The Search for Radical Alternatives: Key Elements and Principles

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Can there be a collective search for paradigms and pathways towards a world that is sustainable, equitable and just? How can such frameworks and visions build on an existing heritage of ideas and worldviews and cultures, and on past or new grassroots practice? How can they be fundamentally different from today’s dominant economic and political system, which has brought the world to the brink of ecological collapse and the depths of socio-economic inequalities and despair? Can they provide rays of hope in what currently seems to be a worsening situation of social tension and conflicts, the resurgence of regressive right-wing forces, and suffering caused by environmental damage.

This note attempts to lay out some thoughts towards such a process, and is offered as one means to stimulate dialogue and visioning. It is based on an ongoing process called Vikalp Sangam (‘Alternatives Confluences’), a platform for networking of groups and individuals working on alternatives to the currently dominant model of development and governance, in various spheres of life (see http://kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives/alternatives-knowledge-center/353-vikalpsangam-coverage; see also Daga 2014, Kothari 2015, Thakaekara 2015). Its major activity is the convening of regional and thematic Confluences across India; additional activities are a website with stories and perspectives from across India (www.vikalpsangam.org or www.alternativesindia.org), a mobile poster exhibition (printed as a booklet, Kalpavriksh 2015), and video coverage of initiatives.

The Sangams are a space for people to exchange experiences and ideas emerging from practice and thinking in a whole range of endeavour: sustainable agriculture and pastoralism, renewable energy, decentralised governance, community health, craft and art revival, multiple sexualities, inclusion of the differently abled, alternative learning and education, community-based conservation, decentralised water management, urban sustainability, gender and caste equality, and more. People practicing and conceiving some of the most amazing initiatives in the country have been able to get together and share.

Beyond the sharing of practical experiences, however, one of the most important outputs of the Vikalp Sangam process is a conceptual framework of transformative alternatives. This framework (hereafter called ‘the Framework’) is constantly evolving, after discussions at each Sangam. Several hundred people from the range of sectors mentioned above have debated the various aspects of the Framework (made available in regional languages relevant to each Sangam, thus far Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Telegu, and Gujarati). This essay presents its key elements, to elicit even wider comments and inputs that can be taken up in its farther evolution, perhaps even resulting in a ‘people’s vision’ of the future of India.
The Vikalp Sangam process consciously does not go into social, economic, ecological problems we face, or into their root causes; it believes that this context is widely discussed in other forums, and that the participants of the Sangam process share at least some basic common understanding of this context. In just a few lines, the Framework notes the structural roots of ecological unsustainability, inequity and injustice, and loss of life and livelihoods, including: "centralised and hierarchical state systems, capitalist corporate control, patriarchy and other forms of social and cultural inequality (including caste, alienation from the rest of nature and from our own spiritual selves, and undemocratic control of knowledge and technology". Not everyone may agree with all of this, but participants of the Sangam process have agreed that we can discuss the specifics of the problem elsewhere, while here we focus on "paths and visions forward" assuming a "broadly shared sense of the crises".

Given below are (a) the key pillars or elements of what constitutes an alternative, (b) some examples of alternatives in various fields or sectors, (c) the main principles or values emerging from these initiatives, (d) strategies to achieve transformation along these lines, and (e) further questions to explore.

What is an Alternative?
A thread running through the Sangam process is the search for what constitutes an alternative. Assuming that what we are looking for are pathways away from the problems (and their root causes) mentioned above, the Framework states that "alternatives can be practical activities, policies, processes, technologies, and concepts/frameworaks. They can be practiced or proposed/propagated by communities, government, civil society organizations, individuals, and social enterprises, amongst others. They can simply be continuations from the past, re-asserted in or modified for current times, or new ones; it is important to note that the term does not imply these are always ‘marginal’ or new, but that they are in contrast to the mainstream or dominant system.”

The Framework proposes that alternatives are built on the following key elements or pillars, interconnected and overlapping:

a. **Ecological integrity and resilience**, including the conservation of nature and natural diversity, maintenance of ecological functions, respect for ecological limits (local to global), and ecological ethics in all human actions.

b. **Social well-being and justice**, including fulfilling lives (physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually), equity between communities and individuals, communal and ethnic harmony; and erasure of hierarchies and divisions based on faith, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, ability, and other attributes.

c. **Direct and delegated democracy**, with decision-making starting in spaces enabling every person to participate meaningfully, and building from this to larger levels of governance by downwardly accountable institutions; and all this respectful of the needs and rights of those currently marginalised.

d. **Economic democracy**, in which local communities and individuals have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets, based on the principle of localization for basic needs and trade built on this; central to this would be the replacement of private property by the commons.

e. **Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy**, with multiple co-existing knowledge systems in the commons, respect to a diversity of ways of living, ideas and ideologies, and encouragement to creativity and innovation.

The Framework proposes, on the basis of the above, that the "centre of human activity is neither the state nor the corporation, but the community, a self-defined collection of people with some strong common or cohesive social interest. The community could be of various forms, from the ancient village to the urban neighbourhood to the student body of an institution to even the more ‘virtual’ networks of common interest."
Of course, participants of the Vikalp Sangam process recognise that actual initiatives towards alternatives may not fulfil all of the above. As a thumbrule, therefore, they propose that if an initiative helps reach at least two of the above five, and does not seriously violate the others, and perhaps is even considering how to achieve those too, it should be considered as an alternative. Importantly, this is not in the form of an external judgement by anyone, but rather a process by which relevant actors can themselves come to an understanding of where they stand in the process of transformation, and what more needs to be done. The Framework in fact also gives examples of what kind of actions and processes could count as alternatives in each sector or field of human endeavour, and what may not; this is given briefly below.

**What are the alternatives in various sectors?**

The Framework provides indicators of the kinds of initiatives that could be called alternatives, in 12 sectors or fields. To these I have added actual examples of initiatives, mostly taken from the Vikalp Sangam website.

**Society, culture and peace:** Initiatives to enhance social and cultural aspects of human life, such as sustaining India’s enormous language, art and crafts diversity, removing inequalities of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, literacy, race, religion, and location (rural-urban, near-remote), creating harmony amongst communities of different ethnicities, faiths and cultures, providing dignity in living for those currently oppressed, exploited, or marginalised, including the ‘disabled’ or differently abled and sexual minorities, promoting ethical living and thinking, and providing avenues for spiritual enlightenment.

Examples that come to mind include: the work of Bhasha in documenting and sustaining language diversity, the initiative to educate young women in West Bengal about their right to inherit property along with their brothers, and teach them the hands-on skills necessary to be food secure, and the attempt to revive and sustain the culinary art of tribals in Maharashtra.

Other examples mentioned below also deal with sustaining crafts as a livelihood, and tackling gender and caste inequities through sustainable agriculture.

The Framework points to a caution that is important in the current context of an increasingly right-wing agenda supported by the state: that initiatives which appear to be alternative in one dimension, e.g. conservation, or sustaining appropriate traditions against the onslaught of wholesale modernity, would not be considered so if they have casteist, communal, sexist, or other motives and biases related to social injustice and inequity, or those appealing to a parochial nationalism intolerant of other cultures and peoples.

**Alternative economies & technologies:** Initiatives that help to create alternatives to the dominant neo-liberal or state-dominated economy and the ‘logic’ of growth, such as localisation and decentralisation of basic needs towards self-reliance, respect to and support of diverse livelihoods, producer and consumer collectives, local currencies and trade, non-monetised and equal exchange and the gift economy, production based on ecological principles, innovative technologies that respect ecological and cultural integrity, and moving away from GDP-like indicators of well-being to more qualitative, human-scale ones.

Examples that come to mind for some of the above include: localised manufacture and the ideas of a regional self-reliant economy initiated by the village Kuthambakkam’s ex-sarpanch Elango Ramaswamy.
move by women in Chennai to replace plastics with environment-friendly products as palm plates, bags made of cloth, paper and jute and recycled products (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/two-women-engage-in-battle-against-plastic/), several dozen producer companies of farmers, fishers, pastoralists, craftspersons and others, such as Dharani set up by Timbaktu Collective (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/very-much-on-the-map-the-timbaktu-revolution/), and the NGO Goonj’s attempt to create a parallel cashless economy around cloth (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/cloth-as-currency-how-goonj-is-creating-a-parallel-cashless-economy/#.VgoyvYvntmko).

Here too, the Framework cautions against would-be alternatives: “What may not constitute alternatives are superficial and false solutions, such as predominantly market and technological fixes for problems that are deeply social and political, or more generally, ‘green growth’/ ‘green capitalism’ kind of approaches that only tinker around with the existing system.”

Livelihoods: Linked to the search for alternative, localised economies, this includes initiatives for satisfying, dignified, ecologically sustainable livelihoods and jobs. These could a continuation and enhancement of fulfilling traditional occupations that communities choose to continue, including in agriculture, pastoralism, nomadism, forestry, fisheries, crafts, and others in the primary economy; or they could be jobs in manufacturing and service sectors that are ecologically sustainable and dignified.

Examples of such livelihoods include: the revival of sustainable, organic agriculture by dalit women members of the Deccan Development Society in Telangana (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/cultivating-biodiversity-peonant-women-in-india/#.Vg7TVlMvtmko) or by small farmers associated with Timbaktu Collective in Andhra Pradesh; pastoral initiatives supported by Sahjeewan in Kachchh (Desor 2014), Anthra in Maharashtra (http://anthra.org/index.php), and Food Sovereignty Alliance in Andhra Pradesh (https://foodsovereigntyalliance.wordpress.com); the state-run Jharcraft in Jharkhand that has enhanced livelihoods of over 300,000 craft-skilled families (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/being-the-change-jharcraft-in-jharkhand/#.VgzzmYvntmko); innovations in Malkha cloth to empower weavers and artisans through stable livelihoods (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/the-key-to-the-handloom-crisis/#.ViYyCH7hDIU); and unionising wastepicker women to gain more secure, dignified ways of doing their work through SWaCH in Pune (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/picking-a-brighter-future/).

What would not fit are livelihoods, traditional or modern, where non-workers are in control and profiting (monetarily or politically) from the exploitation of workers; this is especially relevant in the current context where many capitalist or state-run corporations are claiming to be eco-friendly, but in the way they treat workers or deal with profits, remain essentially exploitative.

Settlements and Transportation: The search to make human settlements (rural, urban, rurban) sustainable, equitable, and fulfilling places to live and work in, through sustainable architecture and accessible housing, localized generation of basic needs as far as possible, ecological regeneration, minimisation of waste and its full upcycling or recycling, reduction in elite urban resource use, replacement of toxic products with ecologically sustainable ones, sustaining and reviving the urban commons, decentralised, participatory budgeting and planning of settlements, and promotion of sustainable, equitable means of transport (especially mass, public, and non-motorised).

Examples of such initiatives include: in Bhuj town, the ‘Homes in the City’ programme by several NGOs that empowers poor citizens to either self-provision or get access to decent housing, water self-sufficiency, waste management, open spaces, and other services; the revival of urban wetlands in Bengaluru and Salem (e.g. Kaikontrahalli, see Nagenatra 2016); urban farming such as widespread rooftop gardening in many cities; the waste cooperative KKPKP and union SWaCH in
Pune mentioned above; and participatory budgeting in Pune and Bengaluru (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/participatory-budgeting-in-pune-a-critical-review/).

The Framework points out that elitist, costly models that appear to be ecologically sustainable but are not relevant for or affordable by most people, may not fit into alternatives.

**Alternative politics:** Initiatives and approaches towards people-centred governance and decision-making, including forms of direct democracy or swaraj in urban and rural areas, linkages of these to each other in larger landscapes, re-imagining current political boundaries to make them more compatible with ecological and cultural contiguities, promotion of the non-party political process, methods of increasing accountability and transparency of the government and of political parties, and progressive policy frameworks.

Examples include: the 30-year history of villages like Mendha-Lekha that have taken control over their commons and declared that for their settlements, they are the government (Pathak and Gour-Broome 2001; and http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/mendha-lekha-residents-gift-all-their-farms-to-gram-sabha); a decade-long experiment at ecoregional decision-making in the Arvati basin in Rajasthan (Hasnat 2005); and movements at gaining citizens’ right to information, independent oversight of governance through lokpals, public audits (e.g. for the National Employment Guarantee Scheme), and others.

**Knowledge and media:** Initiatives using knowledge and media as tools for transformation, including processes using modern and traditional, formal and informal, and urban and rural spheres of knowledge equitably, attempts to make knowledge part of the commons and freely accessible, and alternative and innovative use of media forms for communication.

Examples include the Urban SETU programme in Bhuj town, that uses communication (including a website ‘Bhuj Bole Chhe’) to bridge the gap between citizens and government (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/a-bridge-not-too-far/#.VgUFNMvtmko); and CGNetSwara, using mobile and radio technologies to make governance more accessible to adivasi villages in far-flung parts of Chhattisgarh (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/cell-phone-based-networking-system-in-the-forests/).

**Environment and ecology:** Initiatives that promote ecological sustainability, including community-led conservation of land, water and biodiversity, eliminating or minimising pollution and waste, reviving degraded ecosystems, creating awareness leading to greater respect for the sanctity of life and biodiversity of which humans are a part, and promoting ecological ethics.

There are thousands of examples of community conserved areas across India (see case studies at http://www.kalpavriksh.org/index.php/conservation-livelihoods1/community-conserved-areas); many initiatives at creating localised curricula and extra-curricular material on biodiversity for children and young adults; revival of rural and urban ecosystems such as the lakes of Bengaluru, Udaipur and Salem (Nagendra 2016; http://vikalpsangam.org/article/arnil-mehta-a-man-with-a-mission/#.VIYCL37hDIU; http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/life-of-pi-vush-21st-century-activist-salem/#.V6wEuWVktSo); and efforts at creating ‘zero-waste’ settlements or tourism (e.g., the work of the Khangchendzonga Conservation Committee in Sikkim, see http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/conerving-sacred-spaces-kanchendzonga-conservation-committee-sikkim/).

Superficial solutions to ecological problems, such as planting trees to offset pollution and carbon emissions rather than reducing the emissions, may not be considered alternatives.
Energy: Initiatives that encourage alternatives to the current centralized, environmentally damaging and unsustainable sources of energy, as also equitable access to the power grid, including decentralized, community-run renewable sources and micro-grids, equitable access to energy, promoting non-electric energy options, such as passive heating and cooling, reducing wastage in transmission and use, putting caps on demand, and advocating energy-saving and efficient materials.

Examples include a large number of decentralised renewable energy projects such as Dhamai micro-grid in Bihar (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/energy-empowerment-the-story-of-bijli-and-dhamai/#.VgaQefntmko) and SELCO’s work in southern India (http://www.selco-india.com).

What may not count are expensive, clitosist technologies and processes that have no relevance to the majority of people; or perhaps even large-scale centralised renewable energy projects built by private corporations and with the same problems of access for the poor that fossil-fuel based grid systems have. This latter issue is a major concern with the current government’s large-scale solar energy initiatives.

Learning and Education: Initiatives that enable children and others to learn holistically, rooted in local ecologies and cultures but also open to those from elsewhere, focusing not only on the mind but also the hands and the heart, enabling curiosity and questioning along with collective thinking and doing, nurturing a fuller range of collective and individual potentials and relationships, and synergising the formal and the informal, the traditional and modern, the local and global.

Examples are aplenty in India, though still marginal compared to the soul-deadening and status quo reinforcing mainstream education; these include the Ladakhi learning centre SECMOL, which runs an energy self-sufficient campus (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/secmol/#.V6t5Vt6vtnko); Adharshila in Madhya Pradesh, where adivasi kids and a couple of activists co-create study materials and the curricula is a mix of local knowledge based activities and inputs from outside (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/the-school-on-the-hill/#.V6tfmVkTSo); Imli-Mahua in Chhattisgarh with a completely unstructured learning environment for adivasi kids (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/imlee_mahuaa_learning2.pdf), several shalas in Kachchh where community experts in music, traditional architecture, farming, fishing, and other subjects, mentor young people in ways that can continue traditional skills and knowledge but also provide livelihood opportunities in the current economic context (e.g. Karigarshala for building and architecture, see https://issuu.com/hunnmarshala/docs/newsletter-voll).

Health and Hygiene: Initiatives ensuring universal good health and healthcare, through the prevention of ill-health in the first place by improving access to nutritional food, water, sanitation, and other determinants of health, ensuring access to curative/symptomatic facilities to those who have conventionally not had such access, integration of various health systems, traditional and modern, bringing back into popular use the diverse systems from India and outside including indigenous/folk medicine, nature cure, Ayurvedic, Unani and other holistic or integrative approaches, and community-based management and control of healthcare and hygiene.

Examples of such initiatives are growing in India, and include Swasthya Swara in Chhattisgarh (http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/swasthya-swara-a-unique-community-health-solution/#.V6tfv2VkTSo); and Tribal Health Initiative in Tamil Nadu (http://www.tribalhealth.org).

Food and Water: Initiatives towards security and sovereignty over food and water, by producing and making accessible safe and nutritious food, sustaining the diversity of Indian cuisine, ensuring community control over processes of food production and distribution, and commons from where uncultivated foods are obtained, promoting uncultivated and “wild” foods, making water storage, use and distribution decentralised, ecologically sustainable, efficient and equitable, producer-
consumer links, advocating the continuation of water as part of the commons, and promoting democratic governance of water and wetlands.

Examples abound in India: some like Deccan Development Society and Timbaktu Collective are mentioned above; Community Supported Agriculture in and around Pune (http://vikalpsangam.org/article/placing-faith-in-the-farmer/#VhYMxvntmko); hundreds of local water harvesting initiatives in rural and urban India (such as by Sahjeevan, ACT and other groups in Kachchh, see Desor 2014 and http://act-india.org).

Purely elitist food fads even if they pertain to healthy or organic food, and expensive technological water solutions that have no relevance for the majority of people, are unlikely to be considered as alternatives.

**Global Relations:** State or civil society initiatives that, in the words of the Framework, “offer an alternative to the prevalent state of dog-eat-dog, belligerent and hyper-competitive international relations fuelled by geopolitical rivalries”. These include cross-national dialogues among citizens and diplomats, moratoriums on increases in military, surveillance and police spending, bans on ‘harms’ trading (e.g. arms, toxic chemicals, waste), and even re-examining notions of ‘nation-state’ and emphasising relations amongst ‘peoples’ of the world.

Examples include the several people-to-people dialogues between citizens of India and Pakistan, and the positive (mostly in the past) advocacy of disarmament, non-alignment, environmental sustainability, and other such global policies by India.

What would not count as an alternative is the attempt by India and other emerging powerful economies (the BRICS nations) to provide a counter to the power of the USA and Europe, for even as it does so, it follows the same neoliberal, state-corporate dominated policies that the industrialised countries have done so far.

**What principles are expressed in alternatives?**

A crucial part of the Framework is the articulation of a set of principles, that underlie many of the alternative initiatives mentioned above or that have been shared at the various Sangams. This is recognising the fact that such initiatives vary widely, and none are replicable in precise form from one place to the other, given the diversity of local situations. Learning their underlying principles however may help to create similar alternatives elsewhere.

The Framework notes that these principles themselves are based on “more fundamental human ethical values that should be the bedrock of the principles below, including compassion, empathy, honesty & truthfulness, tolerance, generosity, caring, and others. These are espoused by most spiritual traditions and secular ethics, and are certainly worth keeping central to a discussion of the principles described below.”

The following principles are laid down by the Framework (with descriptions or definitions contained therein):

- Ecological integrity and the rights of nature
- Equity, justice, and inclusion
- Right to and responsibility of meaningful participation
- Diversity and pluralism
- Collective commons and solidarity with individual freedoms
- Resilience and adaptability
- Subsidiarity, self-reliance and ecoregionalism
What strategies could lead us to such alternative futures?
The Framework notes several strategies and actions needed to move towards a world based on the above key pillars and principles. The kind of networking and linking of alternatives that the Sangam is attempting, and promotion of further innovation along these lines, needs to be taken much further. But simultaneously, participants at all the Sangams have recognised the importance of “resistance, civil disobedience, and non-cooperation (both collective and individual) towards the forces of unsustainability, inequality and injustice, and the decolonisation of mind-sets and attitudes and institutions”. Along with these are actions to re-common what has been privatised or ‘enclosed’ in the past, facilitating the voice of dalits, adivasis, women, landless, disabled, minorities, nomads, ‘denotified’ tribes, workers, and other marginalised sections. Participants working on gender and sexuality issues stressed the strategy of exposing (‘counter-shaming’) those who display gender, sexual, or other stereotypical prejudices and biases; others mentioned the need for non-violent communication and resolution of disputes. Promoting public awareness regarding problems and solutions, and providing platforms for people of different faiths and cultures to understand and harmonise with each other, including through spiritual and ethical processes, has also been advocated. Through this and other means, taking responsibility for one’s own actions as part of personal changes, while promoting the sharing of knowledge, experiences, resources, and skills (including in non-monetary ways!), and engaging in continuous dialogue, have been mentioned in the Framework.

Other strategies given importance are engaging with political formations in both party and non-party form, and using available democratic means of redressal and transformation while pushing for further enhancement of such spaces. Creating consumer awareness and options for more socially and ecologically responsible consumption patterns, especially in cities, is mentioned. For creating awareness and fostering resistance and change, the use of both mainstream and alternative media and art forms is given importance. But art and crafts are also not for instrumentalist use only; it is vital to integrate these “into everyday lives, fostering the creative in every individual and collective, bringing work and pleasure together.”

An interesting discussion in the Sangam process has been the question of which ‘ideology’ do we base our exploration on? The collective wisdom emerging on this says it is important to “learn from both ‘classical’ and ‘folk’ traditions including humanitarian ones (eventually removing the dichotomy between them); from both prominent ideologists and thinkers (Gandhi, Marx, Phule, Ambedkar, Aurobindo, Tagore … others), feminists, environmentalists, and adivasi/indigenous/tribal/dalit worldviews”, and that this process also involve “mutual learning with other peoples and civilisations across the world.”

While the Framework lists such strategies and actions in a rather dry way, it is based on the knowledge that somewhere or the other in India, these are being practiced or explored already. Clearly they are still marginal to mainstream practice, but the fact that they exist is itself crucial, a sign of what is possible on a broader scale.

Could all this converge into holistic alternative worldviews?
Finally, the Framework lays out a set of questions that are important for further exploration, discussion, and resolution. It notes that such a process is crucial if the networking of alternative practices and concepts is to result in holistic alternative worldviews. I provide below these questions almost verbatim, editing only for brevity:

- Simplicity and sufficiency
- Dignity and creativity of labour and work
- Non-violence, harmony, peace
- Efficiency in production and consumption (in terms of energy and materials usage)
• "How strongly can we posit the community/collective as the fulcrum of power, rather than either the state or corporations?"
• How much are ancient practices and concepts still relevant; often co-opted by communal or capitalist/corporate forces, how can they be rescued from such misuse to further causes inclusive of all?
• How do we learn from worldviews usually submerged under the more dominant articulations, such as, for instance, the feminist?
• How do we make all this relevant to today’s India, including its youth, tapping into people’s need to see positive messages?
• How can these issues reach across to a wider (non-converted) public, what languages and forms of communication would work more effectively? How to combine reason and emotion in the messaging?
• What kind of transitions would work for those already caught in today’s dominant systems, including the urban middle classes; conversely, how to ensure that those already living relatively sustainable lives are enabled to continue and enhance them?
• Who would be the main political agents of change? How can mass movements that are resisting currently dominant systems, be engaged with for an orientation towards alternative futures?
• What processes can bring together the dispersed, fragmented, and diverse struggles working towards alternatives across India, on some common grounds and visions? How does this become a force for political change?
• Is there consensus on issue of private property?

Finally, participants of the Sangams have also asked of themselves: “How much are we as individuals or organisations living these values and principles? Are our organisations and our work based on solidarity, simplicity ... are there alternative economic options for our own work?”

Conclusion
The Vikalp Sangam process has, as one of its long-term objectives, the creation of a political mass of people who can affect larger change. It is too early in the process to say whether it is moving in this direction. The Framework described above could be one basis for an alternative, grassroots-up visioning of the future of India; but for this much more churning and dialogue is needed, and much greater work on creating peoples’ agendas in every sector or field of endeavour. As a follow up to the Energy Vikalp Sangam, for instance, there is some discussion on whether a citizens’ roadmap towards alternative energy for India can be developed, as a counter to the still fossil-fuel dominated focus of the government, to help influence future policy directions, and to give some holistic context to peoples’ own efforts at resisting dirty energy and tapping clean, decentralised sources. Similar processes could happen around food, learning and education, youth, the arts, cities, and other thematic areas around which Sangams are likely to be organised. In combination with similar networks and platforms that bring together other kinds of interest (such as writers, academics, workers’ groups, resistance movements), in what Ganesh Devy in a personal communication has recently called a ‘Sangam of Sangams’, this could be a powerful new movement to provide some light at the end of what currently seems a very dark passage through which India, and the world, are moving.

Notes
1. As of mid-2016, the following regional Sangams have been held: for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, at Timbaktu, October 2014; for Tamil Nadu, at Madurai, February 2015; for Ladakh, in Leh, July 2015; for Maharashtra, in Wardha, October 2015; and for Kachchh, in Bhuj, July 2016; coming up are a Sangam for Western Himalaya in August 2016, for Kerala in early 2017, and for Madhya Pradesh in mid-2017. Additionally, one thematic (national level) Sangam on Energy was held in Bodh Gaya in February 2017,
and others coming up are on Food (September 2016), Youth (February 2017), and Learning & Education (mid-2017).

2. This framework was first prepared in 2014 to stimulate dialogue in the Vikalp Sangam process. The version referred to in this article is based on comments received on successive drafts at the first four Vikalp Sangams (Timbaktu, October 2014; Madurai, February 2015; Ladakh, July 2015; and Wardha, October 2015), at the Vikalp Sangam Core Group meeting (December 2015), and other comments received orally or on email. For the full Framework in its current (4th) avatar, see http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles-4th-draft/. For comments and correspondence: Ashish Kothari, chikikothari@gmail.com

3. In an earlier form these were expressed as pillars of an alternative future, see Kothari 2014

4. 'Culture' here is used to mean ways of being and knowing, including language, rituals, norms, ethics and values, worldviews and cosmovisions, lifestyles, links with the rest of nature, and knowledge.

5. This section is adapted from broad guidance used by the website www.vikalpsangam.org. Other sectors and aspects could be added.

6. This is partly based on work done by Lenka Topinkova, a Czech intern who worked at Kalpavriksh, Pune, in 2015.

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