

We must learn to learn and unlearn: Future of Kachchh

Report on the Kachchh Vikalp Sangam

27th July to 30th July 2016

Venue: Nijanand Farm, Haripar road, Bhuj, Kachchh



The Fifth regional Vikalp Sangam was organised and hosted by Kachchh based voluntary organisations and Kalpavriksh in Kachchh, Gujrat from 27th to 30th July 2016. A large number of community members from the region, representatives from Kachchh-based civil society organisations (CSOs) and some from other parts of Gujarat, activists, scientists, journalists, artists, came together for Kachchh Vikalp Sangam. The Sangam had a significant representation of community members. Apart from thought provoking discussions, participants had fun filled evening activities and delicious Kachchi and Gujarati food to cherish their stay at Shivanand Balkashram. Camel milk ice-cream was one of the highlights apart from Ganibhai's (community participant) astute jokes.

Vikalp Sangam¹ is an ongoing process of bringing together practitioners, thinkers, researchers, and others working on alternatives to currently dominant forms of economic development and political governance. It aims to create a space to come together, dream and deliberate towards an alternative future. While resistance efforts are underway, and need to be supported, we also need to create a cross sectoral platform on alternatives (or constructive work) to share, learn, build hope, and collaboration.

¹details see

<http://kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives/alternatives-knowledge-center/353-vikalpsangam-coverage>

The Sangam was inaugurated by Kantisen and Chandaben Shroff of Shrujan, profoundly known as Kaka and Kaki. Kantisen ji expressed his happiness to the gathering of civil society workers. He also hoped that something new would come out from this churning (note: this was last appearance of both of them together and Chandaben Shroff, (Kaki) passed away in the month of August 2016). Shri Dr. Jay Sanghvi, owner of Nijanand and our host welcomed all the guests along with his wife. He expressed his happiness that his facility is used for a noble purpose. All the members were introduced to each other through a unique rope tying game facilitated by Radhika Mulay and Shrishtee Bajpai of Kalpavriksh.

Session One: Community Knowledge Systems

This session focused on the importance of reintroducing traditional knowledge into modern agricultural, artisan, and architectural techniques. Presenters from all sectors spoke about their initiatives in this area, and the challenges they are facing.

Building Traditions

HunnarShala's initiative to reintroduce traditional building materials and knowledge into modern construction processes.

Mr. Mahavir Acharya ji spoke about various innovations and projects Hunnar Shala has facilitated. One such project is the Bhunga resurgence, a circular mud house designed keeping in mind earthquake propensity of the region, local materials, cost-effectiveness and cultural and environmental viability. The material used to make a block consists of 90% mud and only 10% cement. The block is used to build local homes and buildings. Sham e- Sarhad, a community owned resort in Hodka village of Banni region was constructed using same designs and techniques. The resort brings enough revenue for the community members during the peak season. One such other decentralised housing technique is Jat Pakkha house, made of only grass by sufi pastoral communities. The community members present in the meeting asserted that such traditional housing techniques are part of their identity and they can accept few innovations such as a plinth but nothing more. Indigenous technologies can be upgraded rather than importing technologies that are foreign to the contextual realities.

Challenges Faced

Facilitating Widespread Use of Alternative Building Materials:

Although the earth block, along with bamboo structures and thatched roofing, are now widely used in architectural design of Kachchh, their legitimacy is still being questioned outside the local areas. The government is yet to endorse these materials, or provide subsidies for their production, so most government-funded construction projects are still using high-energy materials. Civil Engineers who are consulted for such projects also do not trust these materials; they do not see alternative materials as equal substitutes to modern options. The discussions around the topic got build up and participants felt the need of greater transformation in societal process. Building oceanic circles that do not alienate us in the process rather encompass our work and life in such a manner that Vikalp becomes way of

life. Participants spoke about how Vikalp cannot be a Vikalp until it is comprehensive and embrace the idea of what constitutes well-being in comprehensive manner. Vikalp will be something that brings back love to the work and the relations of different occupations and livelihoods.

“How can we acquire government acceptance of these building materials, and proliferate their usage?”

Crop Seed Biodiversity

Satvik, an organisation working on the revival of the traditional seeds and organic farming in Kachchh introduced participants to the contemporary issue related to preponderance of chemical based farming and losing the base touch with the old and traditional seeds. Satvik started their work with focusing primarily on understanding the local biodiversity and discovered that there are various varieties of Bajara, Jowar, Moong, oil etc. In the process, realising that diversity has to be calibrated with the local soils, climatic conditions and largely collating database on what varieties are good for what conditions. They now act as information mediators to the farmers who want to practice farming with traditional crops. Magan Ahir, a farmer who made the shift from chemical based farming to organic farming shared his experience with the participants at the Sangam. The productivity from the initial days of organic farming was slow and less but as the time went by, he started getting good production and was in position to take risk of experimenting with various varieties of wheat, castor and cotton. He asserted that he has high productivity probably not as much as from hybrid variety, nevertheless at much cheaper rates.

How do we collectivise these efforts so that they can reach to other farmers as well?

Kala Cotton Value Chain

A project undertaken by local farmers, Satvikand Khamir to create an organic cotton product, with a completely localized supply chain. Kala Cotton is native to Kachchh, and rain is enough for harvest. It is by default organic and water conserving variety. Khamir is procuring cotton pods from Adesar Vistat Khet Utpadan Producer Company Ltd. every year and is converting it into yarn by ginning and spinning. The yarn is further dyed and weaved by weavers to create a unique product range of Kala cotton.

Challenges Faced

Accessibility of Kala Cotton in local market

Kala Cotton is produced fairly, locally, and organically, and by the local farmers and artisans. Products made using Kala Cotton come from an unexploitative supply chain, and are sold at a higher market price than products made using government subsidized materials, which are usually produced by corporations. In addition to using cheaper, but environmentally costly inputs, these corporations are able to reduce production costs because of their large scale. Thus, it is difficult for Kala Cotton products to compete with these synthetic products, which will always be sold at a lower price. As such, Kala Cotton finds itself in a global luxury market.

One of the questions posed: *“How do we bridge this gap, and get Kala Cotton in the hands of the local communities who are producing it?”*

Evening Activity: Tree Planting

All participants gathered in an empty plot of the ashram to plant native species of trees. The plot will now be known as Vikalp Sangam Grove.



Dinner Session

After an intense first session, participants were taken to the Shivananda Balkashram for a surprise: a Silent Dinner! Each person received a small cloth flower pin, and once it was pinned, they were committed to a vow of silence for the duration of the dinner. Participants enjoyed a beautiful, diya-lit thali meal designed and served by the organising committee themselves. Afterwards, participants had moments of restful self-reflection under a breezy, starlit sky.



Day 2

The day began with an option of Yoga, Vipasana (Meditation), or a Nature Walk in the nearby hills. The participants choose one activity to participate in.



Session 2: Intergenerational Knowledge Systems

This session focused on alternative education initiatives, in the areas of music, weaving, masonry, carpentry, agriculture, and child education. Organic farmers, herders, panchayat heads, NGOs, individual experts, activists, scientists/academicians and craftspersons were part of the Sangam. Presenters spoke on the ethos of their organisations, challenges overcome, and challenges still outstanding.

The session was chaired by Shri Ramesh Sanghvi and Shri Dalpat Dhanidhariya. It began with the pressing concern raised by Ramesh Sanghvi, our host, to liberate and rescue education from the current mere information-gathering tool. The present education system lacks any co-relation with life and its elements. It is handicapped it has become the matter of commerce and we need to think about how it can become un- compartmentalised and holistic.

Soor Shala

An offspring of Kachchh Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS), Soorshala is continuing various traditional musical traditions of Kachchh. At first working within an NGO capacity, the founders soon realised that music tuition cannot be contained in an institutional framework. *“Music is of nature, and nature cannot be confined to the classroom.”* They then approached community members and expert musicians in various part of Kachchh and requested them to

teach in the ways they wanted and supported them. Being 6 months in the process, 20 teachers taught 100 new people and all this happened by just reviving *Guru- Shishyaa parampara*. Below is the picture of Noormamad Shodha playing the double flute. Sodha is a guru teaching and performing with Soorshala.



Artisan education initiatives

An initiative to preserve and continue traditional weaving practices of Kachchh. According to Shamji Vankar a local weaver, learning can only happen in the environment in which the craft is born or being carried on as a social process, not in schools and colleges. This he realised after he came back from NID/NIFT (craft education institutes) where the education was deprived of contextual realities and bereft communities from their traditional knowledge systems. KalaRaksha Vidyalaya has taught 150-200 students who learn from community experts in their environment.

However, the fight with the relentless and demanding market is daunting and increasingly local crafts men are losing relations with the traditional forms of crafts and which has resulted in the breaking down of traditional relationships. The struggle is to keep such spaces like Vidyalaya alive that are self innovating, sharing information with the local weavers, working with natural dyes and can create livelihoods options that save youth from 'modern' products and jobs.

KarigarShala

A yearlong institute for young school dropouts aged 16-18. Karigar Shala works with its students to teach them Carpentry or Masonry, as they choose, along with other technical and life skills important for working within these industries. Here, "student" and "teacher" are fluid positions-- staff and youth work together to determine the curriculum, and learn from one another. The students in the Shala are usually the kids from the local/low income communities. Mahesh Vasan, one of the former students of the Karigarshala shared his

experiences of being in the course and how his life has changed post the course. Being in the course for a year, he realised that work can also be enjoyed and subjects like maths made more sense when their practical relevance was obvious. Atul Vyas, one of the teachers at the shala, spoke about the need to start an incubation company, with many of these students, to learn further skills, especially on how to showcase skills to get work. They have been quite successful so far and many have good jobs and much appreciation from clients.

Challenges Faced

A Need to Formalize Learning Materials Karigarshala is seeking written reference materials, as well as more formalized curriculum. During the sangam, faculty voiced interest in collaborating with outside organisations to create such materials. One question that was raised in response:

“Shouldn’t these types of localised, alternative education materials be developed from within our own community?”

SagarShala

Schools for children living on the coasts, mostly children of fisherpeople, saltpan workers and migrant labourers. Devendra Bhai, a local schoolteacher, realised the need to accommodate the lives of fishing communities and constructing school buildings that were similar in structure to the children’s homes. SagarShala (school near sea), is along the entire coast of 100 km! The first school came up in year 2001 with 60 kids and then by 2014, they had 1400-1500 kids. They also work with salt workers and started hostels in some villages, helped kids go to government schools, integrated kids from different communities that were earlier divided. This did not come easy, government officials refused to recognise Shala as a proper school and booked the teachers for various violations, but relentless struggle by the communities and the teachers has finally compelled the government to recognise these schools and give rations for mid-day meals. They have converted the whole curriculum and material (visuals, poems, texts) in Kachchhi and this is done collectively with teachers. The problem is that they still have to do exams that are centralized and so they have to devote few months to centralised school curriculum requirements.

The key challenge is that the Shala is facing is to find enough time for the local curriculum in the midst of centralised school curriculum.

Jal Sudharak (Para Geohydrologists) by ACT

Yogesh Jadega gave a brief background of ACT and its basic philosophy. Inspired by the Gandhian thoughts, ACT believes in making communities self-reliant by building local/traditional water harvesting systems. They initiated 45-day programme- a mix of maths, science and hydrology to teach local community members about proper water management techniques, specifically, learning how to monitor dams, aquifers, borewells, and rainwater harvesting schemes. They believe that proficiency in the technical skills results in greater autonomy over the resources among the community members. Now such training processes are undertaken in many states and more than 800 parageohydrologists have been created.

Organic Farming: Ramakrishna Trust

Manoj Solanki, organic farmer based in Kukma near Bhuj and initiator of Ramakrishna Trust shared his experiences about the transition from chemical farming to organic farming. Stating organic farming's (*Sajeev Kheti*) both ecological and commercial potential, Solanki ji described his journey and learnings. He said that it is important to extend and impart the knowledge of organic farming to farmers. Describing organic farming not only a major challenge of dominant development agenda in agriculture but also a most viable alternative, Solanki ji listed out benefits of thousands year old farming method.

Bearer of the benefits of organic farming, Solanki ji felt great need to spread the lost knowledge among the farmers. He started Ramakrishna Institute in early 2000s to provide trainings for farmers in organic farming and ensuring smooth transitioning from chemical to organic. Combined with academic proficiency of another organisation Satvik on organic farming, the trust has been able to give scientific language to local knowledge as well. They have created shorter workshops to accommodate the farmers' inflexible and busy schedules. They have trained about 600 farmers so far. The institute has recently started a *Gurukul* in which any farmers' child can come whenever they want and stay as long as they want, to learn about organic ways of farming. The gurukul has an atmosphere of enjoyment, no fixed timing, and curriculum. Currently they have eight students coming to Gurukul.

Challenged Faced

Supporting Farmers during the transition to Organic: Consistently yielding crop, and turning it into a profit takes time when farmers convert from chemical to organic, so farmers tend to suffer serious losses in the short run. As small farmers are already under the pressure of competing in a global trade market, justifying the losses that will be incurred during the transition is difficult.

“We no longer need to convince farmers to convert to organic practices. The trouble for farmers lies in sustaining themselves financially during the transition process.”

Session 3: Governance and Decentralisation

During this session, local initiatives for decentralised governance were introduced.

Panchayat Association and Local Governance Support System (LGSS)

Local communities with the help SETU formed a Panchayat Organisation which meets regularly to discuss local issues. The need of association arose when community along with SETU realised that in spite of various Mandals, small groups and individual initiatives in the village nothing collectively is achievable. Community and SETU collectively made a demand for an association and now around 60 Panchayats are part of this association that meets in every two months and each Panchayat contributes 1000/yr to association. Members also receive trainings on a range of issues during these meetings, including biodiversity conservation and organic agriculture. The Association has people from all political parties but party affiliation has no role in association. Around 123 villages are doing governance audit;

which has resulted into a lot more awareness on various issues including gender, fund use/transparency, etc.



Challenges Faced

Continuing Progress once external initiatives retreat Many NGO-based intervention initiatives have come into rural areas to work with the local community to set up self-governance structures. Unfortunately, these initiatives, be it because of loss of funding, or change in management, wrap-up their projects, and retreat from the sites.

“How do we keep the movement going once the initiative withdraws?”

Biodiversity Registers

Pankaj Joshi from Sahjeevan spoke about the effort of linking biodiversity studies and conservation with Panchayats. The idea is to aware community members about the local biodiversity issues. It also sensitizes them about the nature around them. After efforts, many farmers have even started sowing diversity of crops in their farms. Making use of provisions of Bio-diversity act, the group has initiated the formation of Biodiversity Management committee (BMC) which reports to village and decision taken is then noted by Gram sabha. They have also prepared a Bio-diversity register, which includes everything from crops to animals including the threatened species, and this has created lot of enthusiasm in village. By using Participatory Rural Appraisal technique, the group has made a five-year action plan for conservation and has attempted to understand main threats, and ways to tackle them.

Challenges faced

Hunting is a big challenge, not easy to resolve. Another challenge is that BMC’s action plan is not integrated into panchayat budget and so it is difficult to get requisite funding?

Urban Governance

Members of Gram Sashini Manch, a women's collective formed by women of urban slums across Kachchh presented on the work that they have done within their communities.

Ranging from rainwater harvesting schemes, to plans for proper housing, the women: Krutiben (of KMVS), Veenaben, and Mitaben spoke about the many efforts their collective has organised, as well as the challenges they faced along the way-- especially patriarchy concerning gender-based discrimination. Their inspiring stories filled the room with exuberance and hope.

Another effort by the collective is Gender Index. It provides a dimension to look at the work by Manch from the perspective of gender. It is done with 30 Panchayat out of which 20 Panchayats have made women protection committees. Seventeen Panchayats allocated budget for gender related issues. The elected women representatives in politics are also subject to various pressures. We are giving them a fall back mechanism.

Urban planning: Homes in the City (HIC)

The programme was started with earthquake affected communities of Bhuj city. After 2008, five organisations came together for HIC program. Although approaches are different, HIC is trying its best to achieve a common goal.

The first aim of the programme is decentralized governance. There is a constant collaboration with Bhuj Municipality to sensitise them about the pertinent urban issues. The focus is to work closely with urban citizens and make them part of urban governance systems. Among the citizens, the focus is on the vulnerable sections of city like women, deprived communities, and enhancement of their livelihood options. The aim is to come up with a sustainable town planning model that can be demonstrated and scaled up with the government for maximum benefit of people.

Referencing similar urban governance initiatives in other part of country, Rajendra Ravi from NAPM spoke on the importance of cycle rickshaws to the Indian cityscape. Their space on the city streets is slowly being erased, and his team is working to counter this in Delhi. He also described the symbiotic relationship between the cycle rickshaw and the tea sellers, that 'Chai walas' are a hub of city's information and in turn can help in figuring out the fastest routes with least traffic jams.

Animal Husbandry

This presentation focused on conservation and breeding of the Banni Buffalo, organized by Maldhari communities and local NGO Sahjeevan. Together, they have digitally recorded the Banni Buffalo population, and submitted a petition to the government to register Banni Buffalo as its own species.

Salimbhai, a maldhari breeder and community elder, provided a poignant analogy to contextualize the buffalo. A Buffalo, he said, will cost around 3 lakhs and a Tata Nano car will cost 1 lakh. But, the Nano depreciates with age, and the buffalo continues to produce milk throughout its lifespan. ***When a man buys the tata Nano, he gets one car. When a maldhari buys his micro (a buffalo), he gets 50 micros, and a source of livelihood.*** He said that the

government gave acres of land to Tata to produce their micros, so why doesn't the government give the maldhari land to produce theirs?

Evening Activity: Creating Together

Participants were given the opportunity to try their hands at some of the crafts, which had been mentioned throughout the sangam so far. The activities included:

Block Printing: Participants designed their own stoles using traditional block prints under guidance of Shri Jahangir Latif Khatri of Dhamadka village.



Weaving: Participants learned to weave using recycled plastic material, an alternative textile developed by Khamir artisans. Nanuben Vankar and Rajiben Vankar.

Earth Block: Participants worked with Hunnar Shala members to create a bench made of earth blocks, the alternative building brick which consists of 90% mud and only 10% cement.

Music: Participants listened to prominent local musicians perform traditional folk songs and Bhajans under guidance of Bhujodi Music Mandli and musicians facilitated by Kala Varso Trust. Some even got to try their hand at playing the instruments!

Day 3

Before the final day of sessions began, participants embarked on a nature walk, went for Yoga, or engaged in meditation.

Session 4: Alternative Organisational Models

This session was a discussion open to all participants to discuss the NGO framework, its success, its failures, and its future. It soon evolved into an honest sharing space, where people from different organisations spoke on their experiences, and asked questions. Throughout the session, many themes and questions were brought up, including:

Localised Curriculum

The State of Gujarat is allocating funding to create localised curriculum, which, according to many of the Sangam participants, is the opportunity Kachchh has been waiting for.

One participant noted: ***“Education will mend the discrepancy between the neoliberal global market and the natural resources it exploits.”***

Although everyone was in agreement about the necessity of localised curriculum, the means by which Kachchh should go about creating it became a topic of thoughtful debate. One participant noted that lifestyle based education, although seemingly beneficial, will be hard to integrate into government curriculum, as there is no scientific validation (e.g. statistics) for its success. In response, someone remarked: ***“Scientific validation should not be the final word. There should be a balance between statistics and lived experiences; it should be a process of cross-validation.”***

Another point was argued: What is the utility of small reforms to an education system that is fundamentally flawed?

Some noted that little fixes cannot permanently improve standardized education system if the underlying infrastructure is poor; it will only be a matter of time until another issue arises: Education reform implies large-scale systemic and transformative reform.

“We must learn how to learn.”

Practicing what we preach: Many people noted that although their NGO’s work was to establish democratic processes within external communities, the NGO itself was not run democratically. The structure was oligarchic, and seemed to have lost sight of its goals and principles.

“Once we leave this sangam, many of us will go back to our urban lives, far removed from many of the issues and movements discussed here. How do we act for change from this position?”



“What does effective grassroots work look like?”

“I sit down to eat a simple dinner of bhaji and roti with members of the rural community my NGO works with, and then I drive home to my air conditioned flat to eat imported chocolates for dessert. How do I bridge this gap within myself?”

Maybe it is time to reorient ourselves. We should strive to see our capacity as something that extends beyond our profession, beyond the NGO framework, to our whole being. As engaged citizens, we can act as agents of change in all aspects of our lives: what we eat, what we wear, how we travel, how we buy groceries, etc. It is important to remember that we can, and should, fight for transformative change outside of the workplace, too.

The concluding session was facilitated to take notes of views of each member on the Sangam event and what is their learning from the churning that has happened.

Field trips

On the last of the Sangam, two study tours were organised. One group went to see the Banni region and pastoralist culture. It was accompanied by Bhavna Patel of Sahjeevan. Another group visited Shrujan, Khamir and craft villages with Ghatit Laheru and Juhi Pandey of Khamir. Field trips provided participants visual perspectives about the initiatives that were presented during the Sangam.