



THINK PIECE

Eco-Swaraj vs. Global Eco-Catastrophe

By Ashish Kothari, Activist with Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam, and Radical Ecological Democracy

Abstract:

Across the world, ordinary people are coming up with extra-ordinary responses to the deepening ecological crises facing humanity. Whether in the form of resistance or of response, people are finding creative alternatives to the dominant ideology of 'development.' India's "eco-swaraj" movement is just such an alternative, playing out across hundreds of initiatives in local Indian communities, and linking to similar approaches arising in other global contexts.

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THINK PIECE**Eco-Swaraj vs. Global Eco-Catastrophe**

By Ashish Kothari, Activist with Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam, and Radical Ecological Democracy

Across the world, “ordinary” people are coming up with extraordinary responses to the deepening socio-economic and ecological crises facing humanity. Whether in the form of resistance to activities like mining and big dams, corporate and state abuses of power, or in the form of creative ways of meeting needs for food, water, and energy, these responses represent an assertion that there are alternatives to today’s dominant ideology of “development.” Some of these are re-affirmations of continuing lifestyles and livelihoods that have lived in relative harmony with the earth for millennia, such as indigenous peoples’ movements for territorial and cultural autonomy. Others are new initiatives emerging from resistance movements against the destructive nature of capitalism, industrialism, patriarchy, stateism,¹ and other forms of power concentration, including de-growth, eco-feminism, eco-socialism, and the re-commoning of urban spaces and knowledges.

These initiatives and movements are incredibly diverse in their settings and processes, and indeed this is one of their strengths, as opposed to the tendency of “modernity” and “developmentalism” to shape the whole world in a homogenous western, consumerist, materialist frame. They are pluriversal, rather than universal.² But while diversity is their hallmark, alternative initiatives often also encompass common threads. They promote and work towards systemic change, altering the structures of domination and exploitation. They espouse, implicitly or explicitly, some common values and principles, such as those of cooperation and solidarity, interconnectedness and reciprocity, respect and dignity, autonomy and freedom, human rights as also the rights of nature, equality and equity, among others.

Asian Responses

Even as the Asia-Pacific displays acute social and ecological distress, and extreme inequities, the region is also a hotbed of alternative explorations. To give a few examples:³

- In Bangladesh, the *Nayakrishi Andolan* (New Agriculture Movement) promotes ecologically sustainable, biologically diverse agriculture amongst small farmers, using the principle of *shohoj*, loosely translated as “easy” but with deep spiritual and philosophical meanings related to a “transparent way of being in the universe.”⁴ Several hundred sustainable farming initiatives dot the landscape in India and Nepal, and they include assertions of seed/food sovereignty.
- In several South Pacific island nations, hundreds of coastal sites are governed by local fishing communities in what are called ‘locally managed marine areas’ (LMMAs), encouraging sustainable fisheries and coral reef and coastal conservation, and discouraging destructive extractive activities. Indigenous peoples and other local communities in several other countries are claiming rights to traditional territories and rebuilding the ability to manage forests, pasture lands, wetlands, and other ecosystems for conservation-oriented livelihoods, in a phenomenon globally known as Indigenous Peoples and Community Conserved Territories and Areas (ICCAs).⁵
- Several rural communities in India have asserted various degrees of autonomous political and economic governance, insisting that even as they respect the Indian

Constitution, in their regions they want to be the primary decision-makers, which according to them is the true meaning of democracy. Villages in Gadchiroli region of Maharashtra, and in *adivasi* areas of Jharkhand, have made these assertions in the face of threats by mining, dams, and other “development” projects.

- The Kurds in the region straddling Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, are attempting to devise a society based on eco-feminist, direct democracy principles, in the midst of a militarized, conflict-ridden region.
- Several movements of self-reliance and autonomy strive for greater equality and an end to social and economic exploitation; examples include organizations that have formed the national network MAKAAAM in India, focusing on women’s empowerment and rights to resources for agricultural, pastoral, and other land-based livelihoods; and those struggling to empower Dalits (the so-called “outcastes” of Hindu society in India) to get rid of the stigma of casteism.

Eco-swaraj: Towards a Radical Ecological Democracy

Examples such as the ones above point to transformations along various spheres of human existence, and to alternative frameworks for envisioning society. One such framework that has emerged from grassroots experience in India, with significant global resonance, is *eco-swaraj*. The term *swaraj*, simplistically translated as self-rule, stems from ancient Indian notions and practices of people being involved in decision-making in local assemblies. It became popular during India’s Independence struggle against the British colonial power, but it is important to realize that it means much more than simply “national independence.” In many of M.K. Gandhi’s writings,⁶ in particular *Hind Swaraj*, he noted that *swaraj* encompassed individual to community to human autonomy and freedom, integrally linking to the ethics of responsibility towards others (including the rest of nature), and to the spiritual deepening necessary for self-restrained and ethically just behavior.⁷

In India alone, there are hundreds of initiatives akin to the ones given above, in various kinds of communities, urban and rural. They include: sustainable farming, fisheries and pastoralism; food and water sovereignty; decentralized energy production; direct local governance; community health; alternative learning and education; community-controlled media and communications; localization of economies; gender and caste justice; rights recognizing the differently abled and multiple sexualities, and many others. These, like other initiatives,⁸ display an approach that respects the limits of the Earth and the rights of other species, while pursuing the core values of social justice and equity. With its strong democratic and egalitarian impulse, *eco-swaraj* seeks to empower every person to be a part of decision-making and requires a holistic vision of human well-being. Such a vision encompasses physical, material, socio-cultural, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Instead of states and corporations, *eco-swaraj* places collectives and communities at the center of governance and economy.

In the Indian context, such peoples’ initiatives are potentially a strong and viable response to the disastrous neo-liberal and capitalist economic policies pursued by the state, especially since 1991: policies which have added considerable ecological injustice and unsustainability to the inequities of traditional masculinity, casteism, and class domination prevalent for a substantial part of the Indian subcontinent’s history, as also the state-dominated power hierarchies present in colonial and post-colonial “socialist” eras.⁹ In every element of life, alternative initiatives are harbingers of transformation: movements from economic domination by the state and/or corporations to self-reliance especially for basic needs; from gender and caste and other social inequities to greater equity as “marginalized” sections become empowered; from the political hierarchies inherent

in liberal democracy to greater power distribution at the level of people and communities; from the denigration of “primary” and nature-based secondary economic sectors (agriculture, fisheries, forestry, animal husbandry and crafts) to their re-assertion as legitimate and dignified livelihoods; from a lack of viable employment for youth to the beginnings of alternative livelihoods for young people in a variety of sectors; from the capture of knowledge, media and the arts by elites and corporations to the re-commoning of these sectors in the hands of “ordinary” people – and much else.

The above are, of course, still marginal compared to the dominant trends in Indian society. But even as exceptions, they show great potential for transformation. This potential can be actualized much more widely and deeply with a set of processes including documenting and highlighting viable alternatives, networking them for greater critical mass, building solidarity with the movements of resistance and protest, generating links with similar initiatives outside India, and so on. I will describe one process that attempts some of these actions below.

Radical Ecological Democracy

Based on such grassroots experience and interactions with activist-thinkers and practitioners across India, a conceptual framework called Radical Ecological Democracy (RED) has emerged in the last few years as a somewhat more systematic or structured reworking of eco-swaraj. While it arose in India, it quickly found resonance in many other parts of the world as part of a process of generating Peoples’ Sustainability Treaties for the Rio+20 Conference.¹⁰

Eco-swaraj or RED, which has evolved through a process of bringing together alternative initiatives across India called *Vikalp Sangam* (Alternatives Confluence), begun in 2014, encompasses the following five interlocking spheres (thematic composites of key elements):¹¹

- **Ecological wisdom and resilience:** Reviving or strengthening the foundational belief in humanity being part of nature, and the intrinsic right of the rest of nature to thrive in all its diversity and complexity, promoting the conservation and resilience of nature (ecosystems, species, functions, and cycles).
- **Social well-being and justice:** Moving towards lives that are fulfilling and satisfactory physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually; with equity in socio-economic and political entitlements, benefits, rights and responsibilities across gender, class, caste, age, ethnicities, “able”ities, sexualities, and other current divisions; and an ongoing attempt to balance collective interests and individual freedoms, so that peace and harmony are ensured.
- **Direct or radical political democracy:** Establishing processes of decision-making power at the smallest unit of human settlement (rural or urban), such that every human has the right, capacity and opportunity to take part. From these basic units outwards growth is envisioned to larger levels of governance that are accountable and answerable to these basic units. Political decision-making at larger levels is taken by ecoregional or biocultural regional institutions, which respect ecological and cultural linkages and boundaries (and therefore challenge current political boundaries, including those of nation-states). The role of the state eventually becomes minimal and is limited to facilitating the connection of peoples and initiatives across larger landscapes. It carries out welfare measures only till the time the basic units of direct and ecoregional democracy are not able to do so.
- **Economic democracy:** Establishing or strengthening processes in which local communities including producers and consumers – often combined in one word as “prosumers” – have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange,

and markets. Open localization is a key principle, in which the local regional economy provides for all basic needs. Dependence on global trade is minimized, without falling into the trap of xenophobic closure of boundaries to “outsiders” (such as what we see in some parts of Europe that are anti-immigrant). Larger trade and exchange, if and where necessary, is built on – and safeguards – this local self-reliance. Nature, natural resources and other important elements that feed into the economy, are governed as the commons. Private property is minimized or disappears, non-monetized relations of caring and sharing regain their central importance and indicators are predominantly qualitative, focusing on basic needs and well-being.

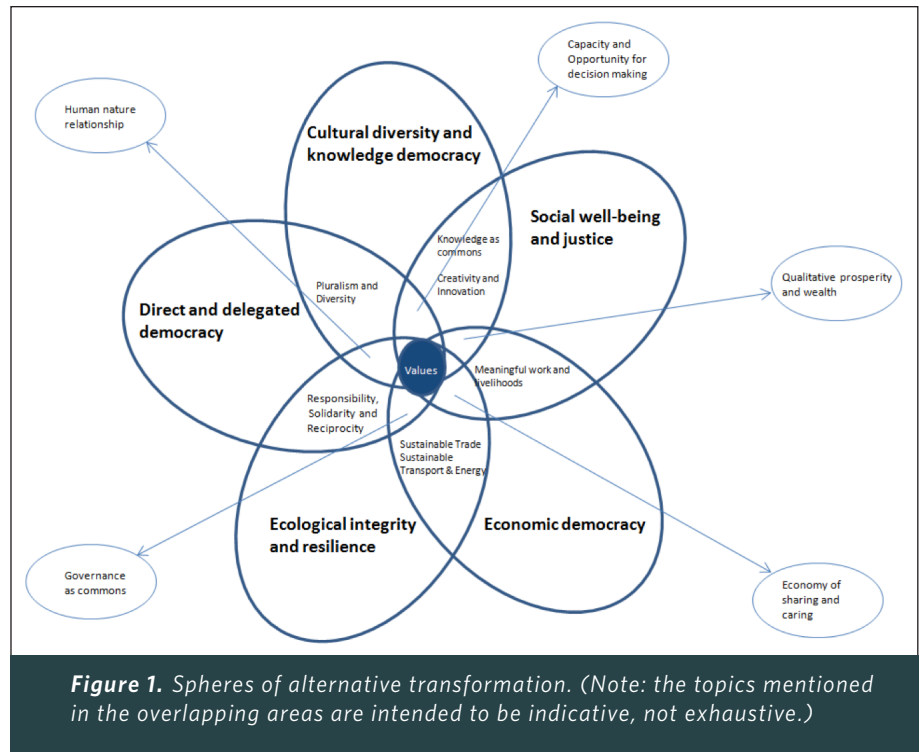
- **Cultural and knowledge plurality:** Promoting processes in which diversity is a key principle; knowledge and its generation, use and transmission is part of the public domain or commons; innovation is democratically generated and there are no ivory towers of “expertise;” learning takes place as part of life rather than in specialized institutions; and individual or collective pathways of ethical and spiritual well-being and of happiness are available to all.

Visualized as the petals of a flower (see **Figure 1** below), the core or bud where these principles intersect informs a set of values or principles, which also emerges as a crucial part of the alternative initiatives mentioned above. These values, such as equality and equity, respect for all life, diversity and pluralism, balancing the collective and the individual, can also be seen as the possible/ideal ethical or spiritual foundation of RED societies, or the world-view(s) that its members hold.

An Evolving Worldview

The broad components and values of eco-swaraj or RED have been under discussion across India through the process of *Vikalp Sangam* (Alternatives Confluence).¹² This process brings together a diverse set of actors from communities, civil society, and various professions who are involved in alternative initiatives across all sectors. A series of regional and thematic confluences that began in 2014, the *Vikalp Sangam* enables participants to share experiences, learn from each other, build alliances and collaboration, and jointly envision a better future. Documenting eco-swaraj practices in the form of stories, videos, case studies, and other forms provides a further means of disseminating knowledge and spreading inspiration for transformation, through a dedicated website,¹³ a mobile exhibition, and other means.

Over a thousand people have participated in a dozen or so confluences that have taken place since 2014 in various parts of India. Through this process a collective vision of a more just, sustainable, and equitable society has also evolved, and will continue to evolve as the process goes further.¹⁴



In 2012, about 20 civil society organizations and movements worldwide signed onto a Peoples' Sustainability Treaty on Radical Ecological Democracy as part of the parallel people's process at the Rio+20 Conference in Brazil.¹⁵ Since then, a discussion list has kept alive the dialogue, and opportunities have been found for mutual learning about approaches like de-growth, ecofeminism,¹⁶ cooperative societies and social and solidarity economies, *buen vivir*¹⁷ and its other equivalents in Latin America, *ubuntu*¹⁸ and other similar concepts in Africa, and others. A website launched in September 2017 showcases stories and perspectives on these movements from around the world.¹⁹

RED or eco-swaraj is not a blueprint but an evolving worldview, finding resonance in different forms and different names in different parts of the world. It is also the basis of multiple visions of the future.²⁰ In its very process of democratic grassroots evolution, it forms an alternative to top-down ideologies and formulations, even as it takes on board the relevant elements of such ideologies. While still struggling in the face of the powerful forces of capitalism, stateism, patriarchy, and other structures of inequity and exploitation, alternative approaches like eco-swaraj and RED appear to be gaining ground as more and more people are confronted by multiple crises and searching for ways out. This is the foundation of its transformative potential.

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Ashish Kothari is a founder-member of the Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh, which takes up research, education, grassroots work, advocacy and activism in environment and development issues. Ashish has taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, coordinated India's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan process, served on Greenpeace International and India Boards, helped initiate the global ICCA Consortium, and chaired IUCN's Inter-commission Strategic Direction on Governance, Equity, and Livelihoods in Relation to Protected Areas. He is currently helping to coordinate India's Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence) process, the global Radical Ecological Democracy network, and the global project Academic-Activist Co-production of Knowledge on Environmental Justice (ACKnowl-EJ). His latest books are *Churning the Earth: Making of Global India* (with Aseem Shrivastava), *Alternative Futures: India Unshackled* (ed., with KJ Joy), and *Pluriverse: A Post- Development Dictionary* (ed., with Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria and Alberto Acosta).

NOTES

1. Stateism is a system in which the state concentrates most power in itself.
2. See Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). See also Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Federico Demaria, Arturo Escobar, and Alberto Acosta (eds), *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (Delhi: Authors UpFront), (forthcoming).
3. For many more examples from India, which the author is most familiar with, pl. see www.vikalpsangam.org, and the publication 'The Search for Radical Alternatives: Key Elements and Principles', at <http://vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternativesframeworkbookletrevisedfinal1512.pdf>
4. Farhad Mazhar and Nayakrishi Andolan, in Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Federico Demaria, Arturo Escobar, and Alberto Acosta (eds): *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (Delhi: Authors UpFront), (forthcoming).
5. See examples from India, Philippines, Iran, Nepal, China, Fiji, and other parts of Asia-Pacific at www.iccaconsortium.org.
6. See for example Anthony Parel (ed), *M. K. Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
7. Some of the understanding of swaraj used here comes from the ongoing work of Aseem Shrivastava, including 'The Imperative of Prakritik Swaraj,' June 2016 (unpublished).
8. Parallel similar initiatives in other parts of the world include 'oil in the soil' and 'coal in the hole', anti-pipeline resistance movements in the Americas and Africa, the Zapatista and Kurdish autonomy regions, indigenous peoples' territorial rights struggles across the global South, agroecology, commons and de-growth movements in Europe and elsewhere, and many others.
9. For a detailed examination of the impacts of these policies, see Aseem Shrivastava and Ashish Kothari, *Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India* (New Delhi: Viking/Penguin India, 2012).
10. See Ashish Kothari, "Radical Ecological Democracy: A way for India and beyond," in *Development* 57(1) (2014): 36-45; Shrivastava and Kothari in *Churning the Earth*, 2012.
11. See also www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org for details of the Peoples' Sustainability Treaties process for the Rio+20 Conference. Adapted from "In Search of Alternatives," a discussion note evolving through the Vikalp Sangam process (see note 10), available at: <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/>
12. For information on the Vikalp Sangam process and its outputs, see <http://kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives/alternatives-knowledge-center/353-vikalpsangam-coverage>.
13. www.vikalpsangam.org
14. "In Search of Alternatives," see note 9.
15. <http://www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/treaty/>
16. An approach linking feminism with ecological perspectives, advocating the rehealing of the earth by reconnecting humans and nature that have been split by patriarchy.
17. Broadly translated as "good living," this and other equivalent terms like *sumac kawsay* are from indigenous peoples in Latin America, encompassing worldviews based on collective, mutually respectful living amongst humans and between humans and the rest of nature. See Eduardo Gudynas, "Buen Vivir: Today's tomorrow," *Development* 54(4), (2011): 441-447.
18. Loosely translated as "I am because we are," this and other African concepts put the collective or community at the center, rather than the individualism prevalent in dominant "western" society. See Thaddeus Metz, "Ubuntu as a moral theory and human rights in South Africa," in *African Human Rights Law Journal* 11(2), (2011): 532-559.
19. www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org
20. For one example see Kothari, Ashish and KJ Joy, "Looking back into the future: India, South Asia, and the world in 2100," in Kothari and Joy, *Alternative Futures: Unshackling India* (forthcoming).