

Report on the

Youth Vikalp Sangam



8th to 11th June, 2019
Bhoomi College, Bangalore, Karnataka

This report is compiled by Riya Simon with inputs from Sujatha Padmanaban.

Gratitude to :

- Translator of the event - Madhavi Rane
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- Video documentation team of Bhoomi College
- Ashish Kothari and Bhoomi College team for photographs

INTRODUCTION

Vikalp Sangam (VS) has been a space for sharing, learning and collaboration between organisations, initiatives and individuals working in the alternative social development sector. The first youth Vikalp Sangam was organised in Bhopal which received majority participation from urban youth. Involvement of youth from adivasi (rural) regions was less and hence the processes of engagement fewer. This gave rise to a need to have a Sangam for adivasi youth mainly from rural areas, where a smaller number of urban and non-adivasi youth would be present.

Thus, we began the youth Vikalp Sangam meet at Bhoomi College, Bangalore from 8th June to 11th June 2019. A meeting had been held at Wardha between 8th to 10th April 2019, to plan the Youth Vikalp Sangam. This was attended by 19 adivasi youth from Samvedana, Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi, SRUJAN, Shramik Sahyog, Bhandara Nisarga Va Sanskruti Abhyas Mandal and from Pachgaon Gramsabha. They took the lead in facilitating and planning the VS at Bhoomi. The youth organisers were helped by Kalpavriksh, Samvedana, Bhoomi College, Blue Ribbon Movement, and Bhandara Nisarga Va Sanskruti Abhyas Mandal. The VS was financially supported by the Duleep Mathai Nature Conservation Trust. Additional support was received from Bhoomi.

The VS received 41 participants from across Maharashtra, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Karnataka. The group was a mix of youths from tribal regions, villages and urban spaces working on issues ranging from forest rights, indigenous knowledge conservation, alternative education / awareness, women empowerment, natural farming, sanitation to biodiversity conservation.

Participants upon introducing themselves shared the following expectations of coming to the sangam :

- ▶ To learn and understand the different kinds of work being carried out by organisations and individuals. And explore opportunities of collaborations, forming relationships and networking.
- ▶ To learn and understand on how to reduce migration to cities.
- ▶ Learn about the ways of engaging youths of their regions and thereby also bring youths from across the country together.
- ▶ Solving day to day issues of their livelihood in their regions.
- ▶ To learn how to make tribes and tribal communities stronger.
- ▶ How to provide good quality education in the village / tribal levels itself.
- ▶ Learn and discuss ways of solving day to day issues of livelihood and making livelihood of social workers sustainable

GROUP PRESENTATIONS

Day 1 and 2 of the sangam was focused on introducing their work through presentations. Members from each project, initiative, organisation shared about their work and journey. There were a total of 16 groups. Some of the key observations from these presentations were :

- ▶ Community power has been key in almost all the alternative stories shared. These alternatives are running primarily because of the support and work carried out by the entire community.
- ▶ At the same time, community mobilisation is often one the biggest challenges due to issues of caste inequality, women discrimination, alcohol abuse, migration of youth, shortage of funds, government and corporate lobbying and political agenda.
- ▶ Group presentations enabled learning for the entire group. Opportunities for collaboration, ideation, brainstorming different methods and ideas enables everyone to look at the pros and cons of each method and think towards applying the respective method in their specific region.



- ▶ Common concern for most of the groups based out of the forest regions is fighting the system and receiving their Forest Rights. Different teams offered suggestions on how to go about this.

- ▶ Tribe versus tribe conflicts have been cited as reasons for slower progress of work in some of these regions. The groups emphasised on the need to resolve these ancient conflicts since all forest tribes are needed to be together to fight the increasing lobbying systems.
- ▶ The initiatives begin with specific agendas of work but over time they observed interconnections between multiple other sectors of the society and thus began working on those as well. For example, Shalu and group from Vidarbha region began their work with lake revival but realised the need for women empowerment, to fight alcohol abuse, youth empowerment and importance of maintaining natural ecosystem.

Brief description of the group presentations are as follows :

Paryavaran Mitra, Gramsabha, Panchgaon, Maharashtra

Members - Karishma Atram, Arvind Bandu Tekam, Durga Atram, Premanand Madavi

Work - The villagers were originally MNREGA workers who in the quest of a more sustainable and stable economic source of livelihood fought for their forest rights, which protected their right to environment and right to livelihood.

Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi, Gadchiroli, Maharashtra

Members - Satish Gogulwar, Ijamsai, Sangeeta Tumade

Work - 130 odd villages have come together as a Mahagram Sabha (a participative body) to work on their basic rights to forest, livelihood, education and health for all members of these villages including women and the physically handicapped. To the neighbouring villages they provide training and support fights against government and mining lobbies.

Aarey Forest, Mumbai, Maharashtra

Members - Amrita Bhattacharjee

Work – Worli adivasi youth and urban youth join hands against land acquisitions and deforestation of the Aarey reserve forest, which are being carried out by government of Mumbai for urban projects related to the metro.

Navrachna Samaj Sanstha Seva, Chhatisgarh

Members - Phuleshwari Baiga, Rambati Baiga, Prakash Dhruva, Hira Baiga

Work - Indigenous communities (Baiga tribe) fighting for their forest land and livelihoods rights against acquisition of their land by the government.

Suggestion offered - Youths of Baiga and Gond tribes can come together to resolve the ancient conflict happening between their tribes, specifically since the government bodies are taking advantage of this situation in creating tension and thus acquiring both of their lands.

Kalpavriksh, Bheemashankar, Maharashtra

Members - Subhas Dolas

Work - Villagers working towards attaining their forest rights and finding alternative sustainable modes of income through initiatives like community run eco-tourism camps in their village. Kalpavriksh supports the group with trainings on legal and social issues.

Living Farms, Orissa

Members - Damodar

Work - Youths are coming together to fight for availing their forest land and livelihoods rights amidst land acquisition and bauxite mining by Vedanta group, religious influences, ancient Kond tribe conflict, migration and loss of indigenous knowledge. Organic farming, afforestation and indigenous food festivals are some of the initiatives being carried out.



Shramik Sahayog, Ratnagri, Maharashtra

Members - Mangesh Mohite, Chandrakant Jadha

Work - 700 odd women group have come together to form the Maha Sang, working for forest and indigenous community rights. The group trains women on kitchen gardening, supports fishermen against companies disposing chemi-

calls in the fisheries, educate and train children with their indigenous knowledge, advocate against deforestation and fight for their basic rights such as birth certificates, identity cards etc.

Environment and Sanitation Institute, Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Members - Shailesh Raval

Work - The group builds toilets and sanitation systems, and creates awareness on hygienic sanitation and the associated health concerns, in the villages. Waste from these toilets are directed for composting. These sanitary systems are designed to consume less water.

Suggestion offered - Dry toilets could be explored especially in regions facing water shortage.



Bhandara Nisarg va Sanskriti Abhyas Mandal, Vidarbha, Maharashtra

Members - Shalu Kolhe, Sarita Meshram

Work - Women in their quest to find alternative livelihoods adopted their traditional occupation of fisheries for which they work towards rejuvenating and conserving lakes and the surrounding ecosystem. Educate and involve children in their work, women empowerment, facilitation of sanitation systems and fight against alcohol abuse is also being carried out.

Samvedana, Vashim, Maharashtra

Members - Kuldip Bhimrao Rathod, Suchita Solanke

Work - The group works on women empowerment, alcoholism, social inequality and children welfare and education issues. Since the phaseardi tribe has detailed knowledge of birds species, they also carry out conservation work. Their primary means of work is on cattle grazing and grass land agriculture.

ASHA, Madhya Pradesh

Members - Rohit Parekh

Work - Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA) works on promoting practices and policies for ecologically sustainable agriculture, dignified livelihood for small, and marginalised farmers, preserve control over agricultural resources like seed, water, land and safe food for citizens.

Synergy Sansthaan, Harda, Madhya Pradesh

Members - Sunil Ivane, Varsha Solanke, Ashish

Work - Synergy works with on youth development and on issues of youth migration in rural, tribal and slum areas. Their focus on providing them with entrepreneurial trainings in addition to working on promoting participatory processes for natural resources, child rights and bonded labour issues.

SRUJAN, Nagpur, Maharashtra

Members - Anita Atram, Ranjit Todsam

Work - Society for rural and urban join activities (SRUJAN) works with the Kolam tribes in Maharashtra on sustainable natural resource management, specifically focusing on food and nutrition security, community and child health, strengthening local governance system and alternative education.

Samvada, Tumkur, Karnataka

Members - Nachiket, Soundarya

Work - The group has been working on sustainable farming in Tumkur regions. Also, working with villages and tribes in Karnataka on reviving and documenting old folk music.

Blue Ribbon Movement, Mumbai, Maharashtra

Members - Kejal Salva

Work - Blue Ribbon Movement work on youth leadership for social change in urban spaces. These programmes are carried out through their engagement initiatives such as gender lab, community connect fellowship and media lab to name a few.

Kalpavriksh, Pune, Maharashtra

Members - Shrishtee Bajpai

Work – Kalpavriksh has been focusing on the themes of conservation and livelihoods, environment and development, environment education, urban greens and more recently alternatives.

Bhoomi Network, Bangalore, Karnataka

Members - Madhavi Rane, Shalini Linda, Babitha P.S, Pragya Singh, Akhila Varghese, Riya Rachel Simon

Work - Bhoomi Network works towards education for sustainability. Alumni of the college - Madhavi has worked on rehabilitation of women prisoners and has been working on her farm. Shalini began homeschooling her child and has been working on documenting ancient knowledge of her tribe which is in Jharkhand. Babitha is working on sustainable mensuration and waste management campaigns in Kerala through the organisation called The Green Army.

Kaikondrahalli Lake visit

On day 2, the team visited the nearby Kaikondrahalli lake in Sarjapur where Shubha Ramchandran from Biome Water Solutions took the team through lake's journey to revival.



- ▶ Conversion of lake to land for buildings and apartment, dumping garbage and sewage into lake bodies are two of the main issues faced by lakes in Bangalore.
- ▶ Over the years, residents from around Kaikondrahalli lake came together to work towards protecting and reviving the lake body showcasing community participatory work in urban spaces.

- ▶ Today, the lake hosts a growing number of species of birds, flora and fauna.
- ▶ The lake revival process is an ongoing journey as even today the surrounding apartments are dumping sewage and builders are slowly taking over the lake regions.



Day 3 began with a walkthrough around the Bhoomi College Campus.

Day 3 and 4 were dedicated to understanding the need for alternatives, the issues faced by members working for the alternatives and subsequently forming respective action groups to learn, interact and work together in achieving the desired alternatives.

UNDERSTANDING ALTERNATIVES

Ashish Kothari led us through a detailed session on the need for Vikalp (alternative) and its effectiveness through multiple examples from across India on diverse sectors and topics. Brief of the session is given below:

- ▶ **Violence of development** is evident in the policies and projects being implemented in India. Hence, one of the most effective ways of tackling this violence is through alternatives. Which can be achieved only by understanding the causes of

violence in detail and these are ineffective if they only provide short term solutions.

- ▶ Alternative thinking arises from the need to **RESIST**. We are showing resistance against the violence being caused by the mainstream development through alternatives. Following gives examples of some effective alternatives that have repeatedly been challenging the common norm of development :
 1. Dalit women of Deccan development society (DDS) are creating community grain banks thus promoting food sovereignty, livelihood, security, equity and conservation.
 2. Gram swaraj systems like Kudumbashree in Kerala, Kuthumbukam in Tamil Nadu and Ralegaon in Maharashtra are opposing centralisation by setting up local economy.
 3. Alternative education is resisting the mainstream education system by rebuilding ecological roots, creativity and inquisition in the communities.
 4. Transformations enabled by urban communities is visible through stories of lake revivals in Bangalore, Pune, Salem and waste management initiatives like EcoSpore in Goa.
 5. Technological alternatives are visible through innovations happening in spaces like SECMOL, Hunnarshala etc.
- ▶ Interestingly response from government bodies have been promising as new laws and policies are being implemented based on many alternatives. Eg : RTI act, Forest rights act, Organic farming policies

Ashish presented a note on the alternative framework and shared areas of transformation as Ecology, Direct democracy, Cultural diversity, Economic democracy and Social well being. These are all interconnected and are meaningless without values that can act as their binding glue.

CONCERNS OF THE GROUP

The group was split into two, to list down issues that they go through in their respective areas of work and lives. Following were the points from the respective group discussion :

Group 1 :

- ▶ Conservation versus practicing it in the fields.
- ▶ Loss of motivation and interest due to slow or no impact visible.
- ▶ Political movements and engagements pose challenges.
- ▶ Finding it difficult to foresee a issues and thus be prepared for it.

- ▶ Increasing number of NGO's and organisations are bringing in many schemes and pumping in too much money. People fall prey to these schemes. However after sometime these projects stop and the localities have to bear the repercussions of the fall out as work is halted completely.
- ▶ Worldview is that the government is suppose to do the work due to which people aren't taking ownership of the works.
- ▶ Women find it difficult to work after 5:00 pm due to security factors.
- ▶ Reduced access to technology and information due to which solutions employed are not that effective.
- ▶ Human Resource migration
- ▶ Financial constraints for volunteer run organisations
- ▶ Lack of focus on integrating children and handicapped with ecological issues
- ▶ Infiltration of BT crops
- ▶ Lack of clarity on the sustainability aspects of the work being carried out
- ▶ Accommodating diversity of caste, culture etc for effective work.
- ▶ Community strengthening is difficult due to increasing influence of destructive forces in the communities.

Group 2 :

Personal Issues

- ▶ Farmer suicides due to climate changes and man-animal conflicts
- ▶ No acceptance and support for women working in this sector
- ▶ Lack of mental health awareness. No avenues to share.
- ▶ Balancing between personal and organisational responsibilities. Difficulty in managing these effects mental health

Organisational / Institutional / Community issues :

- ▶ Voluntary work is looked down upon and not respected
- ▶ Economic security especially during the transition phase and job sustainability
- ▶ Money management in the organisations, communities and institutions
- ▶ Gender equality. Men do not give space and suppress women when it comes to matters of decision making
- ▶ Difficulty in forming women groups. Empowering women to follow their dream
- ▶ Creating ecological awareness amongst youths
- ▶ Youth engagement
- ▶ Alternative marketing solutions needed. Need marketing strategies and spaces for the value added products.

- ▶ Tribe versus tribe conflicts especially when there is increasing influence of corporate and government lobby.
- ▶ Integrating forest and water conservation
- ▶ How to get recognition for ones own individuals initiatives?
- ▶ Political parties and corporate lobby's are working towards breaking community strength
- ▶ Countering youth migration

FOLLOW UP ACTIONS :

☞ Action groups formed during the meet:

Group 1) Conflict resolution between tribes

Aim will be to study the conflicts existing between tribes and thereby enable collaboration between communities in fighting against mining and corporate lobby and attain forest rights.

Coordinator: Samvedana team

Group 2) Explore employment and livelihood opportunities for youths

Members: Shalu, Mangesh, Varsha, Kuldeep, Anita, Chandrakant, Nachiket, Sangeetha, Neera, IjamSai, Sarala, Kalpavriksh team, Arvnid

Coordinator: Manish

Group 3) Starting Alternative school

Members: Suchita, Mangesh, Amrita, Damodar, Rema, Kaustaub, Sujatha, Nachiket, Prakash

Coordinator: Yogini

Group 4) Forming sustainable community

Members: Chandrakant, Madhavi, Yogini, Anita, IjamSai, Amrita

Coordinator: Nachiket

Group 5) Mental health awareness and treatment support

This group will be included in the Health Vikalp Sangam meet.

Members: Amrita, Sangeetha, Nachiket

Coordinator : Ranjith

Group 6) Sustainable agriculture

Members: Ijamsai, Ankita, Kuldeep, Subash, Ranjit, Nachiket, Sunil, Shalu, Neera

Coordinator: Rohit

Group 7) Safe food movement

Members: Nachiket, Rohit, Amrita, Satish, IjamSai, Bhoomi Team, Shalu, Sunil, Chandrakant, Arvind, Neeru, Ranjith, Damodar, Subhash, Yogini
Coordinator: Shalini

Group 8) Water conservation and management

Members: Shalu, Yogini, Nachiket
Coordinator: Manish

Group 9) Soft skill training and workshops

Members: Ranjith, Nachiket, Kuldeep, Neeru, Arvind, Prakash, Sangeetha, Shalu, Mangesh, Sarala, Subash, Sunil, Babitha
Coordinator : Kejal

Group 10) Sharing knowledge of rights and schemes available for forest tribals

Members: Ranjith, Kuldeep, Samvedana, Chandrakant
Coordinator: Amrita

☞ Names and contact details of all the participants will be collated and shared with each other.

☞ Kaustubh will download videos of different alternative stories and share it via WhatsApp with the group.

FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS :

- ▶ Listening to and sharing stories from different groups gave a message of hope and confidence to continue doing the respective works. A sense of community has been established. Must have more of these sangams.
- ▶ Loved Bhoomi College campus and its nature-centred way of living. Good balance of rural and urban lifestyles was felt.
- ▶ Learned that *“we are Bhoomi and how to live with Bhoomi”*
- ▶ Over the course of 4 days, received an understanding and strength to approach life holistically and sustainably.
- ▶ Must continue involving more youth in these Sangams.
- ▶ Building connection at a personal level was difficult due to different demographics of people. Some form of group activity to would have been good to have on the first day.
- ▶ Schedule of the retreat was too tight. Needed some breathing space to process and reflect upon the stories.
- ▶ Lake visit helped understanding the differences and commonality between community level works carried out in rural and urban regions.
- ▶ Suggestion of having a session without agenda was offered.
- ▶ Idea proposed : State level Sangams could be organised.