience.'** Both question authority and purported truth as absolute truth. Hence, the inner sense and outer sense allows for a possibility of change, of self transformation and social transformation, Millind said, and defined himself as a Marxist Buddhist.

'We need to look at different ways of addressing today's ailments. We need to go back to our **wisdom traditions. Humanity and the planet is wounded at many levels: ecological distress, economic distress, psychological distress etc.** While we need to change outside structures **we need to begin with ourselves and cling on to hope intelligently, using all the arsenal we can gather, whether spiritual, material, intellectual and together fight the big fight.** Millind concluded his discourse with saying that **'Hope is not giving up on ourselves'**.

**Session V by Sam's and Paula's presentation on: 'Emerging Universe, Wellbeing and Justice', chaired by Orla Hazra.**

Orla Hazra set the tone of the session by stating: 'The story from science and history shows that we come from a 13.8 billion year journey and we are just coming to this understanding now. We have a whole generation with new sense, a new perspective of being together. Without a collective story of belonging, we are cosmic refugees and the paradox in our lens of dualism results in life practices that creates refugees across the earth. When we talk about blood purity we don't realise that we share our genetics, 99.9% with one another in this room, 98.5 % of our genetics with chimpanzees, 60 % with the bananas we had at lunch, 33% with fungi. Fungi, as a matter of fact, were the first World Wide Web and without them we wouldn't have the diversity of life.

Big history shows us that the universal understanding of all religion is that **we are all bound together.** The study of big history prepares us with skills to face the challenges we now face and the scientific story down through time show us impermanence, creativity, adaptation, redistribution, renewal, rebirth, diversity of our human communities.'

Paula said, 'Sam and I work in peace and justice issues and earth restoration projects. We found music to be an effective vehicle to convey concepts and ideas. Then we connected with the big history and the cosmic story. Sam and I started working on a project called the **'Emergent Universe'**. Human beings are meaning makers! We love stories. **Down the millennia, we've had biblical stories, the Vedas, the Koran, different religious traditions and now scientific stories, technology stories of inventions for solutions to our problems, business story of progress denoting the demand for more and more, conflicting stories all burying the one story, the cosmic story!** We all came from the Big Bang. We are an evolutionary force moving forward and when you see that you are a part of the cosmic story, things change within you. That has been mine and Sam's motivation.'

Taking up where Paula left, Sam said, 'Music has a way of transcending me to focus and come down to the centre of things. Everything is unfolding in the universe at the moment.'

Sam quoted Thomas Berry, '**Without enchantment it is unlikely that the human community will have the psychic energy needed for the renewal of earth,**' Sam said.

What does enchantment mean? Sam asked. 'It is the whole-hearted sense of taking in and being transformed by the magic and the beauty of emerging systems. It is not enough to just know facts but to know the presence of living systems that surround us. Relating with that, we explore the role of the arts', Sam observed. **Why are the arts and music critical to the relation between wellbeing, spirituality, justice and climate resilience?** Sam asked. 'Art is the result of an evolutionary and historical process between audience and artists, between display and desire, expression and taste. Beauty drives evolution and is not necessarily an outcome of evolution,' he explained.

'We still need to stay connected with the Geo-sphere and the Bio-sphere and hence, our work with music is to create a story for people to experience this wholeness. We worked with scientists and writers and crafted a Librato which tells a story from the beginning: from the 'Big Bang' to the emergence of global human consciousness,' Sam recounted and then played a deeply entrancing Choral orchestra.

**The session concluded with a lecture-tour of the campus by Siddhartha for the participants giving them an understanding of ecology and justice as revealed in the art works at Fireflies.**

**Day II.**

**Session I 'Modernity and sociological/ecological conscience: Wholeness and Reciprocity and renewal' by Aseem Shrivastava, chaired by Abhayraj Naik.**

Aseem quoted from a speech of **Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas**, a survivor of the holocaust in Germany. *"It was once religion which told us that we are all sinners, because of the original sin. It is now the ecology of our planet which pronounces us all to be sinners because of the excessive exploits of human inventiveness. It was once religion which threatened us with a last judgment at the end of days. It is now our tortured planet which predicts the arrival of such a day without any heavenly intervention. This latest revelation is the outcry of mute things themselves that we must heed by curbing our powers over creation, lest we perish together on a wasteland of what was creation."*

'The past is forbidden, you are not allowed to go there. The present is impossible and the future is inevitable,' Aseem said and that the nature of that inevitability depended on who we are. He described the future as electronic where human beings become redundant, replaced by machinery of the smartest advanced kind.

**He spoke about how two different cosmologies were at work, sometimes on parallel lines, sometimes at cross purposes. One is the cosmology of what one conceives as power and the other is the cosmology of what one may think of as freedom.** Referring to 'Cosmology', he said, it was a universe of meanings. 'The way modern man tries to reach the universe is by going there. And the way that I

suggest we might find our freedom is by realizing that we are already there. So the entire difference **between the two cosmologies is the difference between 'being' and 'becoming' he said.**

**Tri dimensioning his theme on 'Time', Aseem described the lateral and vertical dimensions which encapsulate** historicity on the lateral and Eternity on vertical dimensions. 'Many people have interpreted the Christian cross as the lateral line representing past, present and future and the vertical line as going through the present into the timeless, the Eternal,' he said.

**The second dimension was the one between secularity and sacrality.** 'In India', Aseem said, 'the word secular becomes important to many people because its opposite is not the sacred but the communal.' It truly is ironical that people must embrace the secular in order to reject the communal. 'What one needs to do is to embrace the sacred and then secularity comes out of that,' he said.

Having defined the differences between the two cosmologies, Aseem proceeded **with the third, the difference between technocracy and Prakriti**, a word that denotes something more than just nature. 'Nature has manifestation inclusive of all of us,' he stated.

On Historicity and Modernity, he envisaged three broad phases in the time scale of modernity and its relativity to history. Aseem engaged the participants in a voyage of discovery. Dating the first phase of modernity as era 1.0 he navigated through the voyages of Columbus and Vasco, the discovery or rediscovery of the heavens in a different framework of meanings through the invention of the telescope, the discoveries made by Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Copernicus's hypothesis verified by Galileo's observations.

Describing era 2.0 as a period when a scientific revolution preceded the Industrial revolution in Europe with an avalanche of inventions which have not ceased, it ultimately precipitated a technology adequate to destroy all organic life on the planet.

Aseem's era 3.0, then accelerated with an array of exploding digital technologies and major forays in Information technology with the invention of **ENIAC** (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer) after the end of the cold war which he called **Digitosis**.

'The adopted notion of Time is an entirely linear notion, the arrow of time as it is called,' he said and added, 'Many of you would have already thought that Time is more than just an arrow. Even Science concluded long ago that Time was anything but that. Coming from within science, a very different notion of Time emerged challenging linear Time, importantly from quantum physicist of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The arrow of Time lives in denial of a fundamental sense that the Timeless is of the essence of existence. The journey of science is interesting because it made its own existential forays into the nature of life and its meaning.'

Aseem expounded on the significant difference between the secular and the sacred. Stating that the secularity of society in the west, following the wars of religion and the disillusionment at particular times in history stemmed from radical questioning of the assumptions of reigning theologies, he said, 'In India, whether it is the peasantry in the field or the Adivasi in the forest, or the fishermen on the Coromandel

Coast; all of them never gave up their notions of the sacred. So their notions of the sacred as well as their notions of Time – the cosmology of Time – remain intact.’

However, he expressed dismay that our intellectuals have adopted the reigning cosmology which is of linear Time and have reduced exclusive secularity to secularism with terrible consequences, both for the natural world and in dealing with political rivals.

Touching on secularity and sacrality, ‘Aseem said, ‘Existence is sacred, nature is sacred which must mean that we by virtue of our mere existence have a sacred meaning. If you look around the world today, we are ruled by technocracy. Aseem quoted **German Jewish Philosopher Hannah Arendt’s book ‘The Human Condition’** written in 1957 where she says, ‘for the first time humanity has the technological wherewithal to escape the Earth’. Raising the question of what it meant for the human condition, she described it as **Earth Alienation** meaning that with every leap in technology, humanity gets alienated from its own native condition, its own native place.

In contrast to this technocracy, he drew from on the scriptures ‘Prakriti’ which referred to nature as manifestation and associated it with the eternal and the sacred, saying, ‘I believe God is everywhere and is very much part and parcel of human and being human is very much part and parcel of being God, our inner lives and our outer lives intertwined with the life of the Divine.’

Next, expanding to ecological reciprocity, Aseem observed reciprocity was not the same as exchange. He said, ‘Reciprocity in the ecological and cultural sense is a much bigger phenomenon that stretches across time and space beyond the finite.’ Citing Goethe’s line ‘One who doesn’t live in 3000 years of history is living from hand to mouth,’ Aseem said, ‘I would add that if you are not also living 3000 years of the future, you are also living from hand to mouth.’ Therefore, our time horizon as a human with God given intelligence has to stretch beyond this finite short term in which the financiers, the media managers and the system managers want us to live today.’

Differentiating ‘Wholeness’ from ‘Wellbeing’, Aseem said that wholeness was when a human being lives and perceives and feels and thinks as part of the infinite whole whereas, wellbeing has finite boundaries in relation to desire and one can desire only the finite and not the infinite. The infinite can only be discovered. ‘I think a spiritual renaissance, a spiritual awakening at a mass level is absolutely essential.’

The liberation of humanity is umbilically connected to the liberation of nature and that sacrifice is closely connected with freedom, Aseem concluded.

### **Session II of the day followed with Rajini Bakshi’s ‘Ahimsa in our Times: Role and Dialogue in Cultural Conflict’.**

Rajini kicked off with a question, ‘How many of you believe that violence is more natural than non-violence?’ Seeing a multitude of raised hands, said, ‘Wow, that’s very impressive. But violence is and non-violence, a nice idea, perhaps a laudable ideal but it is impractical.’

She kicked off another question, 'How many people feel that Ahimsa is desirable but impractical?' Seeing a reduced number of hands, she commented that there usually was a much larger show of hands!

'Many of you may be aware of that Gandhiji died very heart broken. On his birthday in 1947, he refused to be congratulated but instead said, 'If you want to wish me well, please pray that I be lifted from this Earth.' He concluded that in the whole process of freedom struggle, people had never followed his Ahimsa. He realized that all people had practiced was passive resistance, she said. 'They are two very different things and they are planets apart!' she exclaimed.

'Whatever Gandhi's faults, you cannot fault him for his commitment to tell the truth and he said, "If I had actually led people in non-violence, the horrific carnage of partition could not have happened." That was Gandhi's state of mind when he concluded that his own experiment in Non-violence had failed but he said, "I have failed but the idea has not failed, the philosophy has not failed and it will triumph", Rajini said and that today she would review how and why Gandhi's faith has been validated in the last 70 years.

The killer Ape theory says because our ancestors had a greater ability to be more cleverly violent, we survived and the other species, notably the Neanderthals, our last surviving closest cousins in the evolutionary journey, were finished off. It was argued that violence is an important and dominant human trait and a useful trait because it is what makes human beings and human society dynamic.

Questioning again on why and how this begin to change, Rajini unraveled the relevance of Gandhi in that he knew intuitively that these claims were false. 'Gandhi did not have research or scientific data to back him but he applied common sense and logic to denounce the killer ape theory by reasoning that if we had been fundamentally violent, we would have killed each other centuries ago!

'Since then multi-disciplinary research has established that co-operation was a much more crucial skill, adaptation and co-operation together, which incidentally is a rebuttal of Darwin's theory about survival of the fittest. It never meant muscular fitness, or the ability to run faster, but meant adaptability. Those who adapt, those who adjust, those who learn to build alliances with people whom they might have been in conflict with, survive and multiply. So now, even if we are going to negotiate with dominant mainstream western science, it is no longer believed that we are hard wired to be violent,' she said and referred to the **Seville statement** which emanated from the congregation of scientists, sociologists and philosophers brought together in the mid eighties by UNESCO to deliberate on **Violence**, which declared that **War is not natural, Violence is not our dominant instinct**.

Rajini also said **it still didn't mean that non-violence is our natural instinct** because **in India**, particularly today, **religion and caste are dominant causes of conflict**. In the twentieth century, a hundred million people are estimated to have died unnatural deaths, the overwhelming majority of that through violence caused by states and for ideological reasons, according to her. She regretted that even today, many of her friends and colleagues refused to accept that non-violence is a worthwhile idea because they were committed to the idea that violence of the oppressed is justified.

Rajini submitted the reason why much of the right wing mobilization wins over so many people is because of a genuine belief that they belong to the oppressed, that their ancestors, their forefathers have been oppressed by X,Y and Z and that the time has come for them to be resurgent.

The argument of the advocates of Ahimsa to the proponents of violence she projected is 'Let's admit for a moment that nonviolence may not always work but violence does not work either. There is the Palestinian conflict going on. There is still a North and South Korea.' So, how do we resolve this in our everyday lives? Why has Gandhi's faith been validated now? She asked and drew parallels with the **Civil Rights movement in the USA**.

'There is an umbilical connection with Gandhi's movement in India because many people from the African American community came to India and one of them was **James Lawson** who went back to the US and became one of Martin Luther King's mentors. He conducted detailed workshops which made the civil rights movement possible. Directing to a documentary film **A force more powerful**, Rajini panned to an episode in the film which projected Martin Luther King's central insight: *'I cannot be free if my white brother is still enslaved with the notion of racism. I cannot be free unless my oppressor is freed from the brutalization that happens to the oppressor.'*

Akin to that stream, Rajini quoted her mentor **Ashish Nandy** who said, **'It's about embracing the otherness of the other.'** 'There is the other who is in some way trying to oppress you but how do we embrace the other is a big challenge', she said.

Over the past 70 years there has been an elaborate development of a culture of non violent inter-positioning by Quaker groups which originated in America and some parts of Latin America which go to conflict areas and stand between warring factions with a remarkable record of sustaining very few injuries let alone fatalities, she said.

This kind of nonviolent activism is of two types, she clarified. One is tactical, pragmatically using nonviolence. This line of thinking was developed by **pacifist political scientist Gene Sharp of the Einstein Institute** who was inspired by Gandhi but at some point of his work, he came to the conclusion that if spiritual development was a prerequisite for non violence, then it wouldn't go far with people. So, he developed methods of nonviolence which did not require the spiritual journey.

The other is of the stream of Gandhi and Martin Luther King and what the South African post Apartheid experience showed.

How does this help us with our struggles in India? This is what interests me because our journey today is much more dependent on how we can embrace the otherness of the other which I believe is not possible without some journey of enquiry about our own self. Most of the conflict around us is intractable. We are surrounded by people in India who believe that Gandhi's assassin was right and that Gandhi was wrong.

Showing a short film titled 'Victory to Godse', Gandhi's assassin, Rajini said, 'The easiest response from me is to ridicule it. However, the essence of what the film is trying to say is in our society now, splitting

it. The only challenging response is to see whether we can see this film as a form of ignorance. If that is the case then how do we empathize or engage with it? Can I listen to the hurt, the rage and concern behind the complaint. Hating the hater only makes it worse. I have tried to dialogue with the right wing from time to time and I know that their rage is because of their inability to understand what hurts them. So, where do we go from there?’

### **Session III: Indic Culture and its Liberative Potential by Professor Rajaram chaired by Ananda Siddhartha.**

‘Something has shifted on the ground level in the last two or three years which is very subtle’, Rajaram said. Instancing the parable of ‘the frog ‘which leaps out when put it in a bowl of hot water, whereas if the water gradually heated, it would boil itself to death, he said, ‘We are slowly but surely getting used to new norms. All of us know that three or four lynchings which took place in the US in 1953 but in the past two years, there were 84 lynchings in India.’

‘Therefore’, Rajaram said, ‘we have to make possible, difficult conversations between polarized opposites. All of us here share common beliefs about very important issues but what do you do in the microcosm of the classroom when suddenly there is a shift in temperature because the ecology of belief systems has changed. It is so effective, so real, and so persistent. In that sense the problem seems to be an acute short supply of tolerance.’

‘Ministers are happy to offer 50 lakhs (five million) for somebody to behead somebody else and bring the head as a trophy routinely in the name of religion. We should be disturbed but all this has resulted in dissent and public discourse where there is no conversation. The louder you are the more correct you seem to be. I wonder what kind of therapy might be available in liberal Hinduism. One: **the absence of the definitive article in Indic Literature, Indic Imagination and Theology**. There is no where it says **I am the light, I am the way, I am the truth**. If Jesus had used the indefinite article such as ‘**A way, A truth, A light**’, a lot of mischief could have been avoided but to expect this from orthodox religion is too much,’ he said.

‘The other thing within the Indic imagination is a cognitive plasticity that is now being damaged,’ professor Rajaram said and narrated a story. ‘An anthropologist visiting Nilgiris, goes to a Toda habitat. Outside a Toda’s home he sees a stone on which there is kumkum and flowers. When the anthropologist takes a photograph of it, the Toda exclaims ‘You have polluted my God!’ The anthropologist apologizes, but the Toda reassures him saying ‘Don’t apologize, I will just throw this stone and bring another one and put kumkum and flowers and kneel before it.’ Look at the plasticity of the Toda to say, okay this is replaceable, Rajaram pointed out.

Looking at Geography, he said it was about mind and space. ‘All of us know about the Ayodhya dispute and if you look at Rama projected in the Ayodhya movement there is no Sita there. There is only Ram,’ he commented. ‘And what does he have in his hand? He has a bow and arrow in his hand. The temple is small but he is very big with the bow and arrow.’ Actually, inside Rama’s imagination there are hundreds of beautiful manifestations of ‘Ramas’ he said. ‘There is Sundara Rama, Bala Rama, Sita Rama, Mohana Rama, Ananda Rama etc.’ he listed. ‘Each one is an adjective and a mood. Why do you vulgarize the

warrior Rama?’ Metaphors should not be trifled with according to **Milan Kundera**, a writer of Czech origin ‘because when you do this you unleash forces that you can’t contain’ Rajaram cautioned.

Rajaram said while Abrahamic religions had only one relationship with God, that of **Dasia**, master and servant, **Indic spirituality had polymorphic relationships with Gods** and a **clear refusal to be subordinated to one scripture or one place of worship, according the ability to negotiate across spaces**. Etymology also plays a part. **Brahmacharaya** is celibacy, the way we understand it but the root meaning of Brahma is vast. **Charya** is the ability to move across vast spaces. That is Brahmacharaya. But people are not aware of these things and can be easily manipulated.’

Rajaram moved onto defining his meaning of cognitive tools. He propounded, ‘The cognitive tools available to us with time are the sense of Self. The Buddhist sense of Self is very fluid. If you examine **Parampara**, the guru–shishya tradition, denoting a succession of teachers and disciples in traditional Vedic culture and religions such as Hinduism, the Hindu is one who gradually manages time and space and in tune with the Indic imagination on a spiritual journey. Some know it, some don’t but everybody is on it.’

Quoting the Buddha who said, ‘**The greatest spiritual problem is to tackle head on the pitiless indifference in the universe,**’ Rajaram said, ‘We don’t mind an angry universe. We don’t mind a universe that doesn’t love us but we cannot manage an indifferent universe. All religions address this deep pain of indifference.’

Rajaram spoke on the nuanced understanding of free will. ‘The western sense of ego is that you are there to achieve certain things, a personality development cult which says if you are poor it is your fault whereas Indic imagination does not downgrade poverty. Shiva, one of the most respected Gods is very poor. He lives in a graveyard; he doesn’t wear ornaments, wears tiger skin. This is courage ‘**Aprigraha**’, non possessiveness and ‘**Asthiya**’ saying no to the endless tampering of the senses,’ he said.

He said Futurologists portrayed four challenges, none of which could be handled by a single country: 1, climate change 2, renewed threat of nuclear conflict 3, technological disruptions and 4, discontent due to increasing global inequality. All this asks us to redefine parameters of spirituality, he said.

Rajaram recounted a character from the Indian epics; ‘**Puruva**’ who asks his son to donate his youth for him so that he can enjoy life and the angry Gods punished him with **constant ageing without dying!** ‘**Indic imagination promises only one immortality; the ripple immortality, the only kind of immortality we can have**. Gandhi’s immortality is how his ideas are touching us today. Buddha’s immortality is rippling across 2500 years but the kind of immortality we are looking for today is very interesting,’ he observed sardonically. Rajaram spoke but a website ‘**elixir.com**’ which will charge 6000\$ and upon willing your body to that company, it would be stored in cryogenic chambers which will wake you up after 40 years. Saying that 13,000 people have subscribed so far,’ he said.

‘We need to build bridges within our private spiritualities because threats are real, as much as possibilities of emancipation. Hinduism by definition is plural: Civilisational Hinduism and not Nationalistic Hinduism. Gandhi’s distinction of **India as a civilization** from **India as a nation** is perhaps

one of the finest distinctions that are available to us. Now, I see Civilisational Hinduism under some temporary pressure to fit into the narrow confines of a nation. And National Hinduism is arguably a form of hysteria. I am confident that the internal energies of Hinduism will reclaim its space,' Rajaram concluded.

The evening was time to sustain the participants with cosmic energy. Deborah Nunes and Ciro from the School of Integral Sustainability, Salvadore, Brazil, conducted a play '**The Story of Us**'. The participants joined in and **it developed into a stellar orbit of heavenly bodies synchronizing with this vast cosmic destiny**, connecting each with a universal kindredness, manifesting from the nebula of concernedness and togetherness.

### **Day III**

**The day began with Fireflies' traditional floral ceremony of the Mandala, the lighting of the wicks illuminating a sacred space within us in which we interconnect and together create a beautiful state of wholeness.**

Session I '**Gardens of God –Reflections on Justice and Compassion**' by Anantha Giri, chaired by Manu V. Mathai followed.

Disserting into his talk, Ananta Giri said, 'We need to understand the tensions and the challenges between **Wellbeing** and **Justice** and understand the pluriverse of both, the call for good life as well as the struggles for it which involves the conflicts as well as the challenges in overcoming these conflicts. In that spirit I thought about this theme- ***Gardens of God: Rethinking and Transforming Good Life and A New Realization of the Pluriverse of Rights, Rites, Good, God, Justice and Responsibility.***'

Ananta Giri said the notions of **Rights** and **Justice** was not usually connected with **Good**. Concepts like **Buen vivir** from Latin America and **Ubuntu** in Africa which say that '**My Good Life depends upon how you are. I exist because you are**' can hide many kinds of inequality and indignity on the part of self and society. 'These conceptions are confronted with perennial questions of rights and justice,' he stated. 'Highlighting this concern, critical thinkers on justice such as **John Rawls** and **Jurgen Habermas** have questioned the priority of **rights** over **good**. Similarly, the critical thoughts of **Amartya Sen** tell us not to forget the issues of rights and justice in the name of **good life**.'

'Because of this contrast between right and good, we needed to broaden and deepen our conceptions of good life by drawing from other philosophical and civilizational perspectives such as **Purusharta** and **Lokasamgraha** from Indic traditions.' Explaining **Purushartha as the four fold pathway of realizing Good Life with Dharma (right conduct), Artha (Wealth and meaning), Kama (desire) and Moksha (salvation)**, Ananta Giri said we needed to go beyond that construct and cultivate multiple visions and practices of integral Purushartha. He explained Lokasamgraha as gathering of people and expanding it beyond its literal meaning to **Atmasamgraha**, the gathering of souls and said practicing integral Purushartha will help us realize that **Good** lives in self and society, Good Life in soul and society.'

**'We also need to cultivate the idea of Lokasamgraha as collective wellbeing** and engage in a cross civilizational dialogue which challenges us to initiate a process of gathering of people just as we are assembled here. In the Indic civilization there is this significance of 'Community' as opposed to 'State'. In modernity, there is a primal significance of the State in the realization of justice while in the Indic civilization, it has been the community. But if communities are themselves fragmented because of the caste logic, then it is **Lokavinasha, the destruction of Lokasamgraha; the destruction of the people which is also the destruction of the soul,**' he said.

'Therefore, we should look at Lokasamgraha not just as a public gathering in the political and social sphere in the modern sense but as a soul sphere, the **Atmasamgraha**, for the realization of Rights, Justice and Wellbeing where the gathering of people is for collective wellbeing which confronts existing structures of domination and isolation of caste, gender and religion,' he said.

'When you talk about Rights you also need to open the door to religion and practice of **Rites** and paths of mutual co-nurturance as suggested by Confucius, who points out in his **Analects** that if we are striving for Rights, it can intertwine with **Rites** corresponding to certain aspects of **Dharma**.

'Our journey with Rights, Good and Rites also can dance in transcendence with the **Divine**; with Gods which goes beyond our societal construct of Good and Evil. But what is that sense of Goodness? I call it the evolutionary Goodness, the nurturing Goodness. Our idea of Good has to go beyond modern constructions of secularism and cultivate practices and movements consisting simultaneously of rights and rites, good and Gods, justice and responsibility,' Ananta Giri said.

'When we talk about God, we also must include the Goddess and the question is how to relate Rights to God since we are talking about sustainability and climate change and the struggle for Good Life and justice,' Ananta Giri said and narrated an account from **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'Forest of enchantments'** where she describes Valmiki reading Ramayana and the kingdom of God and when he asks Sita 'How do you like my story? Sita replied, 'You did not describe the torment that Sita has gone through.' Valmiki then tells Sita to write her own story. Sita then begins writing her book invoking the Goddess Saraswathi. Ananta Giri said, **Aurobindo**, in his book **'The Mother' described Saraswathi as the symbol of essence** and connected this essence with the idea of justice because the struggle against injustice required essence.'

Going to the Kingdom of God, he said God was presented in the Old Testament, as in many other religious traditions of the world, as powerful, angry and an omnipotent King. 'In such a portrayal of God, we fail to realize that God is mercy, **rahim, karuna** and compassion. The vision of Kingdom of God as power preoccupied us with the power of God rather than God's mercy whereas, God is our nurturer. He/ She is constantly walking and meditating with us with mercy to face challenges of self-development and responsible cosmic engagement and participation,' he said.

Ananta Giri shared **Harvey Cox's** translation of Jesus' statement that the "Kingdom of God is within you" in Aramaic which meant "The Kingdom of God is across you." 'To understand the Kingdom of God as across us is to realize that our work and meditation within ourselves need to relate to others. The

language of 'within' as 'across' us prompts us to go beyond a literal understanding of 'inner' as confined within oneself and realize that it is also related to the worlds around, in relationships of non-duality rather than in a framework of dualism between 'outer' and 'inner'.

'It helps us move from power and violence to the inner spheres of meditation, self-realization and mutual realizations. Jesus did not come on Earth to be a King, rather help us realize our God nature, our essential and integral God-dimension of existence which is a dimension of love, mercy, mutual care and anger at unjust social systems.'

'To realize the kingdom of God in our lives and society, we need to go beyond self and other-**Swadharma** and **Paradharm**, and cultivate a way of walking with God together on the path of **Sadharm** and **God of togetherness** as suggested in the concluding lines of Rigveda where there is a call for **Samgachadhvam, Sambadadhvam—walking together and speaking together,**' he added.

Plunging further into his dissertation Ananta Giri said, 'When walking with God together, we can see Kingdom of God as '**Gardens of God**' and God as a Gardener, a creative Gardener, rather than a power hungry Sovereign. Instead, as theologian Brigitte Kahl wrote, we see God taking up the spade and planting trees in the garden, doing hard and dirty manual work. But when God is taking up the spade, by taking it up ourselves we collaborate with God and in the continuing process of gardening, blessing Him and Her, we also become blessed. In Christian traditions, we can also see Jesus Christ as a gardener.'

Narrating the story of Lord Ram who left Ayodhya for the forest to practice the path of renunciation and Sita's feeling of suffocation in the palace being a daughter of Earth, and the killings by Ram overtaken by the patriarchal logic of power and violence, to the banishment of his pregnant wife Sita to the forest hearing suspicions raised on her character, Ananta led the participants to the discovery of **Sita's kitchen!**

Ananta Giri said Gandhi's grandson, Ramachandra Gandhi, actually discovered a place known as Sita's kitchen when he visited Ayodhya after the demolition of the Babri Mosque. In his book, Ramachandra Gandhi visits a place which is worshipped as the birth place of Rama and finds that there is a place called Sita's Kitchen and described Sita's Kitchen as the entire field of her self-imaging as **Shakti**, powerfully represented by the earth. It is on earth, in the embrace of the Divine Mother, that all are born, all creatures great and small; all forms manifest, noble or evil; and all are nourished.

In Gardens of God, Ananta Giri said we are all beings; the Snake, Adam and Eve, unlike in the Garden of Eden where the snake was considered evil. 'But we can transform this by seeing the snake, Adam and Eve as children of both God and Mother Earth. The energy at work and in meditation involved in gardening in the gardens of God is not just sweat, for it also involves the task of weeding but also strife to be non-violent and kind without causing unnecessary harm to all beings. Gardening here is neither just rational nor emotional but involves a deep interplay of emotion, intuition, reason, imagination and deep visions,' he commented.

Ananta Giri said that transforming Kingdom of God into Gardens of God also prompts us to creatively walk and meditate on the discourse of '**Ramrajya**', the Kingdom of Ram. Walking and mediating with such movements and reflections, we can now rethink and transform the discourse of Ramrajya into

'**Ramvana**', Garden of Rama. This is a journey and movement from violence to non-violence which is facilitated by introspective and transformative movements of both Sita and Shambuka. Sita refuses to go through **Agnipareekhya** (the test of fire) and helps Ram to overcome his implicit patriarchal nature in a spirit of true gender liberation.

We thus transform Ramrajya into Ramvana where all beings live with their difficulties as well as the urge to overcoming their temptations of egoistic aggrandizement and violence. This also transforms the conventional Kingdom of God into Gardens of God and in the process help us transform self, culture, society, religion, polity, world and cosmos.

Ananta said, 'This journey with anger and temptation to violence is overcome in a forest in *Sita's Kitchen* which suggests that to overcome the temptation to violence coming from kingdoms and palaces, we need to cultivate a dimension of forests in our lives. **Christian philosopher Charles Taylor** realized the significance of this as did Rabindranath Tagore who said in 1915 that it was important to understand the distinction between civilization which is based upon the primacy of the city and the polis and the civilization which is based upon the life and spirit of the forest, the ecological consciousness of the forest.

Hence, transforming Kingdom of God to Gardens of God opens up new ways of looking at the traditions of political theology which connects with the vision and practice of deeper cross-cultural spiritual realizations that moves towards an ecological civilization and rebuild the burnt Kandava forest as a garden of God, truly representative of **Good Life, Rights, beauty, Justice and Responsibility**. 'Ananta Giri submitted.

**Session II of the day, an all women panel on: 'Present and future challenges before social activists seeking sustainable futures' chaired by Shabin Paul of Pipal Tree.**

Shabin welcomed the players in the dialogues, saying 'This need not be seen as a presentation but just as a dialogue on the topic of what '**Hope**' means to us. All of us are engaged in different actions: social, cultural and political activism, as writers etc. In small ways we do influence society. Where do we draw our inspiration from? She asked and introduced the panelists:

'Diana originally from Palestine, acrobat trainer and a team builder for leaders and managers in multicultural organizations, building their internal competencies to manage change and a culture of accountability.

'Archana Kishnamurthy, leadership coach coaching CEOs, entrepreneurs and women leaders from the corporate world and founder of 'Mindful Living Pvt. Ltd. and Conscious Living Centre' who conducts workshops for conscious living for Corporate houses and Educational Institutions.

'Fatou from Senegal, a sociologist and coordinator of food sustainable department of ENDA, an NGO based in Senegal with branches in Asia, Africa and Latin America and also a coordinator of the dialogues in Decca and Senegal.

'Christine from Lyons, France, Trainer and Consultant and coaching and team management in creativity and collective intelligence, who facilitates exchange programs for students from Lyons and the Philippines and conducts event management and raising funds for projects in the Philippines.

'Suma Varghese, an editor and author who retired as editor of the spiritual and holistic magazine 'Life Positive' in 2017 and presently founder and facilitator of the popular 'Zen of good writing' course, a unique blending of spirituality and writing.

'Debroh Nunes from Brazil as professor of participatory democracy and ecology, active in the World Social Forum and many other progressive organisations, and facilitator of Dialogues in Humanity in Brazil.'

Suma Verghese said, 'For me, it has been sufferings within and outside of self and others. For a very long time in my life I was engaged in looking at things at a very macro level talking about policy issues, what governments should do, communities should do, what somebody else should do, but we never talk about what I should do. Years down the line we are still doing the same thing and nothing much has changed. Things were getting worse. I took on from there asking myself, what can I do? What am I naturally gifted with, what do I feel passionate about? I realized that I have always been passionate about learning and growing and I feel very good when I see that I have grown and have found ways of dealing with some challenges within and outside and I just share them. Obviously I have a very simple life now. I learn, I grow and I share. From sharing I learn again and I grow and I share again.'

Archana Krishnamurthy, sharing her spiritual journey said, 'The crux was when I realized that although I had moved myself away, God had not and that gave me faith. Secondly I found that every time I had to prioritize the other meant going beyond my own view points, beyond my needs and my own prejudices; in short, expanding myself. When a catastrophe occurs, I get down addressing it and contemplating on how I have contributed to the situation and what am I learning from the situation. As I started moving along the path I also realized that I was not alone in this universe, the universe itself is with me. I found sooner or later the answer would also come to the questions in my mind. This awakening put me in touch with my mission which was moving towards a holistic way of life that led me to part with 'Society magazine'. That very evening I was offered the job of bureau chief of 'Life positive magazine' which is a holistic magazine. For twenty one years, it was the greatest privilege of my life to share my perspectives, experiences with my readers. I honestly believe that in many ways I was able to bring slight shifts in the minds of my readers. So if I do the right thing in the right time for the right reason I am looked after.'

Christine said, 'I became a leader in my university for social commitments for the students and teachers when I discovered climate change. I organized a big program to change the behavior of students and teachers to ecologically change and since four or five years we experienced a lot of success. My work with my team changed habits. But my university was sold to an American institution and the program collapsed. Seeing how our efforts to change can collapse, a deep spiritual experience made me start my work on sustainability. I mobilized thousands of people to plan for facing these challenges together and to respect collective time, to respect the collective possibilities of change because we need collective solutions in our journey to become sustainable citizens of the world. We need to work with our bodies,

our minds, our emotions our spiritual awakening and I am full of hope because I am sure that people like us, our students in our school are already building a new civilization That gives me the confidence that new paradigms will emerge,' she said.

Diana played a haunting, emotive and soul stirring Palestinian song *"Walking on a stretched rope, my hands are stretched on my sides, without a security net, the breeze is blowing, and between earth and heaven anything happens, any single mistake- I fly!"*

'The name of the song in English is acrobat.' she said. Describing herself as an acrobat walking on earth looking for balance,' she said, 'I understood I had to find balance since I as six years old. I was born to a Palestinian Christian family in Jerusalem. We lived in the west and I went to school in the east. So every day I had to walk on this stretched rope. As a matter of custom, I had to change my dress twice a day, when going to school and when returning from it to suit Palestinian and Israeli sensitivities. I then understood that there was only one way I could make it and that way was the western world. So, after school I went to university, studied English Literature so I could make it in the western world. I succeeded but then I asked what was I doing? So I went back to Jerusalem after my studies. I went back to use my knowledge and be proactive. I created my own company there. Many thought it was my brother's or father's company but I said "No. It's mine." When I heard this song I realized that the singer, a Palestinian woman was living the same life that I lived 30 years ago. She was living in a very conservative society and when you live in a conservative society you need other inspirations. You need more strength, you need to believe more in yourself, you need conviction more than men to walk on this stretched rope,' she summed up.

Fattou spoke next. 'To find the answer to what keeps us going, I would have to dig deep into my own experiences. My first experience with the fishing community in Dacca was that women were practically destined for marriage. However, my parents, particularly my father, believed that education was crucial for a girl. It was a daunting moment for me when I passed 'A' levels because people would say it was time for me to get married. But I said NO. I wanted my own empowerment first and foremost. So I decided to go to Europe but I had no money. So, I borrowed money for my plane ticket and some pocket money, about 225 Euros, from a family member. The registration at the university cost 192 Euros. That was when I realized that life was a fight. I took up odd jobs to survive like washing cars, as waitress in restaurants etc. I also had to send money back home for my family. I realized solidarity is the secret that my task was not to stay in Europe but to go back to Senegal, my own country and extend my hand to other women like me. So I worked with 'ENDA', an organization where I still work, supporting women working in fisheries whose task was to salvage all kinds of products from fishery wastes and process them and sell them. We made them understand how with training and capacity building, they could transform themselves. They agreed and now they support and encourage other women to develop,' Fatou said.

Shabin, said 'I don't personally believe in coincidences. I think this is all planned. I believe there is a designer. We've all been given a role to play and how we play it in society is our duty and responsibility,' and invited the participants to share their experiences.'

### Session III 'Panel on Directions and Concrete suggestions for the future' by John Clammer

John said, 'I think I can build on some of the things you just said. I have been listening to the speakers these few days, making some notes on the important notion that you raised. I have built on those ideas and thought through some of them in more detail. We started the first afternoon with the discussion on hope and whether there is a community or collective sense of hope instead of panic. This reminded me of what I read years ago of a number of famous social theorists at a meeting. There was a leading **German social theorist by the name of Ernst Bloch** who wrote a massive book '**Das Prinzip Hoffnung**' - **The principle of hope**. One of the things he talks about in that book is the importance of **Utopias**. He was living through a period when the Nazis were ascending when hope was disappearing. He argued that what Utopias do for us is that it stimulates imagination and that '**Imagination**' was the key.

So, **to create a future, you must be able to imagine it**. The key to envision and embody that future is like asteroids. The media has an enormous role to play in the way in which stories are shown. In the past, the dialogues have been about food security but this year I see that we have writers, poets, etc and it is exactly they that can create new stories. These stories are the core for thinking about the future, to imagine it and embody it so that it gets assimilated into our culture.

My second thought was about Siddhartha's story of the bow and the arrow, about the inward journey and the outward journey. In fact, what we have gone through the past several days is the inward journey. Let's face it. **A lot of us are afraid of the outward journey**. Something very fundamental is involved here. There are thousands of people working on alternatives, organic farms, water conservation and other experimental initiatives etc. but the big structures don't seem to change even after these interventions in any substantial way as we would like. **That is because we don't have an alternative economics**. We haven't figured out a value system which can convince people of other ways of relating to economic reality. The economy is the dominant institution of our lives. It shapes our passions, our subjectivities, our entertainment patterns.

Referring to the Earth Aurotorial composition of Sam, John said, '**If I were to re-orchestrate it along the canons of Hindustani classical music, what can emerge is a very different vision of how we think about the universe. More than a historical sense and not on the objective sense of cosmologic development; but how we begin to relate to that reality through the boxes of thinking, and sense of aesthetics with which we frame the world.**

Speaking on the chaos theory, he said it was a study of complex non-linear systems used in meteorology because the weather is a complex system. 'A key issue in the chaos theory is that even in a complex system there is the key to self regulate and change a system to another, from one state to another. For instance, take a tray of ice out from your fridge. It doesn't dissolve into water. It passes a critical point and then it disintegrates. One of our tasks to beat the big structures is to find those critical points, the key with which we can change the world. It won't be just tough but very exciting!'

Saying he had reservations on the word 'Alternative' because it implied that the 'Mainstream' is the reality, **rather than looking for 'Alternatives', we should look for reality**. 'The automated version of the world with AIs, robots and intelligent machines is not the world we want,' John said. Using his wand, he

transported the participants to the magical miracles of the world of **Harry Potter** and then sent them back to the daunting notion of re- enchantment over the technological, managerial, 'Scientistic' and not 'Scientific' models which have led us to living in unhappiness today as a consequence. **'The idea of re-enchantment gives us the opportunity to look again for a miracle, for 'Hope' is a miracle,'** John concluded.

It was the last tea for the dialoguers on the campus of Fireflies, each incandescent with the rays of wisdom derived from the dialogues, realizing that soon they would depart on their journeys and disseminate it within the communities they came from.

**Au revoir!**