

Food Vikalp Sangam 2017

*Report of the second thematic alternatives confluence or Vikalp Sangam on
Food organised in Bajju, Rajasthan
6th to 9th October 2017*



Organised by

Kalpavriksh, Urmul and Banyan Roots

Supported by

MISEREOR, Aachen, Germany

This report is compiled by N S Nagesh and Shiba Desor with inputs from Shrishtee Bajpai and Ashish Kothari. For more information about the Food Sangam process or the report please contact Shiba at desor.shiba@gmail.com

Photographs: Ashish Kothari



Background

Vikalp Sangam or the Confluence on Alternatives is a process which attempts to move beyond critiquing the present day disruptive and exploitative systems, and focuses on what are the alternatives which can challenge such a system. This process thus involves coming together of various initiatives, organizations and concerned individuals to celebrate, share and learn from each other's inspiring work and also to collaborate across domains to move towards a holistic vision of the alternatives¹. 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 thematic Sangams (on Energy, Youth and Food). 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 allowing for an area-specific but much wider cross-sectoral exchange.

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 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. The food sangam 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. Support for organising two food sangams was provided by MISEREOR, Aachen, Germany. The first food sangam was organised in Muniguda, Odisha from 17th to 20th September 2016 with Living Farms as the local host². The recently held Food Sangam is the second such event and was organised at the Bajju campus of Urmul, located in the arid landscape of the Thar, just under a hundred kilometres west from Bikaner.

¹ For more information: <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/vikalp-sangams-handout-note-april-2017/>

² Report of the 2016 food sangam is available at: <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-reports#.WHNSfX1IsfL>

Participation:

There were 65 participants in the event from a diversity of regions and spheres of life representing community networks, NGOs, policy analysts, collectives, and academia working in the areas of social and environmental concerns. The first day of the Sangam was a public event and had an additional participation of 31 farmers from around the region.

Summary of the day-wise events

Day 1: The first day was organised as a public event with stalls displaying food diversity and organic produce, screenings of documentaries concerned with food issues and initiatives, an introduction to the history behind Urmul and the issues of North Rajasthan and a general context-setting for the food sangam. People also shared memories of their favourite foods. In the evening there was a cultural event connecting food with folk music.

Day 2: On the second day, participants from different regions briefly shared about the food scenario in their regions and their experiences. There were also screenings of short documentaries related to some of the participant initiatives, as well as a lively impromptu discussion on issues such as shifting cultivation.

Day 3: Participants split into three groups and travelled to different villages of the region experiencing rain-fed and canal-fed agriculture and livelihoods based on crafts. In the evening there was a sharing of observations.

Day 4: The final day involved a discussion on the applicability of the overlapping spheres of the alternatives framework emerging from the vikalp sangam process on the various initiatives being discussed. There was also a brief session on follow up actions and feedback.



Details of the proceedings

Day 1

Introductions

The first morning was spent in informal interactions over the stalls displaying diversity of cuisine and crops, and the screening of short documentaries on food and agriculture prepared by Video Volunteers. The discussions began with a round of introductions during which participants also shared about their most beloved food memories. This led to the rendition of a folk song praising the local Khejri tree by Urmul Seemant board member, Dhapu Bai and sharings on how food is inter-twined with the folk culture of the region.

Arvind Ojha of Urmul gave a note of welcome and a brief introduction about the hosting organisation. Starting out in 1972 as a cooperative dairy unit for north Rajasthan, URMUL trust was created in 1984 to focus on health care. After the severe drought of 1987, it focused its work on integrated community development in areas of community health, education, child welfare, agriculture, animal husbandry and crafts, and expanded its area from Lunkaransar, to also include Bajju and Kolayat. The 45 days long *nehar yatra* in 1991 was a walk along the Indira Gandhi Canal organised under the able leadership of Sanjay Ghosh for doing an assessment of the challenges being faced by the people of the villages along the canal. Over the three decades, Urmul has helped design, innovate and facilitate diverse community initiatives with financial security.

Food scenario in Rajasthan

The introduction of the Indira Gandhi canal was a significant event. The canal was promoted with the narrative of utilizing the excessive water flowing for agricultural development. There has been a significant change in cropping pattern after the construction of the canal. Food and fodder crops like mot and bajra were replaced by wheat, groundnut, moong and other such water-intensive cash crops. In earlier times, water was valued equivalently with ghee and was very responsibly and conservatively used. Water-use pattern also became much less frugal as availability and accessibility of water changed from scarcity to abundance. Water logging and water seepage became major issues in canal areas because the land had gypsum and couldn't absorb the excess water. There was also a decline in livestock keeping of local breeds like Nagauri bull. Government policies have been fragmented and have failed to address the interconnected issues of farming and animal husbandry in a holistic manner.

Rajasthan has had a history of environmental protection. In the village of Khejadali, near Jodhpur, as many as 363 Bishnoi men and women sacrificed their lives to protect the khejari trees from the soldiers of the king Abhay Singh of Jodhpur in September 1730. This movement, led by Amrita Devi, was one of the first non-violent conservation movements of India.



Sunda Ram ji, an innovative farmer from Sikar, spoke about the significance of reviving traditional varieties of local foods like *tinda* and *meetha pyaaz*. He has been exploring traditional seeds of this region and has collected almost 700 varieties of vegetables and seeds, some with even higher productivity than ‘improved’ varieties.



In such a situation conserving fodder crops and promoting fodder banks becomes important. Similarly food banks and seed banks also play a very prominent role in freedom from hunger and diseases, and for maintaining food sovereignty. Invaluable local trees like Khejdi that require little water also need to be conserved. Promoting activities like kitchen gardening and mulching are also low investment strategies for ensuring healthy nutritious food.

From Southern Rajasthan, Rohit Jain from Banyan Roots shared about their work on revival of millet diversity. The usage of the chemical has increased in this region over the years but these were forcefully introduced. Banyan Roots has established a supply chain network of farmers (organic farming) and consumers, based on the Participatory Guarantee Scheme (PGS) of certification for organic produce. PGS is based on farmer to farmer peer review, individual integrity and mutual trust. They have even established a food processing unit. Connections with ASHA (Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture), Slow Food Movement and Organic Farming Association of India have also been formed. Thus, Banyan Roots has created a network of 234 farmers practicing organic farming methods. Forest food like mahua and honey are also promoted. They are in connection with another organisation, Astha, which focuses on the implementation of Forest Rights Act.

Rajasthani cuisine

Local Rajasthani Cuisine from the Thar Desert area- *Bajrey ki roti, Raita with rai and seeds of fogla³, Boondi ka Raita, Aloe Vera ki Sabji, Kanka diya- guar phalli ki sabzi, Sabut lal mirch ki chutney lasun ke sath, Kaacher ki Sabzi, Kakdi ki Sabzi, Mot Bajre ka Kheechda, Kaddhi, Mot badi ki Sabzi, Sprouted Mot, Bhoondi, Dhokla (bajra/ wheat), Sprouted Chana, Kala Khand, Ghevar, Dal ka Halwa, Gajar ka Halwa, Churma (of Bajra), Bare ki Rabdi.*

Khejdi is considered as a wish-bearing tree (*kalpavriksh*) in this region as all its parts are useful. The bajra growing at the bottom of this plant is the sweetest, Khejri's leaves and dried pods (sangri) are used for cooking *sabji*. The Bishnoi community worships the tree.

The food items prepared and consumed also vary with season. Many local Rajasthan people eat on a single plate together, to save water (as it is the most valuable resource in desert) and also to promote and strengthen relationships of love, bonding, care amongst themselves. Plates were washed with mud earlier, but that practice has significantly reduced now. There is also the ritual of insisting that guests keep on taking servings of food till they are bursting on seams (a ritual that the sangam participants witnessed firsthand).

There is a very strong linkage between music and food in the Rajasthani Culture. On the evening of Day 1, Nathu Ram and Mangi bai enthralled the participants with their melodious, joyful,

³ (locally found, it used to control desertification but it has been removed)

pleasant, meaningful folk songs. Most of the traditional folk songs were directly or indirectly praising the beauty of the Rajasthan's food culture. Srilal Mohta narrated stories as to how the local culture and folklore is embedded in the food that the people eat. He stressed on the need to deeply know and understand our local foods and put in efforts to preserve it wherever warranted.

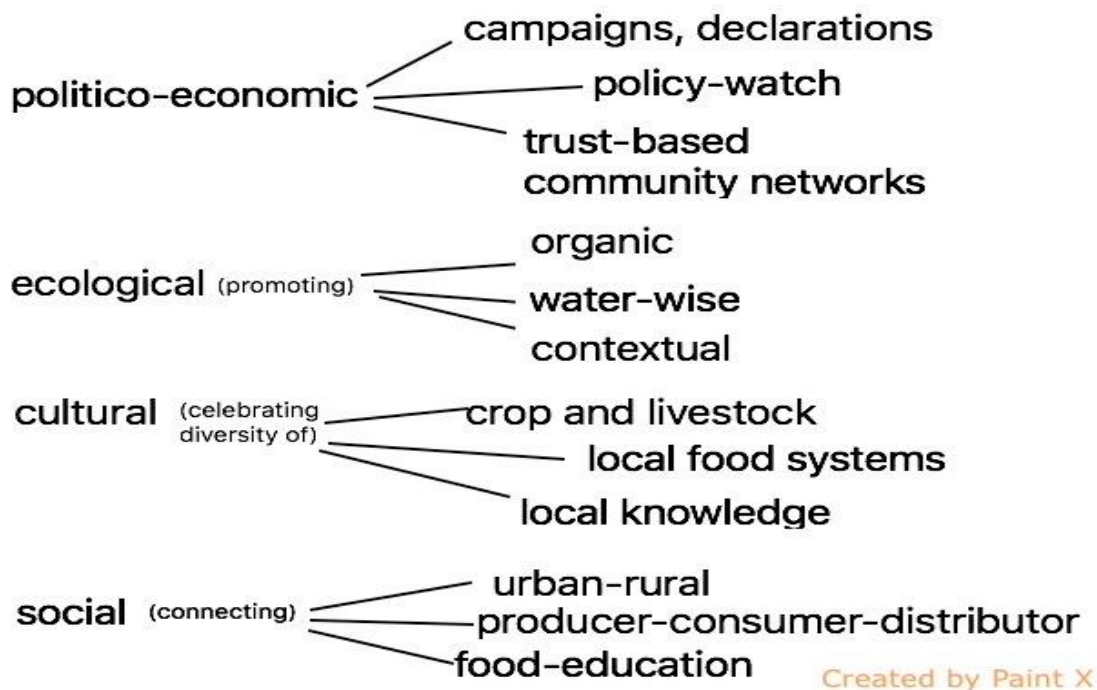


National overview of food issues and alternatives

Shiba from Kalpavriksh gave an overview of the challenges and alternatives towards a responsible food system. The agricultural scenario in India has changed drastically starting in the 1960s and 1970s when monocultures, hybrid seeds, irrigation and chemical inputs were vigorously promoted for use in agriculture. And despite this 'green revolution', the present agricultural scenario is dismal. Farmers are in distress with reducing yields, increasing debts, poorer health and expensive seeds. The number of farmer suicides are increasing every year, and they are higher in cash crop areas like Bt cotton (genetically modified cotton). The related situation of our water table is also dismal with 54% of India facing high to extremely high water stress. Meanwhile, the diversity of food procurement systems (hunting, gathering, shifting and settled cultivation, pastoralism, fisheries), the diversity of crops and livestock and the diversity of local knowledge systems and local cuisines continues to be neglected and depleted. Moreover, India has one-fourth of the world's hungry and 60 million people displaced by 'development projects'. To top this, the global challenges of patent regime, environmental degradation and climate change also affect the food scenario. And yet, India is at the cusp of another intervention (an 'evergreen' revolution) involving introduction of more genetically modified crops which are high risk, expensive, chemical input intensive and not as adaptive to local environments and climate change as traditional varieties.

At the same time, there have been calls with a vision for a different food system. A system that focuses on localised, adequate, nutritious, diverse, affordable food for all through protecting and promoting ecologically sustainable and socially just livelihoods. There are thus examples of learning through food within schools and outside, reconnecting the urban populace with farmers and with food gardening, ensuring safe and organic produce by systems such as PGS, and intervening in food politics for ensuring food sovereignty of small producers and distributors and for promoting safe and ecological farming.

Campaigns, collectives, grassroots action and initiatives have led to work in the following four dimensions towards articulation of such a vision.



Day 2: Sharings from other parts of India

Jungle is our Bank: Gadchiroli

‘Jungle is our bank- for food and livelihood’, says Ijam Sahi who works on Community Forest Rights in Gadchiroli and is associated with Amhi Amchya Arogyasathi. ‘We farm in the forest as well as in the village fields. Mahua and jamun are common in our region. But our oral knowledge related to cropping patterns is eroding steadily. Chemical fertilizers are also adversely affecting our crops and water sources. Seed festivals or Beej Utsav (as organized in Nagpur) should be made more prominent. There are many wild vegetables in the forest that needs to be explored and researched. The events celebrating crop harvest or ripening (as in many

Adivasi festivals) should also be made more popular. Mining has become a threat for our forests.'

Food and Health: Ladakh

Tsewang Namgail from Snow Leopard Conservancy India reflected upon the connection of food with health and how ill-health is either due to excess (leading to toxicity) or deficit consumption of food. Going by the famous greek saying “Let food be the thy medicine and Let medicine be the thy food” by Greek Philosopher, we should eat nourishing foods for good health and look to our traditional wisdom of medicinal foods during ill health.

In general, a typical Ladakhi diet consists of locally produced food like roasted barley flour, phating (dried apricot), churpe (dried cheese). But the region has been rapidly moving towards consumption of unhealthy processed foods like maggi, chips, biscuits with excessive packaging as well as excess of salt, sugar and fats. Plastic waste from all the packaging has also become an issue of grave environmental concern for the region of Ladakh. Their organisation uses the approach of promoting homestays for incentivising conservation by providing alternative livelihoods to people heavily dependent on the forests.

Issues of concern from the Malnad region of Karnataka

Vanastree (as the name implies “women from forests”) has been the voice of the rural women farmers. Malnad Mela, Tuber Mela and a lot of other such activities have been organized by them. Vanastree has specialized in working with the women in establishment of seed banks to preserve the local traditional varieties. They have preserved the tubers and other planting materials and distribute them for planting. They have bought out the books and training manuals for nursery preparation and management using organic methods.



Sunita Rao of Vanastree has highlighted that the following issues should be of our primary concern in the upcoming debates and dialogue for alternatives:

- ☐ Most of the areas which are presently under field crops like paddy are being converted into orchards of horticultural crops or into plantations crops.
- ☐ Before it was possible to have some amount fair predictability of rains, but nowadays it has become highly predictable, probably due to climate change and other anthropogenic activities. The Malnad region which receives heavy rains will face a serious threat due to the varying intensity and distribution of rainfall.
- ☐ There has been an erosion of intergenerational transfer of wisdom due to education, migration, media and other influences. Bringing out manual on “Best practices for small scale food systems” may be highly useful.
- ☐ Most of the skill development programmes of the Government are not related to the actual needs / requirements of the present times.
- ☐ It is a huge challenge for small organizations to comply with the seed laws and rules.
- ☐ There has been increasing violence in food production with cow vigilantes and rising extremism thrusting food choices and taking away livelihoods.
- ☐ Collaborations with government departments and local universities have been very challenging and tough.
- ☐ It is important for society as a whole to take up these concerns. Too much focus on the narrative of ‘women empowerment’ can lead to a lop-sided burden on one half of the society to navigate through the various struggles of household, field and forest.

Organic farming in Kedia village

Santosh Kumar, Anandi Yadav and Ramveer Yadav shared their experience from Bihar. In the village Kedia, people have been customarily doing rainfed farming. With the support of Greenpeace, they shifted to making the farming totally organic. They have created a farmers cooperative to moderate prices and also take decisions on water use collectively- have banned bore-wells and instead use water storage works like tanks, ponds and wells. Encouraged by their efforts, other villages have started moving in the same direction.

Seeds, Nature and Tribal institutions in Muniguda

Pradeep Patra from Living Farms shared their learning experiences from working with Kondh adivasi community. The community does neither value nor use money for their day to

day transactions all the time. Most of the transactions are rooted on trust and relationships. The seeds are always exchanged with each other and not bought from the market. This has in fact helped them preserve both their ancient local seed diversity and overcome the authority of today's seed monopolies successfully. They have successfully resisted the introduction of hybrid corn varieties by the Government. They strongly believe that seeds are for our consumption and not for selling and making profits. Not having excessive dependence on money as a medium for transactions has helped them live a life not centred around materialism.

They believe that the use of chemicals will spoil seeds and be an act of disrespect towards Mother Earth. 'Our relationship with seeds, forests, land and other natural resources is for lifetime and this relationship cannot be given up or compromised in exchange for even crores of rupees. Money can never be equated with Mother Earth. Thus compensating the damage to the mother earth with money would be wrong and disastrous. Such illogical balancing will only take us towards extinction rather than our upliftment.'

To prevent distress migration among youth, they have started a Green College where village elders teach skills to youth- like making sal-leaf plates, growing vegetables, working in local fisheries. They have also developed producer-consumer relationships amongst the farmers that they work in and the staff/ patients of the Christian Hospital in Rayagada. The consumers are encouraged to visit the fields of the farmers from whom they are buying the produce. Their children are also now learning the process of farming.

Jagannath Majhi who is an adivasi from that community described about their traditional institutions which can offer us feasible alternatives in the present era. Kutumb is one such village family institution and "everyone in the village is part of this group / institution". All the Kutumb members will sit together and make decision, for example the crop cultivation plan for the coming season. All the community members will volunteer their labour in one farm and then everyone will go to next person's farm and the process continues until all the farms of the community have been covered. This community has shown that one doesn't need money for agriculture. They believe in the philosophy that "it is the mother earth which has given them the food and thus their only obligation/ duty is to bow down to the Mother Earth and also protect her".

The communication system amongst these community members is very strong due to their close proximity and strong social connectedness (exchange system) and this has been feasible without the presence of modern day gadgets. The bonding is so healthy that, if someone dies in the village, someone from the village will surely burn the pyre irrespective of formal relationships.

"If we leave farming, it is as if we are leaving our way of being".

In their community they eat insects, fishes, ants, rats and other such food. Earlier they faced social stigma associated with their food habits. But then they discussed amongst

themselves and declared that it is part of their culture. ‘The food is given to us by our mother earth and we should respect that and feel proud of it, rather than being embarrassed.’

He also narrated the example where a group of tribal villages had successfully resisted the advancement of few outsiders trying to construct a building in their forest.

Traditional seeds and knowledge in Pithaurabad

Babulal Dahiya has been cultivating 110 traditional varieties of rice in his two acre plot to preserve them and protect them. Having realized that most of our traditional knowledge lies in our Lok sahitya (folklore), this Bagheli poet emphasizes that “saving folksongs and sayings won’t mean much if the local crop varieties, which repeatedly crop up in the folk literature, are not saved and protected side by side.” Most of their knowledge is accumulated over time by various trial and errors and is well tested. This knowledge is in the form of proverbs and sayings but unfortunately this knowledge is getting lost and eroded. There is a need to take up strong and actionable measures to prevent this knowledge from moving towards further extinction.

‘*Motey Aanaj*’ (coarse grains like millets) are a valuable food that nourished our ancestors. Our seeds have also survived all the extreme climatic situations and competition, due on local traditional cultures and practices.

It is not just the collection of the traditional seeds that is important, but also the knowledge (about its climate requirements and so on that would help us sustainably preserve them over ages. Thus losing our traditional seeds will be like losing our culture, tradition, songs, proverbs, folklores, legends, myths mohawarey and also vice versa. To sum up in BabulalDahiya’s words, “Words and Seeds have a long history” and both need to be preserved. He has already been untiringly working with Madhya Pradesh Adiwasi Lok Kala Academy for this cause. The state biodiversity board has published a book of agro-ecological lore compiled by him.

Traditional Seed preservation culture of North East

Participants from the North East Network shared their work through a brief documentary. ‘We live in the mountains. In traditional agriculture here based on jhum and terrace cultivation, people grow 60-70 crops in one season. We use traditional methods of storing grain and seed. Local traditional knowledge is a crucial element in food security. We work there on issues of sustainable livelihoods, natural resource management and building social awareness issues like domestic violence against women. Through this network we connect 8 villages with seed-saving initiatives happening elsewhere in India and all over the world. We also celebrate our agrobiodiversity through annual festivals. The overall idea is to strive towards autonomy and self-sufficiency based on the traditional food diversity.’

Jhum cultivation is done for 4 years on one mountain and then for the next 15 to 20 years nothing will be cultivated there. The village council will decide where and in which location the Jhum cultivation will be done in that year. Generally in the first year leguminous crops are cultivated and over the next three years rice and other mixed vegetables are cultivated. Thus,

Jhum cultivation involves cultivation of a diverse variety of crops (mixed cropping) and not monocropping. No chemical inputs are necessary.

There was a lively discussion around shifting cultivation and its sustainability. A participant, Sanat, pointed out that in 2004, Shillong Declaration on Shifting Cultivation across the South East Asia went through at least 20 major case studies. Based on these studies they justified that Jhum cultivation does not lead to destruction of forests, soil and biodiversity. The debates of Jhum cultivation is more of a political and market issue. Industrial agriculture takes away all control from cultivators and instead gives rise to a layer of elites who then determine the pricing, production and distribution.



Women Collectives in Manipur:

Helam Haokip and Shangnaider Totang spoke about the work of their group on establishing peace through women collectives for food sovereignty, voice against domestic violence and decision making. We are interested in food sovereignty, not just food availability. Keeping women on forefront, we work on conserving traditional methods. We do careful shifting cultivation and are cautious about regeneration. We encourage people to stop using chemicals and encourage seed sharing. The shift towards dependency on public distribution system is a cause of concern there as well. Grains under PDS come from distant areas like Punjab and Haryana. Given the negative environmental impact these kind of programmes have, it is very important to unanimously stress on localized PDS. Distribution of grains produced locally will have more acceptance and benefits as it will be in line with their local culture also.

Small scale fisheries

Mariette Correa presented some issues from fisheries, which was a sector that had been otherwise left completely un-represented in the event. Small scale fish workers contribute significantly to our economy and nourishment. While discussing small scale fisheries, often the focus is simply on the persons who catch fish, and not the ones involved in various other stages of processing and marketing. To include those in our definition, the term fishworkers is more appropriate than fisherfolk. Fishing is not just limited to coastal fisheries but also to riverine and other water sources. It is difficult to get an estimate of the numbers involved since many people do it as a part-time activity and do not identify themselves as fishworkers. Even in places where fish may not be a part of diet, it can be a significant source of livelihood, as in many parts of Gujarat.

Due to climate change, pollution, decline in fish catches, conflict over water and land resources, tourism, mining, oil exploration, there is a huge threat to the small scale sector fisheries. The spaces available for fishing are getting narrowed down. Industrialised fishing has become a huge competitor. Government policies favour large scale mechanized fisheries than the small scale fisheries. Many government schemes also display a lack of sensitivity towards the prevalent local systems, for example introduction of motor-bikes for collecting and selling fish, an activity that is customarily handled by womenfolk, even when it is common knowledge that such bikes would be primarily handled by men. Rehabilitation of the fishing community is always tough and challenging as there is always a fixed amount of coast land to be shared upon.

In line with Forest Rights, a lot of work has been planned and carried out to enforce the fish workers' rights bill, to protect the traditional rights of the fish workers. At the international level, FAO has come out with voluntary guidelines on food security for small scale fisheries in June 2014.

Day 3: Village visits

Participants split into three groups and visited canal-fed and rain-fed villages where URMUL was involved in facilitation activities related to crafts, agricultural livelihoods and women empowerment. The overall feedback for the visits was very positive. Most people were happy with the trips and felt that it was a great opportunity to learn about the history, the economy and the way of life in the desert as well as experience the warm hospitality of the people here.

The work on crafts was considered impressive and leading to social equity and women empowerment. The market linkages for the crafts were a good means of economic empowerment, and participants from Bihar and Manipur expressed interest in learning more from the initiative and applying elements of this in their own places.

It was observed that people had a lot more knowledge of and access to govt schemes, possibly due to URMUL's facilitation in making these schemes accessible and in also making govt more accountable.

They also got a glimpse of the agricultural scenario. Visiting farmer Sukhram, it was observed that like elsewhere, youth are going away from agriculture, but they were glad to see that there was still some connection as they come back frequently and work on land. There was also an intense discussion about the undermining of URMUL's messaging for organic, local diversity farming because of parallel support by some of their local units to hybrid seeds and fertilizers because of pressures from donors/ collaborating govt agencies. Through discussions it was also realised that stray cattle numbers and related incidences of crop-raiding have increased a lot more due to the recent cow politics.

There was also some discussion on how promotion of flush toilets by government runs counter to efforts towards water conservation in a dry area, and how dry toilets and use of human compost in the fields (as in Ladakh) could be a possible alternative.

Finally, it was also felt that there was a need for a more recent studies on ecological and socio-economic impact of IGNP, continuing earlier studies (e.g. by BHNS) and processes like URMUL's canal yatra in early 1990s.

Day 4: Consolidation

Towards an Alternatives framework

Ashish Kothari from Kalpavriksh shared about the five overlapping spheres of an alternatives framework that have emerged from the last three years of the Vikalp Sangam process-

Economic Democracy

This refers to having local autonomy in our economy. In the SHGs, farmer collectives and farmer-producer linkages that we came across in this meeting, we see a different economic model. Economic independence is also connected to the ability to meet needs within a region. From that point of view, the long term sustainability of export-oriented livelihood strategies can be questioned. This is a point for self-reflection and is being pondered over in another area (Kutch) by a crafts-based organisation (Khamir).

If we consider our traditional economies, people of the forests, mountains and deserts have often contributed collective labour in farming and construction. In Rajasthan, harvesting used to be a community event, culminating with a feast of lapsi. In that way, money is a relatively new introduction in our cultural fabric, whereas in places like Europe, the concept of time-banking is only now becoming popular.

Direct and Delegated Democracy

Over time, the meaning of Democracy has been narrowed down to imply electing people and then those people in power have control over us. But it should have truly been participative democracy or village democracy where people are part of decision making on a day to day basis for basic needs of food, water, shelter, education and health in their own spheres/communities. The rights of decision-making need to be taken along with the responsibilities of ensuring a fair process where one's rights do not encroach on others'. The Mendha Lekha motto of "We should be the Government in our Village" from Gadchiroli can be an inspiration. The larger institutions or representative bodies of decision making should be made accountable to the grassroots-level bodies. The power needs to emanate from the grass roots and actually be able to control what is happening in the representative bodies through a mechanism of transparency, accountability and reporting back.

Social Well-being and Justice

We saw elements of social-wellbeing in women SHGs (like the girl's groups being formed by Urmul) where through economic empowerment, social empowerment was also taking place and in work of women collectives like Vanastree. Overall, this dimension relates to a spiritual deepening of awareness about inter-relations between different components.

Cultural Diversity and Knowledge Democracy

Is knowledge something imposed from outside or something that emerges with time from within? Like the agro-ecological lore in the rajasthani folk songs we heard or the Central Indian folk sayings shared by Dahila ji. An exercise called the People's linguistic survey found there to be 230 words just for snow in Himachal Pradesh and around 40 to 60 names for Clouds in Rajasthan. Without discounting modern knowledge, acknowledging and preserving the knowledge entwined in culture becomes an important aspect of this dimension. Jhum Cultivation of Northeast is another example of a practice that was wrongly discredited without understanding its ecological significance and cultural relevance in the way it was practiced at that time.

Ecological Wisdom, Integrity and Resilience

Technological interventions like tractors, hybrid seeds, which we may consider as a necessity, may appear differently if viewed from the framework of ecological integrity, given the loss of biodiversity it often entails. For example windmills can be considered as environment-friendly if we only focus on the renewable part and do not consider the loss of grazing land it entails. Or green revolution in Punjab can be considered good if we do not consider the ground water contamination.

It is not possible to tackle one aspect of the society without tackling all the other aspects. Thus apart from finding alternatives, it becomes essential to make existing alternatives more interconnected with other aspects.

Collaborations:

Participants from Bihar, Manipur were interested in learning from the crafts initiatives of Rajasthan and exploring such possibilities within their own regions.

Exchange of seeds and seed sharing took place between participants of various regions.

Kalpavriksh offered to connect the participants to the vikalp sangam e-list and the website. The alternatives framework could be used to evaluate and self-assess by interested organisations. People are also free to translate or localise the KV publication on food issues, 'Something to chew on'.

It was suggested that a draft write-up on context and laws related to seed sharing is prepared.

Participants invited each other to visit in their lands and experience the food situation in their region first-hand.

Some of the participants that met for the first time during this sangam have started planning for a regional sangam in Bihar.

Sunita and Mariette initiated a planting activity on the venue, sowing seeds from another dryland area.

Living Farms offered to share their study on erratic rainfall and mixed cropping with the participants on email.

URMUL and Snow Leopard Conservancy discussed to have an exchange between ladakh and rajasthan on desert issues- dry toilets, connecting crafts with a community-based model of eco-tourism

Feedback

Sharing a sample from amongst the many feedback points offered in the last session:

‘It was inspiring to have the village visits because meeting people who may not have much in conventional (material) terms but still have a warm and loving approach towards life gives a sense of immense hope. I was also glad to see that criticism was taken in a constructive manner, rather than being defensive.’

“Spaces like these sangams actually help in preserving these cultures and keeping our traditional practice alive for long”.

“The strong culture of conversation in the sangam was welcome, but addressing the larger questions neglected in the other setups or forums should be given highest priority. Most of our power should be conserved towards accumulating the positive energy to bring about stronger impacts. The process of dialogue and conversation is very important in the present era. We need more of post offices than light houses”.

‘It was an interesting and good learning experience. But there could have been more discussion on role of animals in nutrition.’

“The event gives a positive, constructive direction in an otherwise dismal scenario. Will need more introspection to apply these values in our own lives.”

‘Coming from a dryland area, it was a humbling and awe-inspiring experience to realise that people survive and farm in a land that gets 50 times lesser rainfall!’

‘Coming from a forest I had a misconception that a desert would have little signs of life. But I was surprised to see much life here- crops, fruits, rodents, birds, honeybees. I also observed different traditional forms of seed saving and food storage.’

‘An enriching experience of exchanging knowledge with so called illiterate people about knowing crops, reading symbols. Hope that such sharings can continue.’

