

POWER IN INDIA: RADICAL PATHWAYS

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Summary

India has strongly entrenched power hierarchies that have historical roots but have also been exacerbated by inequalities and injustices that have deepened with economic globalisation. However grassroots political movements are emerging in India that could signal a gradual shift to direct or radical democracy, coupled with making representative democracy more accountable and ecologically sustainable.

ILLUSTRATION NOTE

Gond indigenous children from the Indian village of Menda-Lekha village, a community that practices the principle of decision-making by consensus, has ended private land-ownership, and is moving towards meeting all its basic needs in terms of food, water, energy and livelihoods.

‘Our government is in Mumbai and Delhi, but we are the government in our village’, Mendha-Lekha village, Maharashtra.

‘These hills and forests belong to Niyamraja, they are the basis of our survival and livelihoods, we will not allow any company to take them away from us’, Dongria Kondh adivasis (indigenous people), Odisha.

‘Seeds are the core of our identity, our culture, our livelihoods, they are our heritage and no government agency or corporation can control them’, Dalit women of Deccan Development Society, Telangana.

These three assertions of ‘ordinary’ people in different parts of India suggest the basis of a radical restructuring of political relations and a significant deepening of democracy.¹

The village of Mendha-Lekha, in Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra state, has a population of about 500 Gond *adivasis*, ‘tribals’ or indigenous people. About 30 years ago these people adopted the principle of decision-making by consensus at the full village assembly. The villagers do not allow any government agency or politician to take decisions on their behalf, nor may a village or tribal chief do so on his/her own. This

In 2013 all the village land-owners decided to place their lands in the ‘commons’, effectively ending private land-ownership

is part of a ‘tribal self-rule’ campaign underway in some parts of India, though few villages have managed to achieve complete self-rule (*swaraj*, an Indian concept we discuss below).

A struggle in the 1980s against a major dam that was to displace Mendha-Lekha and dozens of other villages highlighted the importance of self-mobilisation.² Since then the village has

conserved 1,800 hectares of surrounding forest, and recently gained full rights to use, manage, and protect it under the Forest Rights Act 2006, reversing centuries of colonial and post-colonial forest governance.³ The community has moved towards meeting its basic needs in terms of food, water, energy and livelihoods through, among other things, the

sustainable harvesting and sale of bamboo. In 2013 all the village land-owners decided to place their lands in the 'commons', effectively ending private land-ownership, using the long-forgotten Gramdan Act of 1964. Decisions at the village assembly are taken on the basis of information generated by *abhyas gats* (study circles) on a host of topics, in which villagers combine their own knowledge and wisdom with the knowledge of civil society organisations (CSOs), academics and government officials who are sensitive to the villagers' worldview.

In Udaipur district of Rajasthan state, several villages, facilitated by CSOs, have carried out detailed resource mapping and planning, and have mobilised to ensure that earmarked government budgets are spent in line with community priorities.⁴ Similar planning exercises are being conducted where villages have established their rights under the Forest Rights Act, or the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, or similar state legislation in Maharashtra, Gujarat, and other states. These village-level experiments have some parallels in urban or larger levels. In the state of Nagaland, a government initiative called "communitisation" has devolved aspects of decision-making regarding health, education and power (e.g. salaries and transfers of teachers) to village and town communities.⁵ Cities such as Bengaluru and Pune are exploring participatory budgeting, entitling citizens to submit their spending priorities to influence the official budgets. While this approach has faced number of pitfalls and shortcomings, such as local elite dominance, and the fact that citizens do not *determine* spending priorities, civil society groups see it as a step towards decentralising political governance.⁶

These acts of reconfiguration and reconstruction run parallel to an equally strong trend towards resistance to the mainstream economy and polity. The second of the statements at the start of this essay comes from the ancient indigenous *adivasi* group (in India called a 'scheduled tribe', referring to a listing in the Constitution) of Dongria Kondh, which was catapulted into national and global limelight when the UK-based transnational corporation (TNC) Vedanta proposed to mine bauxite in the hills where they live. The Dongria Kondh pointed out that these hills were their sacred territory, and also crucial for their livelihoods and

cultural existence. When the state gave its permission for the corporation to begin mining, the Dongria Kondh, supported by civil society groups, took the matter to various levels of government, the courts, and even Vedanta shareholders in London! The Indian Supreme Court ruled that as a culturally important site for the Dongria Kondh, the government required the peoples' approval, a crucial order that established the right of consent (or rejection) to affected communities, somewhat akin to the global indigenous peoples' demand for 'free and prior informed consent' (FPIC) now enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We will come back later to the third of the statements quoted above, of the Dalit women.

Faultlines in Indian democracy

Experiments of the above kind that are attempting to usher in a new future are strongly confronted by an entrenched power dynamic in India, which has at the national level seen a worsening of inequities in many forms.

For instance, the richest 10% in India hold 75% of total wealth, and 370 times the share of the poorest 10%. For the super rich, the top 1%, the situation is even more breathtaking – they now account for nearly 50% of the country's total private wealth, about \$1.75 trillion!⁷ The picture for the underprivileged is in complete contrast. Thirty years ago, before it opened up the economy, India accounted for about 20% of the world's poorest. Today, close to 33% of the world's poorest, about 400 million, live in India – in other words, about 33% of India's population live on less than \$1 a day, totally inadequate to provide basic food except in forested or coastal areas that still have enough available natural resources. Not surprisingly, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), a third of the world's malnourished children are Indian; 46% of all Indian children below the age of three are stunted and 47% are undernourished. Consequently, "India accounts for 20% of child mortality worldwide".⁸ Nearly 25% of the Indian population is also unable to read and write, which did not matter when survival and livelihoods were based on natural resources and

farms (and in fact where oral knowledge was crucial), but increasingly disables people seeking other kinds of work.⁹

The Indian elite, on the other hand, is moving on a completely different trajectory, accruing enormous benefits from the market-driven economy and aspiring to the lifestyle of the global elite, which obviously places huge pressure on the global ecology. As Kothari and Shrivastava pointed out in *Churning The Earth*, “the per capita ecological footprint of the richest one percent in India is 17 times that of the poorest 40 percent, already above the global acceptable limit of 1.8 global hectares of consumption of earth’s resources”.¹⁰ The neoliberal economy adopted by the Indian elite in 1991 has ultimately led to an environmental disaster, one (and only one) indication of which is that Indian cities have the world’s highest levels of pollution. Air pollution-related diseases affect a third or more of Delhi’s children, in particular the poor.¹¹

The location of “power” in the current structure of Indian democracy was influenced by inequalities that emerged as an ancient society evolved, and further rigidified in colonial times, notably (but not only) the Hindu caste system or “*varnashram*” in Sanskrit. A significant determinant of the stability and efficacy of any kind of power relationship is the internalisation of its logic. The Indian caste system is probably the most successful illustration of that societal order, rooted in an intangible yet powerful notion of ‘purity’ of a person and even a group. In fact, people derive their relative purity from what the scriptures ascribe to a caste to which they belong. The priest is the epitome of purity while the “untouchable” occupies the bottom of the pile as the caretaker of corpses and scavenger of excreta.

The exclusion of the “untouchables” or Dalits (translated as the “broken” people) from Indian society because of their occupation is a continuing moral outrage for a country that claims to be the world’s largest democracy. Today 1.3 million Dalits still survive solely through scavenging.¹² In Mumbai, Dalits are lowered into manholes to clear

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sewage blockages – often with no protection – and over 100 workers die every year due to inhaling toxic gases or drowning in excrement. One would be hard pressed to think of any other occupation in the modern world that is both so degrading and dangerous. As B.R. Ambedkar, a harsh critic of caste and the religious precept behind it, said, “Caste is a state of mind. It is a disease of mind. The teachings of the Hindu religion are the root cause of this disease. We practice casteism and we observe untouchability because we are enjoined to do so by the Hindu religion”.¹³

The relationship between caste and power has shifted in contemporary India given the pulls and pushes of modernisation that have brought people into shared spaces, both physical and intellectual, whether or they liked it or not. The labour market and the chaotic process of urbanisation have further accentuated that movement. Some observers argue that economic liberalisation in India has enabled Dalits to move out of their wretched existence. Yet, even if a few Dalits (as also other historically marginalised groups like *adivasis*, Muslims, and women) have seized the opportunity of the market to advance their cause, this appears to be restricted to individuals rather than in any significant way to the social sector. The vast majority of Dalits remain marginalised, and have become even more so as their natural resources or traditional survival skills and occupations are snatched away or rendered unusable by the same liberalisation process. This includes significant de-skilling of manual occupations like crafts and agriculture.

Apart from castes, other social relationships are also glaringly inequitable. Women, for example, have secondary status at home and in the workplace; only 64.6% of Indian women can read or write compared to 80.9% of men, which as noted above has a significantly disabling impact in a modernising world.¹⁴ There continue to be high levels of violence and discrimination against women, including female infanticide in some parts of India, lack of access to food and other determinants of health, and denial of rights to land or other resources crucial for livelihoods. Similarly, discrimination against religious minorities, particularly Muslims, is acute and widespread. In many towns Muslims find it difficult to rent or buy residential property, thus becoming increasingly ghettoised in shrinking

neighbourhoods. They have the country's highest school dropout rates, and between the ages of five to 29 years the Muslim community has the lowest enrolment at 46.2%.¹⁵ The condition of the Indian tribal population is not much different. With the rapid and indiscriminate expansion of economic liberalisation, *adivasi* and other forest-dwelling communities are increasingly losing forest areas to so-called development projects.¹⁶

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How has India's version of democracy affected both traditional and new power inequities? At one level, in a political structure heavily dependent on periodic government elections (central, state and local), those with numerical strength can at least in theory have a significant say. Indeed, Dalits and other marginalised castes, Muslims and other minorities, *adivasis*, women and others have been able to affect electoral fortunes to varying degrees. Second, constitutional and legal affirmative action, such as reservations in government jobs and educational institutions, has enabled some mobility out of oppression. However, as clear from statistics quoted above, unequal power relations characterise much of Indian society, both traditional and modern. One crucial reason is that India has depended on *representative* democracy, in which power is held by

a minority that, even if elected by the majority, tends both to mirror social power inequities and to concentrate power. For instance, after nearly 70 years of such democracy, most positions of bureaucratic power remain with the 'higher' castes and middle or upper classes. Without a fundamental change in the form of democracy, this is likely to characterise India for a long time to come.

Similarly India's multi-party system – while allowing for a diversity of political actors – has been characterised by caste identity, corruption, communalism (religious hegemonies and intolerance), and dynastic power. This is not to say that real-life issues of basic needs and wellbeing have been completely ignored, but they often take the back seat, and

when progressive policies are enacted (and India has many), their implementation hits roadblocks due to the features mentioned above. Very recently, a new political formation that arose out of large-scale protests regarding corruption, the Aam Aadmi Party, provided hope of a cleaner, more substance-based politics, but it too has become mired in controversy due to an authoritarian ruling clique.

The picture is by no means simple, though. There have been attempts to “decentralise” power; for instance, the Constitution mandates governance by *panchayats* at the village and village cluster level, by *ward committees* at the urban ward level, and similar bodies at larger geographical scale such as district *panchayats* (through amendments made in the early 1980s). However, these representative bodies are subject to the same problems (albeit to a lesser degree) that plague representative democracy at higher levels, including elite capture and halting implementation. Also, the failure to devolve financial and legal powers, has limited effective decentralisation.

Some states have taken legal steps, such as Madhya Pradesh’s Gram Swaraj Act 2001, mandating decision-making by village assemblies – although implementation has been weak. There are also more successful models like Nagaland’s communitisation mentioned above, but these are exceptions.

Finally, while in the socialist economic system in the first few decades after Independence, the state wielded considerable power over the means of production, since the late 1980s and especially early 1990s, India has become increasingly capitalist, with enormous concentration of economic power in the corporate sector. Even the slow progress towards equitable distribution of resources under the pre-1990s regimes has now been thrown out in the name of globalised development.¹⁷

Radical democracy or swaraj

Given the overall context of power inequities outlined above, do the kind of initiatives outlined at the start of this essay provide hope for

substantial change, or are they destined to remain isolated and small? We analyse what could be a vision for the future based on existing initiatives and conceptual frameworks, and look at possible pathways to transformation.

Central to this is the Indian concept of *swaraj*, roughly (but poorly) translated as 'self-rule' or 'home rule'. Popularised by Gandhi as part of the freedom struggle, the concept is possibly much older. In Gandhi's usage, it embraces the idea of the individual's freedom to act ethically and within a collective context and, as well as local self-reliance for survival and livelihoods, and an entire people's or nation's independence.¹⁸ It equates such freedoms with responsibility for the freedoms of others and integrates the spiritual, ethical, economic, social and political domains in complex ways. It is as much about self-restraint (e.g. of one's desires) as it is about freedom from restraints (from the state or others imposing from above). Crucially relevant to this essay, Gandhi explicitly said that the state was antithetical to the notion of *swaraj* because it concentrated power away from the people.

At their most basic, the village *swaraj* experiments described above are about locating political power at the smallest unit of collective decision-making (beyond the individual family) – the village, the urban neighbourhood, the educational institution, the CSO – where people can meet face to face. At larger scales, it is about the interconnections between such basic political units at greater geographical and thematic scales in ways that hold such institutions accountable to the grassroots. At an even more complex level, it is also about the democratisation of economic relations, and of a host of other imperatives such as social justice and equity, and ecological sustainability.

Radical democracy goes well beyond the 'representative' democracy approach adopted by countries like India. The current dominant model is one in which those who win elections or are nominated to positions in decision-making institutions from local to national level, accrue

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enormous power to themselves (or are conferred it by prevailing laws), and have little or very inadequate accountability to those who elected or nominated them. Citizens who feel aggrieved if their representatives fail to perform as they would have liked, do have some means of redress including the courts. Ultimately, though, the only effective redress is the next elections or nomination process. Meanwhile, most citizens simply have to bide their time, or at least be convinced that this is all they can do.

One of Mendha-Lekha village's mechanisms for direct democracy is decision by consensus. Until every person in the assembly has agreed, no decision is taken. Even this could be subject to inequities of articulacy, time, and social factors, albeit much less prevalent in *adivasi* or indigenous populations than in others. This (and the situation of large-scale decision-making, to which we come back below) is where a maturing of democracy is needed, where through formal and informal processes, the majority are sensitive to the vulnerabilities and voices of the minority, where hidden or subtle inequities are resisted, where elders or 'leaders' (including youth) consciously identify and suggest ways out of such traps. In many of the examples given in this essay, civil society or government officials may at times play a mediating or facilitating role for such processes, especially where traditional power structures are inequitable. The work of organisations or movements such as Timbaktu Collective in Andhra Pradesh, or Maati women's collective in Uttarakhand, illustrates such facilitation.¹⁹

Moving beyond the local

The local and the small scale cannot by themselves make changes at the macro level, and direct democracy would obviously not work at larger scales. Many functions need to be coordinated and managed well beyond the local level, such as railways and communication services. Many problems (such as toxics and pollution, desertification, climate change) are at scales much larger than individual settlements, emanating from and affecting entire landscapes (and seascapes), countries, regions, and indeed the planet. And macroeconomic and

political structures need forces of change at the macro level, including in the form of environmentally and culturally sensitive global governance. The challenge is how to incorporate principles of radical democracy and apply them at these different scales.

In a radical democracy scenario, such larger-level governance structures need to emanate from the basic decentralised decision-making units. These are envisaged as clusters or federations of villages and towns with common ecological features, larger landscape-level institutions, and others that in some way also relate to existing administrative and political units of districts and states. Governance across states, and across countries, of course presents special challenges; there are a number of lessons to be learnt from failed or only partially successful initiatives such as the Kyoto protocol or sub-national regional initiatives such as river-basin planning authorities in India.

Landscape and trans-boundary planning and governance (also called 'bioregionalism', or 'ecoregionalism', among other terms) are exciting new approaches being tried out in several countries and regions. These are as yet fledgling in India, but some are worth learning from. For a decade, the Arvari Sansad (Parliament) in Rajasthan brought 72 villages together to manage a 400 km² river basin through inter-village coordination,

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making integrated plans and programmes for land, agriculture, water, wildlife, and development.²⁰ Its functioning has weakened in recent times, but it provides an important example from which to learn. In the state of Maharashtra, a federation of Water User Associations manages the Waghad Irrigation Project, the first time a government project has been completely devolved to local people. This has led to a much greater emphasis

on equity in water distribution and access, and greater possibility of public monitoring, compared to more centralised irrigation governance systems.²¹ Examples of this kind are found in other countries, including Australia, where the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative seeks to integrate governance and management of landscapes over 3,600 km².²²

Though rural and urban communities will be the fulcrum of alternative futures, the state has a critical supporting and enabling role to play at least in the near future. It needs to retain, or rather strengthen, its welfare role for historically or newly marginalised sectors, support communities where local capacity is weak, regulate and hold liable businesses or others who behave irresponsibly towards the environment or people. It will have to be held accountable for its role as guarantor of the fundamental rights that each citizen is supposed to enjoy under the Constitution of India, including through policy measures such as the Right to Information Act 2005. This important law was born out of a peoples' movement demanding access to government records, especially to fight financial corruption; possibly one of the world's most powerful examples of legislation on information access, this has slowly begun to make central power more accountable to citizens. Finally, the state has a critical role in larger global relations between peoples and nations.

Over time, however, national boundaries would become far less divisive and important in the context of genuine globalisation. The increasing networking of peoples across the world, both traditional and digital, is already a precursor to such a process. Cultural and ecological identities that are rooted in the people or community to which one belongs and the ecoregion where one lives, as well as those being formed through digital media, may gain in importance, defined by celebrating diversity, with the openness to mutual learning and support.

Across all levels of decision-making there is the need to ensure that representatives are accountable. Lessons could be learnt from ancient Greek and Indian democracies (while not ignoring their exclusion of women or others), and from experiments in Latin and Central America such as the *consejos comunales* (communal councils) in Venezuela and the Zapatista-governed region of Mexico.²³ These examples include highly constrained 'delegated' responsibility whereby representatives are subject to clear mandates given by the delegators or electorate rather than attaining independent power, they can be recalled, must report back, among other obligations.

Power is not only political: towards eco-swaraj or radical ecological democracy

A crucial lesson from India's experience and similar attempts to re-imagine democracy is that a radical redistribution of political power can be effective only if it is accompanied by the restructuring of economic and social power relations.

Economic democratisation will entail changes in many aspects: the relations of producers with their means and modes of production, robust producer-consumer links and the transformation of both producers and consumers into "prosumers", progressive localisation of economic activity relating to the meeting of basic needs such that clusters of settlements can be relatively self-reliant or self-sufficient, encouragement of non-monetised or local exchange systems for products and services, and fundamental changes in macroeconomic theory and policy. An increasing number of companies and cooperatives, run democratically and with the ability to gain some level of control over the market, now exist in India, such as Dharani Farming and Marketing Mutually Aided Cooperative set up by the Timbaktu Collective in Andhra Pradesh, the textile producer company Qasab and others in Kachchh, Gujarat, and the SWaCH cooperative of wastepicker women in Pune, Maharashtra.²⁴ These are still marginal but show the possibilities of countering the trend towards privatisation and corporatisation.

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Interesting notions of localised economies, their fundamentals akin to Gandhi's notion of self-reliance elaborated by the economist JC Kumarappa,²⁵ have been put forward by organisations and individuals. These include the former *dalit sarpanch* of Kuthambakkam village, Ramaswamy Elango, and the organisation Bhasha working in *adivasi* areas of southern Gujarat, both of which propose clusters of rural (or rural and urban) areas in which all or most basic needs are produced and exchanged locally, reducing dependence on outside state or market systems.²⁶

Simultaneous to economic democratisation is the need to challenge other social inequities, including in India those of caste, gender and class. Here too, a number of grassroots initiatives are showing some pathways; the Dalit women farmers of Deccan Development Society quoted in at the start of this essay, for instance, have thrown off their socially oppressed status (combining caste and gender-based discrimination) by achieving a remarkable revolution in sustainable farming, alternative media, and collective mobilisation. Where once they were shunned as Dalits, marginalised as women, and poverty-stricken as marginal farmers with few productive assets, they are now assertive, self-confident controllers of their own destiny, having achieved full food sovereignty using local seeds and inputs, producers of their own visual and audio media, advocates for local to global policy change, and in many other ways.²⁷

Finally, and as a base for all of the above, there is an urgent need to move towards ecological sustainability. Several analyses of the impact of economic globalisation and centralised governance have shown that India is already on the steep descent into unsustainability. This can be seen in the continuing decline of forest quality and plunging of groundwater levels. India is the world's third largest carbon emitter as is its ecological footprint -, and ecological damage is already causing turmoil and dispossession in the lives of tens of millions of people.²⁸ No amount of restructuring of power relations will work in the long run if the very ecological foundations of life are undermined; by the same token, the protection of these foundations also requires that people at the grassroots can take power into their own hands.

Combining these elements there emerges a framework of an alternative future, called *eco-swaraj* or radical ecological democracy (RED).²⁹ The notion is conceptually simple but functionally complex: *a process or system in which every person and community is empowered to be part of decision-making, in ways that are ecologically sustainable and socially equitable.* It is based on the pillars of ecological sustainability and resilience, social justice and equity, direct democracy, economic democracy and localisation, and cultural diversity.

Pathways into the future: can alternative initiatives change the big picture?

The introduction of RED in India or elsewhere is obviously not going to be an easy or smooth task, and there is no automatic move from local or regional initiatives of direct democracy to change at national (or global) levels. The entrenched ruling elite exercises domination through various time-tested tactics and will continue to counter any threat to its survival. It inflicts symbolic violence by restrictive economic opportunities, subsistence wages and punitive labour laws to maintain its primacy. In recent times it has come down heavily on civil society, using arbitrary powers to cancel registrations or licenses. The most glaring is the continuing attack on Greenpeace India, whose funds have been frozen by the Ministry of Home Affairs for “irregular activities”, while it is clear that the State feels threatened by the group’s effective campaigning against coal mining and thermal power stations.³⁰ Through its nexus

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with the media, the elite also continually controls and manipulates the narrative of that interaction to its advantage. Nor does it shy from physical violence, for instance to deal with labour protests, those opposing forcible land acquisition, or movements for relative autonomy in northeast India. The militant opposition to these tactics by an organised ultra-left

rebellion in central India is a worrying sign. Although violent resistance has failed to mobilise society and provide a meaningful way to challenge unequal power, it is increasingly easy to understand why communities are resorting to counter-violence, or supporting “Maoist” or “Naxalite” groups that use outright violence against representatives of the state.

The threat of violence has always existed behind the expression of power. According to Hannah Arendt, power is not created through violence; in fact when it uses violence it is eventually destroyed. In words that turned out to be quite prophetic in her analysis of totalitarian states, Arendt affirmed: “Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance”.³¹

In this light, does the rise in class, caste, communal, gender and ethnic violence in India point towards the unravelling of its power structure? Is violence the sign of a change, albeit slow and messy? It feels as if India's power structures are stretched at the seams and falling apart. Violence fills the vacuum sporadically but without providing long-term stability.

What, then, is the way out of the cycle of discrimination, exploitation and violence in India? It has to be found in the attempts at bringing together peoples' movements, supportive CSOs, intellectuals and artists, and other sectors into various networks of resistance and reconstruction. As in the case of the Dongria Kondh challenge to Vedanta, across India hundreds of acts of resistance and rebellion are going on at any given time, against land grabs, forest diversion, displacement, caste and gender-based violence, arbitrary exercise of power in academic institutions, unemployment and underpayment, corruption, the politician-business nexus, scarcities of water and food, government attempts to curb freedom of speech and dissent, and so on. There is inadequate documentation to give an idea of the scale of such resistance, but media and CSO reports suggest it is widespread and substantial enough to worry the State and corporate bodies. These movements and groups stand on the cusp of an alliance-forming moment, which they need to seize.

On 2 December 2014, some 15,000 to 20,000 people from formations working on the rights of peasants, fishers, industrial workers, adivasis, wastepickers, street hawkers, children, women, and the rights to health, education, livelihoods, and the environment rallied in Delhi and pledged to join hands to defeat the entrenched power elite. They came together under the slogan '*abki baar hamara adhikar*' ('this time around, our rights'). While no formal alliance was announced, the movements agreed to continue working together on these issues. Whether such an informal alliance will last remains to be seen. Already platforms like the National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (NAPM), one of the core organisers of the rally, suggest the beginnings of a broader coalition of change-makers. Out of the breakdown of the Aam Aadmi Party (mentioned above) has also emerged a fledgling mobilisation called Swaraj Abhiyan which has promised to avoid the pitfalls of centralised power that AAP succumbed to.

But beyond building resistance movements, there is also what these moments and movements produce, based on practice and exploration, to envision what a sustainable, equitable and just India would look like. A process of bringing together people working on such alternatives, Vikalp Sangam ('Alternatives Confluence'), hopes to provide inputs for such envisioning.³² Starting in 2014, several regional Sangams have been held and several more are coming up; thematic Sangams on issues such as energy, learning and education, youth needs and aspirations, urban sustainability and equity, and knowledge democracy, are being planned; and these will ideally coalesce in a series of national Sangams over the next few years. Through all this, a framework like *eco-swaraj* or Radical Ecological Democracy could become the ideological catalyst for this alliance.

Given adequate networking and collaborations among various mass movements (including labour unions) and CSOs, and through increasing advocacy with political parties, these could provide pathways to a new power dynamic in India. The small, incremental changes taking place all over India – in rural communities, *adivasi* territories, and urban neighbourhoods – are the necessary steps towards redefining the relationship between ecology and economy, between the individual and the collective and most importantly, between human beings and the Earth. People are recognising that the current power dispensation is frozen in an intellectual paradigm defined by free-market orthodoxy and will change only if confronted by worldviews such as *swaraj* or Radical Ecological Democracy. India (and the world) needs that change in order to continue to thrive.



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Pallav Das has pursued a twin-track career in environmental conservation and creative communications. He has designed and launched innovative campaigns, and founded and led private and non-profit organisations, including Kalpavriksh. Pallav has documented some of India's most pressing development challenges through his film work, including films on violence against women and the threat of HIV/AIDS among street children.

Endnotes

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