

## Food Sangam 2016



*Report of the first thematic alternatives confluence or Vikalp Sangam on Food organised in Muniguda, Odisha from 17th to 20th September 2016*

## BACKGROUND

### About the Vikalp Sangam process

Our current model of 'development' and globalisation has severe negative impacts including ecological destruction, displacement of communities, disruption of livelihoods on a mass scale, and growing socio-economic inequities. Various parts of India are already facing tension and conflicts, and many more are on a powderkeg, as a result of the upheavals caused by a mindless pursuit of economic growth. Meanwhile all formal sectors of the economy and society are being oriented towards feeding into this pursuit, whether it is education, R&D, markets and trade, or health.

In the midst of this dismal scenario, there are myriad attempts at generating and practicing alternatives that could not only challenge the dominant 'development' paradigm, but provide viable pathways for human wellbeing that are ecologically sustainable and socio-economically equitable.

Against this backdrop, the ongoing process of Vikalp Sangam or Alternatives Confluence was initiated to provide platforms where groups and individuals involved in such pursuits could constructively challenge and learn from each other, exchange ideas and materials, celebrate cultures of hope, and become a stronger political force. These gatherings have often also been a space for discussing and evolving a framework note for exploring an alternative vision to the predominant development paradigm. An evolving core group of individuals, organisations and networks has helped conceptualise and plan for such gatherings.

The process was initiated in 2014 with the first Sangam at Timbaktu. Since then, there has been a series of regional Sangams and one thematic Sangam (on Energy).



*Photographs from the first two Sangams at Timbaktu (left) and in Madurai (right)*

## **The idea of a Food Sangam**

Regional Vikalp Sangams and Thematic Sangams both have their roles in such processes, with the thematic sangams not replacing but enriching the overall process with depth, while the regional sangams allow for an area-specific but much wider cross-sectoral exchange.

Food is the essence of life. From the time of the first Sangam in 2014, it was felt by a large and diverse group of participants that food is a complex topic that permeates diverse spheres of life and needs to be central to our thought and action. It was also felt that even within groups working directly on food, it is often not possible to look at the many different interconnections. In this context, a food sangam was conceptualised as a space for people to come together and give time to understanding such linkages.

The Vikalp Sangam on Food was planned with the objective of touching upon social, political, cultural, ecological and economic dimensions of food and enunciating the inter-linkages of the alternative vision. The idea was to keep the format interactive so as to facilitate sharing and learning. Support for organising this event was provided by MISEREOR, Aachen, Germany.

## **Planning for this event**

Planning for the Food Sangam in Odisha was done by a thematic core group of individuals and organisations. The core group consisted of ASHA (Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture), Living Farms, Anthra, Kalpavriksh, ICSF (International Collective in Support of Fishworkers), Janpahal, and, in individual capacity, Bharat Mansata and Rajeswari Raina.

While Kalpavriksh along with the local host- Living Farms, took care of the logistics, the entire core group was a continuous sounding board for advice during the main steps of the organising process. Their inputs particularly fed into:

- setting objectives for the meeting
- finalising invitation list for participation (so that it covers all relevant areas)
- fleshing out the 'how' (the structure) for the Sangam
- participating and contributing to the discussions during the actual event

Unfortunately, due to other parallel commitments, some of the core-members were not able to participate in the actual event. Even then their support in the process of conceptualising was invaluable and it is hoped that the messages from the Sangam are taken forward by all involved in different stages of the process.

## PROCEEDINGS

### Participation:

The venue 'New Hope' is located in Muniguda in Odisha amongst lush green forests and gentle rolling hills, including the Niyamgiri. One could also see the coal trains and the eucalyptus plantations.

The event saw participation from a diversity of regions and spheres of life. The list of participants is annexed at the end of the report. It was not truly a nation-wide event, since some states and regions (particularly north-east) could not be effectively represented. But it still had people from a number of different biocultural regions. There were NGO activists, farmers, forest-dependent communities, policy analysts, folklorists, ecologists and educationists. A number of participants also had to cancel last minute because of the urgent need for involvement with advocacy related to GM Mustard in their respective regions.

The first day, which was designed in the format of a food-festival and subsequent public discussions, saw participation from Kutia Kondh/Desia Kondh farmers from the surrounding areas of Telengapadar Grampanchayat of Muniguda Block and Piskapanga Grampanchayat of Chandrapur Block & Thaupadi, Dukum, Shada, Jhigidi, paikadulguda, chanchraguda, kumardhamuni Grampanchayat of Bissamcuttack Block.



### Structure of the event:

Below is a brief description of the day-to day structure of the event.

Apart from this, there was delicious food (including a meal with nine varieties of rice, many millet meals and drinks, *jhangora* or barnyard millet *kheer* made by Vijay Jardhari ji and *mahua pakodas* by Gadchiroli friends).

There were also spaces for informal interactions because of a relatively loose structure leading to fostering of a few more personal connections than is sometimes possible in rushed meetings.

### Day 1: Food festival and policy discussions



The sangam started with a round of introductions in which everybody talked about one meal or food item that they cherish dearly. The sharing brought out some wonderful and unheard of combinations and thoughts of a diversity of relished food items. This was followed by a mini food festival and a public event where there were displays and tasting opportunities related to many wild foods and local crops from Odisha (several regions), Gadchiroli in Maharashtra and Garhwal in Uttarakhand. The festival saw participation of people from surrounding gram panchayats and many children from three nearby government schools. On the same day there was also a discussion on policy issues and vision in connection with food, facilitated by Dr. Rajeswari Raina.

### Day 2: Local knowledge systems and ecological agriculture



On 18th, we had a lively morning session on local knowledge systems centred around food where both locals and participants from outside shared their beliefs, experiences, memories, songs and stories. These reflected a culture that went much beyond market-connections and monetary needs and influenced the way in which they interacted with their environment.

In the post-lunch session there was a presentation by Dr Debal Deb on ecological agriculture followed by a prolonged and intense discussion.

### **Day 3: Urban food security, GM mustard, and visions for food sovereignty**

On 19th morning, some of the remaining participants shared about their initiatives including a discussion on urban food security with Janpahal from Delhi which works with street vendors and marginalised urban consumers. The morning session also included a discussion on non-economic motivations for producing and sharing good food and protecting food cultures.

In the afternoon, a statement against GM mustard was adopted, and endorsed by many of the present participants.

There were also presentations connecting food to the evolving alternatives framework of the vikalp sangam, as well as envisioning food sovereignty or anna swaraj.

The discussions ended with a follow-up and feedback session.

### **Day 4: Multicropping and traditional crop diversity: Field visits**

On the 20th, the group divided into two parts, with one part visiting Dr. Debal Deb's farm, Vasudha, while the other part went to a village Kunduguda with mixed cropping agriculture and visited Adi Kumruka's farm as well as the local village haat.



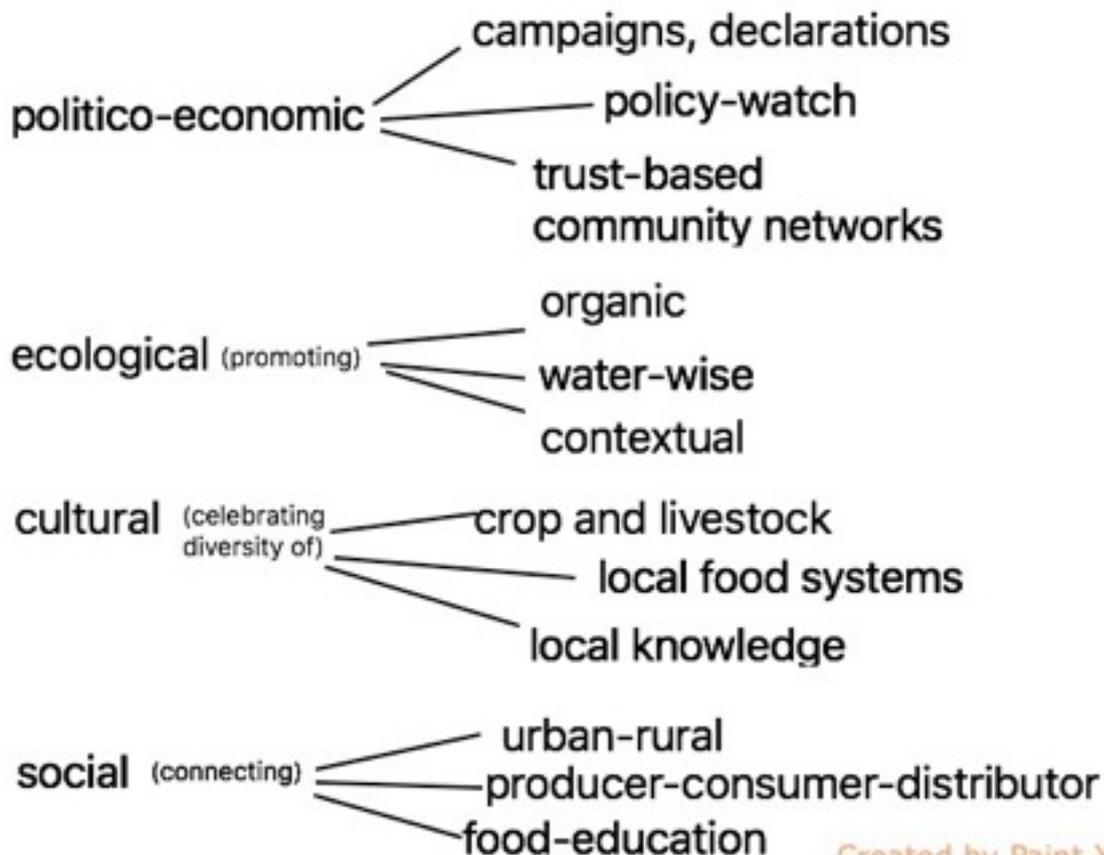
## Details of the first three days of discussions:

### Day 1: On alternative policy

Policies influence what comes into a household, a region, a community, and within a nation. To move towards food security and sovereignty, what should be the policy goals? Discussions, anchored by Dr. Rajeswari Raina, brought out that-

1. Food security can not be looked at in isolation, and is intricately connected with aspects of land and forest rights. It is also connected to water, health of ecosystem, and present knowledge forms. Policies affecting all these need to be in the public domain, understandable and accessible in various local languages.
2. Policy-framing and governance needs to be localised. We ourselves understand our forests or land best and are in the best position to make policies for these. There are some places which may require direct consumer-producer market linkages, others where street vendors and other mediators need to be explored as transparent trust worthy linkages, and then there others where the dependence is more direct and subsistence-level and where market logic has still not permeated and is not even required.
3. The imposition of homogenisation dictating what we should grow and eat (introducing hybrid and now GM varieties, while ignoring local varieties), cutting or degrading our forests needs to be collectively resisted

### Day 2: Alternatives



## **Overview of alternatives**

Day 2 began with an overview presentation by Shiba Desor (Kalpavriksh) describing how various initiatives explored the politico-economic, cultural, ecological and social dimensions of food<sup>1</sup>. The framework described in the presentation looked roughly as given above. The presentation was followed by sharing of experiences from the ground about local knowledge systems and practices connected with food.

## **Strengthening local food traditions**

### *Multicropping farming and challenges in Odisha*

Adi Kumruka from Kunduguda shared about his practice of multicropping. Last year, he planted 75 crops. Out of these, 5 failed so he got a harvest for 70. In a year, he gets sufficient crops from our fields for 10 months and they depend on the forests for 2 months. They try to farm in such a way that every month we have a harvest of something. He believes that what we grow or eat needs to be our medicine. Since childhood, he has never seen his parents look to others for anything and he also strongly believes in self-sufficiency. He is wary of loans as these have to then be paid by children. He wants to teach what he learnt from his elders to his children. He believes that the soil has blood and farmers know what crop to take. They are the care-takers of the soil.

Loknaath Nauri of Korandiguda village shared his belief that 'he who does not have seed is not worthy of being called a farmer'. He described how in his upland field, where plants are sown according to slope height depending upon water-requirements, line sowing is being pushed by the government for the past 5-6 years, defying the plain logic of common sense. He feels that a divide is rising up. Young people seem to like to listen to the government and plantation companies that are brainwashing people to believe that land is not productive enough and must be sold. In such times, collective (sangathan) becomes very important.

Mohan Dehury from Keonjhar remembered the words of his grandfather who had said- if you leave farming your entire generation will be lost. In his area, multi-cropping hill farming is traditionally practised. He identified mining, climate change and a pending recognition of CFR rights as issues faced in his area.

During discussions, another participant from Odisha added that farmers are only registered if they sell in market and take loans. If calamities strike, only registered farmers get compensation. This is a sad state of affairs, where tribal belts are suffering from crop failure because of climate change while the major responsibility for causing climatechange might be lying elsewhere. During this session, a powerful analogy about the role of money in a society was given, comparing it to the size of a bamboo. The bigger the bamboo the larger the hollow in it.

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<sup>1</sup> (The presentation is elaborated in Food Sangam Briefing note)

### Seed diversity and agricultural knowledge systems in Pithorabad, MP

Babulal Dahiya of Sarjana talked about how the coming in of markets and shift to soyabean in central india, malnutrition, loss of community (especially women's) control over seeds and loss of knowledge is taking place. Public Distribution System (PDS) has also led to replacement of local millets with less nutritious wheat and rice in diet. In comparison to indigenous crops, hybrid crops take longer to harvest, require more maintenance and are attacked by rats.

Traditional farming techniques (like crop rotation and multi-cropping) help retain nutrients in soils. Such techniques were traditionally transmitted through stories. Sarjana helps make mahila sangathans for fostering awareness about outside interventions, and the need to preserve local knowledge systems of food production and distribution. They help with surveys of traditional crops, crop calenders, community seed banks as well as reviving oral stories (*lok sahitya*)

### Seed saving in Garhwal

Vijay Jardhari of Beej Bachao Andolan talked about the context in which the BBA movement was triggered. He explained that when soyabean was being pushed in the region, the question, posed especially by the women was- what will we feed to our animals? The initiative, rooted in knowledge of elders, has been able to save 350 rice varieties, 220 types of rajma. It also raises awareness about the ill-effects of chemical-based agriculture.

He shared some folk stories connected with food and agriculture. There is a story which talks about the time of a deadly drought that spread in the area. When people from outside visited after some time, they found deadbodies strewn on the ground, and no sign of food. And then they spotted a dried bottle gourd with seeds stored inside, tied to the roof of a house. Farmers had chosen to die rather than eating the seeds that would be needed for feeding the fields next year. Another story was about how in the drought, one farmer kept ploughing his fields. When asked why, the farmer answered that it was so that he does not forget how to work his land.

### Forest dependence in Gadchiroli

Ijamsai Katenge of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra, belongs to the Gond community and is associated with Amhi Amchi Arogyasathi which works on issues of water, forest, and land (*jal, jungle zameen*). While his community also cultivates fields, significance of forests in their lives and culture is vital. Emphasising that, he said 'We have very little savings in a bank. Jungle is our bank. Nature is our god, and animals and trees our totems.' Their gram sabha has received recognition of community forest rights. The younger generation is getting disconnected from their forests and fields in general. Their traditional system of dispute resolution is *jaat panchayats* at the village level, then the levels of *nyaaya nilaaya* and *ilaaka*. But he feels that government is trying hard to break this traditonal system.

## **Ecological Agriculture** (presentation by Dr. Debal Deb, followed by discussion)

Agriculture is an ancient science, about 12000 years old, and humans through domestication have created many different species and varieties of crops and livestock. In that way, farmers have been scientists and agro-ecological conservationists for centuries. India has a great diversity of crop varieties and livestock breeds. These have a range of wonderful and useful characteristics suited to their local environments, and as per different needs. India had, for instance, 120 breeds of cattle, 1500 varieties of mangoes. In rice, we have varieties that are salt tolerant, drought tolerant, flood tolerant, tolerant to seasonal flooding, varieties with good iron content, and many other types. We are fast losing their seeds. The total number of rice varieties have come down from 1,10,000 to 7000 since the era of Green Revolution. This is a genocide that no conservation organisation is talking about. Rather than gene banks, such seeds could be saved through being planted in the soil.

The focus, while developing new crop varieties in formal science has been almost exclusively on high-yields. This is a form of symantic hegemony that needs to be challenged.

Agroecology talks about inclusion of biodiversity into farm ecosystems as companion species. For an ecosystem to be resilient, there need to be maximum number of trophic levels and maximum number of interactions between organisms at different trophic levels. In our soil-system in modern agriculture, such interactions (between microbes, worms, fungi, and other organisms) are being eliminated or severely diminished. In that form, it soon becomes a dead or dying ecosystem.

A question that arose during discussion: Are we not falling into a trap of sementic hegemony ourselves by being biased against the science of GM?

Dr. Deb's response was that genetic modification being practised at present is engineering or technology, not a science. Engineering is about conversion of science to capital (as happened with the 'engine' during the epoch of 'industrial revolution'). The protest against GM crops is also about the stakes involved, and working on a precautionary principle.

### **Day 3: Consolidation**

#### **Alternative visions**

Day 3 began with a small introduction by Kalpavriksh on how an objective of the food sangam is also to see if an alternative vision for food-systems could emerge out of this. For this, the five pillars of an alternatives framework evolving out of the Vikalp Sangam process were mentioned. These pillars (ecological integrity, social well-being and justice, knowledge democracy and cultural diversity, economic democracy, direct and inclusive democracy) and their connection to food was briefly touched upon.

It was suggested that as we move towards the end of the event, we keep this framework in mind, and also try to articulate other frameworks that we explore.

**Street vendors for food security-** Janpahal (Dharmendra Singh, H. S. Rawat, Preeti Maurya)

Food security can not be achieved without retail democracy. India is probably the only nation where the number and vibrancy of small shops and street vendors is so large. Many people who migrate into the cities have to occupy unauthorised colonies. These people are often not considered 'skilled' enough for the formal market. Informal street markets are havens for the marginalised and displaced people of our country.

In 1992 there was an order by SC on street vendors instructing that hawkers could not be evicted in the name of beautification. This has been a crucial judgment for those involved in advocacy for rights of street vendors.

The Bhubaneswar model for street vendors was an attempt to create a model where good food can be made available and affordable for the urban poor. Consumers are vendors themselves and other low income groups.

How to make vendors a part of food swaraj and democracy?

Following activities have been done by Janpahal in that direction-

- awareness creation amongst vendors about 'good food'
- formation of a buyers group of 15 communities
- survey about consumption of junk food and fast food
- future plan of using vendors for linking farmers and consumers for responsible consumption
- collecting recipes and popularising local foods that have gotten lost
- trying to involve hawkers into policy-making committees
- getting the *nagar-nigam* (town council) and street vendors to talk to each other.
- documenting community eating in the city
- demanding recognition of city space for street vendors

**Organic agriculture in Kedia, Bihar** (with Greenpeace)

Kedia is a tola of 100 households with 252 acres of land. Although Bihar does not currently face the crisis of farmer suicides, pesticides and fertilizers have been slowly infiltrating into the agricultural practices. The set of initiatives, using existing government schemes, with technical and advisory support from Greenpeace involve:

- Shift to biogas from cowdung and firewood as sources of fuel. Bihar government scheme was used for getting the biogas plant
- Creation of cattle-shed using a government scheme. Cow dung and urine from the shed is collected for composting

- Development of eco-toilets and recycling of night soil.
- Promotion of ecological and organic methods of farming
- Irrigation through wells. not encouraging borewells.
- Discussions about how to get old flora and fauna back

**Reviving traditional food and agriculture-** Namita from Sambhav (in Nayagadh, Odisha)

To show that degraded land could be regenerated, the group bought 90 acres of land and are involved in following activities-

- forming various activity groups, for eg. of children, young girls, mother-in laws.
- conducting sessions on traditional recipes from elders through sunday schools
- conducting sessions on traditional heirloom seeds
- encouraging revival of foods required for good health of new mothers
- encouraging household vegetable gardens
- forming a *jungle suraksha samiti* (forest protection committee)
- stimulating exchanges with neighbouring villages

Sarpanch Laxmikant Rao talked about a forest protection committee that has been initiated in their village. Each family has vowed to conserve one indigenous variety of seed.

**Non-market economies** (Debjeet Sarangi, Living Farms)

Because of dependence on markets, we have started equating absence of cash with poverty. Our vocabulary and thinking has also been modified accordingly. But many communities still don't place prime importance to cash as an indicator of well-being. The language of link between man and nature goes beyond simply having things to capitalize on.

Many of the top down schemes like Indra Awaas Yojana, MGNREGA, and plantations under the forest working plans are culturally inappropriate and ignore the multiple layers of use and interaction between the people and their landscape.

As community dynamics evolve, food habits are also changing. Living farms is attempting to initiate dialogues between youth and elders on these issues. What kind of changes do they need where they will have to deal with existing power structures?

80-90 villages were visited to collect indigenous crop varieties and have a dialogue on the political ecology of the community. Marriages and haats have become informal forums for discussion on ecological sustainability.

They are trying to make a school where elders and children interact with each other. Also, in Bisamcuttack, efforts are being made to include a chapter on local agriculture in the school curriculum. In addition, there are attempts to have local food in mid-day meals rather than rice-wheat from far-off places.

## **Statement on GM Mustard**

Many participants also signed an open declaration protesting the release of GM mustard. The statement resolved that-

1. There are abundant alternatives to ensure the food security and sovereignty of all the people of India without resorting to GM crops.
2. The hastily adopted unscientific and undemocratic process to grant clearance to the herbicide tolerant GM Mustard lacks transparency and consultation with affected sections of farmers, consumers and independent scientists, and is reprehensible and strongly condemned by us.
3. Our concern is that GM crops pose grave hazards to human, animal and ecosystem health and biodiversity, and therefore demands robust public engagement of the sciences, scientists and policy makers with all concerned citizens through informed dialogues and assessment of problems and solutions.
4. The recommendations of: (i) the World Agriculture Report by the IAASTD, (ii) the Technical Expert Committee appointed by the Supreme Court of India, and (iii) the Parliamentary Committee on GM crops, must be followed before granting clearance to any new GM crops.
5. Many of us are also in favour of a total ban on GM crops which we feel are hazardous and not needed.

## **A vision on *anna Swaraj* or food sovereignty**

(by Bharat Mansata)

In the context of the loss of traditional multicropping systems and the wealth of crop biodiversity in the present crisis of food and farming, we need to move towards a vision of agro-ecological regeneration and food security with focus on:

- soil conservation and regeneration
- groundwater recharge and regaining water abundance
- energy harvesting through photosynthesis
- regenerating biocultural diversity
- agrarian land reforms
- promotion of food choices that support good health
- empowering women farmers
- remunerative returns for bringing youth back to farming
- organic SRI with traditional crops
- urban and peri-urban agriculture

The vision elaborated by Bharat was based on a chapter co-authored with Kavitha Kuruganti and Vijay Jardhari for a forthcoming book on visions for an alternative future.

### **Feedback and follow up session**

In the feedback session, most people expressed appreciation regarding the format and the discussions. Some people were of the view that diverse forms and ideas were not sufficiently explored. The absence of fisherfolk and pastoralists was also felt. Some dimensions of food such as commons and food sovereignty, food waste, food and health connection, and access and distribution were not sufficiently explored but the need for deeper discussion on these was felt and acknowledged. It was hoped that in the next Vikalp Sangam on Food, which is scheduled for 2017, there will be an attempt to learn from this experience and facilitate even better processes.

Some participants offered their services or know-how (in areas such as urban gardening, creative modifications of old foods recipes for children, etc.) for use in other areas.

Some possibilities of synergies (like between Jan Pahal and Beej Bachao Andolan, to encourage street vendors to serve traditional foods) also emerged.

Lastly, a point was raised by Debeet ji of Living Farms, on which there was a general agreement, that participants need to informally but actively stay connected with each other and try to do things together. Perhaps we need a lot more of such gatherings, at different levels, and with a higher frequency to be actually able to cover the wide-reaching aspects.

The meeting ended with songs shared by participants from Gadchiroli and Niyamgiri hills.

## Annexure

### List of participants

(we have tried to complete this list, but there may be names that are missing. It also doesn't contain names of the local participants for the first day of the public event)

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