

Indigenous and Community Worldviews Vikalp Sangam

6 - 8 November 2022





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The Sangam planning was facilitated by Shrishtee Bajpai (Kalpavriksh) and Lakhmi Venugopal (Inner Climate Academy) along with Minket Lepcha, C Made Gowda, Stan Thekaekara, Virginius Xaxa, Uttam Bathari, Ashish Kothari, Lakshmi Venugopal, Shruti Ajit, Urvi Shah, Ameer Hamja, Shubhada Deshmukh, Mayalmit Lepcha, Seno Tsuhah, and Neema Pathak Broome.

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Welcoming and Context Setting

The Indigenous and Community Worldviews Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence), a gathering of Adivasi, pastoral, farmer and other communities, and civil society organizations, was conducted on 6-8 November 2022. This gathering was organized by [Kalpavriksh](#), [Inner Climate Academy](#), and hosted by [Timbaktu Collective](#), an initiative promoting transformations towards equity and sustainability in over 300 villages in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. It was an attempt to highlight diverse ways of being and living and knowing of such communities across India, and to enable greater understanding and collaboration amongst them. The participants included members of Adivasi or Indigenous communities like Warli, Mishmi, Dimasa, Gond, Soliga, Chakhesang, Oraon, Meena, and Lepcha, pastoral Maldhari and Van Gujjar communities, and Dalit women farmers from Telangana.

The intent of the organising team in planning the Sangam was to have

- An open, non-judgmental, non-hierarchical, non-patronizing, non-domineering, non-criminalizing, non-colonizing, non-romanticizing, non-extractive being to allow for diverse ways of expression and safe space that is co-designed by all the constituent members of the meeting.
- A self-reflective space that is able to narrate its objectives, intentions and actions together.

- A respectful, mindful and reciprocal space that is facilitated by keeping issues of power, hierarchies and extractive relationships in mind. (across ethnicities, genders, caste, classes, and generations) Collaborative and process-oriented space that can enable collective envisioning and ways to tackle the challenges of the present times.

It was quite challenging to define worldviews while planning the Sangam along with all participants. The description below was put together by the organising team in a background note that was shared before the gathering:

"By worldview, we refer here to a set of ethical principles and beliefs that underlie human behaviour, that set the tone for our relations with the rest of nature and with other humans, that define our spiritualities or ethics, life philosophies. For many people, this would be equivalent to cosmology, but since this term connotes a necessarily spiritual or religious frame (in the sense of supernatural phenomena), we use here a broader term that could also encompass non-spiritual ethics. For most purposes, however, the two terms could be used interchangeably. In an effort to encompass spiritual and non-spiritual ethics, we hope the concept encompasses plural values, feelings, understandings, and perspectives. Importantly, we include not only indigenous peoples and other traditional local communities but also collectives in 'modern' settings including cities in the industrial world."

Intentions of the Sangam

1. To help foster a space that can gather indigenous and other traditional/local communities and knowledge-keepers, thinkers, practitioners, activists, and researchers, together and grapple with solutions to the current ecological, social, economic and other related crises.
2. To voice a collective vision emerging from / informed by a diversity of indigenous peoples and local communities, cosmovisions, wisdom and perspectives to move towards a just, equitable and ecologically resilient future.
3. To nurture and design the Sangam in a way that is based on ancient knowledges and embodies the decolonial ways of coming together, designing, dialoguing, networking, and researching.
4. As activists, researchers, collaborators (not from indigenous communities or other local communities) to re-discover our own sense of relationship (to self, the other and the rest of nature) and belonging and what social transformations mean from that perspective.
5. It was also imperative that all participants had equal opportunities to present their thoughts and participate in dialogues. (The diversity of participants and languages presented a communication challenge. This was looked after with the help of whisper translations by the organising team throughout the event.)

Some questions participants arrived with:

“How can indigenous people and non-indigenous people collaborate? What is the right way to do something like this? What can we collectively learn from the past and respond to in the future?”

“Even though North-east India is considered as one unit, or ‘Adivasis’ are painted in the same light across India. We are all quite different and diverse. How might we represent indigenous communities from our respective parts and talk about the commonalities and values we come with?”

“We are all going through a global crisis and the question is - Do we as communities have answers or responses to this? Are communities hopeful?”

“All communities have various and diverse views embedded in their roots, how do we unfurl those? The world states only one way of progress and success, which is seemingly destructive. How do we find alternatives to those through our diverse worldviews?”

About Vikalp Sangam

Vikalp Sangam ([alternatives confluence](#)) is an evolving process that was seeded in 2014, emerging out of a search for grounded alternatives to the current model of ‘development’ that is built on ecological destruction and rising inequalities. It, at the moment, involves in its core functioning, over 80 movements and organisations in India.

As Vikalp Sangam’s background note states: Alternatives refer to ways of meeting human needs and aspirations, without trashing the earth and without leaving half of humanity behind. These refer to grassroots initiatives for basic needs, processes of direct political and economic democracy, struggles for justice and equality, policies, technologies and concepts/frameworks that challenge structures of oppression, inequality and unsustainability. They could be initiated and implemented by communities, government, civil society organisations and individuals amongst others.

The Sangam process weaves alternatives through dialogues, confluences, conversations, documentation, fostering collaborations and future envisioning. These are informed by the daily resistances of many communities across India, their practices of alternatives, ancient philosophical practices, arts, and sciences at the service of caring life, and the politics of life. It is a confluence where people share, collaborate, and reflect on their experiences and knowledge. Additionally, the Sangam groups engage in collective advocacy for policy and systemic transformations.

Seeding Ceremony

Our day started with a sharing of Timbaktu's work across 185 villages in eight mandals of the drought-prone and ecologically challenged Ananthapuramu District in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India by Bablu Ganguly and Mary Vattamattam.



After which, the seeding ceremony, facilitated by Lakshmi Venugopal was a gathering of all participants in a circle. Here, each participant expressed the significance of an artifact they carried from their region of belonging and placed it in the center of the circle. This was an invitation for more sharing and understanding of where each one is coming from, and what activities they are engaged in. Participants enriched the space by offering various seeds, plants, crafts, food, etc. This sharing built a foundation to understand the diversity of worldviews.

Vikalp Sangam Framework Introduction

Facilitated by Ashish Kothari, the Vikalp Sangam Framework note was discussed. This note attempts to lay out some thoughts on the principles and strategies underlying the VS process and is offered as one means to stimulate dialogue and visioning. Find the [Framework note here](#).

Reflections:

- ➔ It was expressed that how the Sangam influences the people is important. The way it affects thoughts and values helps build a movement, enables critical thinking, etc determines further actions.
- ➔ This is a space where networking and learning from one another takes place and one does not feel alone in their struggles but instead draws strength from each other.
- ➔ It is easy to start something but sustaining it is very difficult. To make this network possible, many people/networks who have been a part of this process have been trying to tie the process together for years. The network has tried to create an atmosphere where it is established that everyone is equal and the democratic processes in decision-making are followed.

- Some comments shared were, *“How do the Indigenous people and Adivasis want their knowledge to be shared? How do we create a space which understands that collaborative spirit, and do it in a non-extractive way by not commodifying the knowledge? How would the indigenous communities take ownership of sharing their knowledge?”*
- All communities have their own traditional knowledge. Development for the indigenous communities should come from the indigenous communities, not from the state.
- When the subject of resilience and response to crisis was being discussed, many participants responded, *“We are from different landscapes and ecologies, and it is not possible to provide a single solution to all our varied challenges. What are we in this for? Are we here to share stories or also weave stories from each other’s lives? A good intention of being here would be about building solidarity by sharing stories and responses to various crises.”*

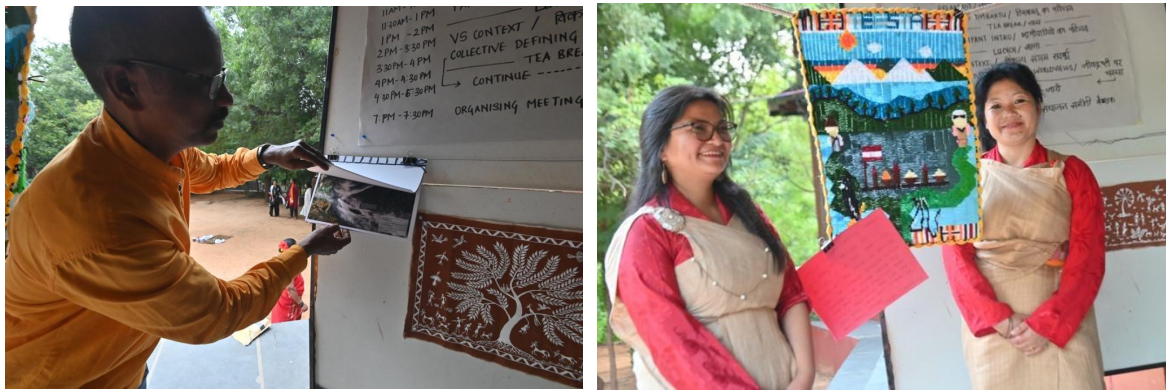


Fig 1. A Warli painting exhibit by Akash Bhoir from Aarey, Maharashtra, and an illustrated folk narrative by Alyen Foning a muun, a traditional female shaman of the Lepcha tribe which takes us on a journey of the tribe’s origins, it’s connection to the ancestors, mother earth, and the sacred waters through the muun’s vision of the water dragon.

Fig 2. Folklore by Jasmine Lepcha based on the Lepcha legend of two rivers as a cross stitch. Jasmine feels that youth spend so much time trapped into technology, the appeal of making something with her own hand was much greater. She writes, “While I was showing Teesta and Rangeet through my artwork, it was not merely two rivers but the collective emotions that we Mutanchi Rongkup Rumkup (Children of Mother Nature and God) have towards them. With every stitch, I have woven the love and gratification that I have towards the epic Teesta-Rangeet.”

What are Alternative Worldviews?



Facilitated by Stan Thakaekara, the aim of this session was to unfold an understanding of an alternate worldview, i.e. a worldview that is fundamentally different from the currently dominant mindset of 'development' and 'progress'. *"Do we have alternative worldviews, and if so, are these being submerged by the dominant views? Where do our worldviews come from? Does the history of indigenous and Adivasi people give them an alternative worldview?"*

Participants felt that most of the group is subject to a single/dominant worldview. They suggested that we are conditioned from childhood, to have one worldview and the only chance for survival is to have an understanding of the alternative worldview. The exercise given to participants, divided into smaller subgroups, was to discuss and put forth ideas through which we define our worldviews on themes such as nature, wealth, governance, consensus and democracy, health, education, and to being a human.

Reflections:

→ Some emergent themes from the discussions within groups were:

- Community living is more egalitarian while individualistic living is more hierarchy-based.
- **Economy:** Indigenous systems are non-accumulative (no hoarding).
- **Health:** Traditional healing is holistic and interconnected. It takes into account the mind, spirit, nature and humans, while modern systems are superficial and disconnected from nature and culture. They also tend to be insensitive toward resources.
- **Governance:** There is a power imbalance in the current dominant system while the traditional methods factor accountability, good mediation, and ancestral principles, etc while acknowledging internal injustices in traditional governance systems too.
- **Education:** There is negligible intent toward enabling the spirit of learning in today's pedagogical approaches. They are literacy-focused, employment-focused, extractive and exploitation-based. Indigenous methods,

on the contrary, are life skills-oriented, sustainable and intergenerational. They focus on traditional knowledge systems.

- It was observed that the dominant and traditional worldviews were in stark contrast with one another with very few overlapping elements. This made the participants wonder about how to make the best out of both, the indigenous and modern worlds.
- Over the next few months and years, it was suggested that the participants collectively gather stories from their respective communities in regard to challenges and responses to help understand worldviews better.

Governance



Facilitated by Virginius Xaxa, this session began with the observation that there is very little representation of indigenous people at the union or state level. At the local level, there is the possibility of representation, while at the village level there is greater space to participate. The group was divided into smaller three groups to discuss the current situation of governance in their respective regions and what is being done to overcome or address the limitations of the

formal governance systems. Along with it, to discuss emerging alternative systems of governance and how they interact with modern governance institutions like panchayats, area sabhas etc.

The following themes were explored:

1. What has been the structure of the traditional system of governance- clan, village, inter-village, territory? What have been the key positive principles of such governance- What have been the weaknesses of such governance – gender inequality and discrimination, casteism, etc, and how can these be resolved to create more equality in decision-making?
2. What kind of alternatives would provide a space for the community to engage in self-governance? Has there been such a space in the Indigenous/traditional system of governance?
3. Are self-governance and self-rule the same?
4. Can we think of integrating the positive values of traditional governance systems with the Constitutionally mandated structure of governance and the changing

dynamics of communities? What can we learn from some states where there is an integration, e.g. Sikkim where the Dzumsa traditional system is recognized as the panchayat?

Reflections:

Some emergent themes from the discussion were:

- **Political boundaries and ecologies:** Territories in many places are divided by political boundaries. However, the tribes and communities in these regions have the same socio-cultural systems. In cases of conflict resolution, the government becomes the mediator and facilitates the negotiation. That does not allow people to communicate with their own tribes situated in another region through their traditional ways. (eg: The Lepcha tribe in Sikkim and West Bengal)
- **Self-determination and development:** Given that not all tribes have the same governance systems, there is a need to recognize and understand this diversity better. In many areas rights and tenure of the local people on their lands and resources are not secure. Securing such rights is an important precondition for establishing secure, inclusive and stable governance systems.
- **Limitations of traditional governance systems:** Traditional systems of governance have had their own limitations, such as being discriminatory on caste, class, gender and age factors. In recent times these have been rendered redundant in local decision-making to a large extent as state systems like PRI have taken over. The role of traditional leaders or institutions is often tokenistic. There are some efforts towards overcoming the limitations of the traditional governance systems, or conventional state PRI systems. Such efforts towards alternatives have focused on women's empowerment and recognition of rights. They have also focused on self-learning and peer learning to strengthen the smallest levels of decision-making. Traditional systems of governance with unwritten rules and regulations still operate in many areas. However, they are now going down as the relevance is reduced because of panchayats. Panchayats are not real spaces for inclusive decision-making. PESA rules have recently been made but not yet implemented. Spaces for youth and women need to be included in the process.
- **Generating awareness and support:** To address the lack of information on empowering legal provisions, information on such legal provisions, their limitations and how they have been used could be shared widely. In places where people are working towards strengthening local governance structures, solidarity support is often needed. Facilitating mutual learning processes could be an important step toward strengthening local governance. It was also established to undertake more in-depth case studies on the discussed examples and also look at more sharing and support groups to be able to bring about change in existing systems. A Sangam that is being planned specifically on governance and democracy could include and use these case studies.

Cultural Program

Towards the end of the 2nd day, Timbaktu collective hosted a cultural event full of spirit. We enjoyed an energy-packed circle of learning classical forms of dances, Chakabajanam and Kollatum.



Intergenerational Learning



Facilitated by Minket Lepcha, Alyen Foning and Uttam Bhartari, this session focused on storytelling as a dying culture, with a significant impact on indigenous communities, especially in Northeast India. Creative storytelling and interactive media can be used to empower young minds and revive their interest in their rich natural heritage, especially around flowing water – rivers, rainfall, springs – and the floods which impact their lives annually. Reverence and coming to the circle was an important part of the

listening and a sacred circle was created with Pantong Palit - a flute with four holes that emits a tune with shamanic relevance and reverence. The Lepcha folklore based on a scientific seed, *oroxylum indicum* (Lepcha name Pago Rip) was shared. After the session, the seeds were distributed to all of them to celebrate diversity as well as unity in the same seed pod of *oroxylum indicum*.

Reflections:

- The transfer of ceremonies, memories, stories, and rituals happens through language. Language needs to be saved and practiced in storytelling. With the death of multiple languages due to the imposition of single dominant languages, diverse worldviews would collapse. Participants suggested VS to consider “language” as a theme for more discourse and dialogue in the future.
- “We have to hold onto traditions tightly, because otherwise, they can be forgotten easily”, exclaimed a few participants. The challenge expressed was to save knowledge while also enabling it to continue evolving.
- The youth is using media that is alien to many communities. A lot of it allows for the infiltration or modification of cultural practices. A question that emerged was, “How can we synergize the use of new-age media while also enabling the holistic passing down of our knowledge systems?”
- It was discussed that the focus should be on methods of passing on knowledge to the future generation because otherwise documentation of communities and knowledge can misinterpret the truth.

Ecology and Environmental Crisis



Facilitated by Nawa Gibi and Sahil Nijhawan, this session focused on: How are the ecological conditions around us changing? What are we doing about it? Nawa Gibi gave us an insight into how throughout his life, he's seen the landscapes around him change. The Dibaang river in Arunachal Pradesh would flow gracefully through huge plains and fields but then the state began road and transport projects which led to deforestation and the collapse of habitats for wildlife. The river changed course and

the farms were flooded. Many such instances from various regions were discussed in this session. Prakash Bhoir talked about how they are witnessing more leopard attacks due to extensive construction near Aarey, Mumbai; Nirmala Kerekatta from Jharkhand spoke about how the establishment of industries around their mineral-rich land had led to deforestation and infertility of land due to utilisation of chemicals for farming; in Kutch, the ecological conditions are collapsing because of new industries, leading to decreasing pastures for the camels and other livestock.

Reflections:

- Nature and humans are not separate. Communities have a complex relationship with other species, that includes material, physical, and spiritual aspects; it is not always 'harmonious' nor always 'conflictual' as urban conservationists tend to portray. An urgent need to realize this complexity, and the place of humans within nature, and take action toward some form of co-existence was discussed.
- Sometimes, communities are helpless in trying to protect their natural surroundings from the dominant developmental projects. And in such situations, if advocacy groups or individuals without vested motives are able to guide/ help them, it becomes easier to navigate a challenge. This can include adding their own knowledge to those of local communities, to provide a comprehensive information base for campaigns and struggles.
- As the conversation on environment and climate becomes more and more common, it is also being dominated by certain kinds of gatekeeping language. For instance, forests are termed as "carbon sinks". The movements that the indigenous, tribals and locals were a part of are being hijacked by researchers and academia. This needs to be challenged, and movements need to regain control over their own terms and language.
- Communities also need help in understanding relevant laws and policies that are either undermining their ecological security, or can be used to strengthen it.

Declaration on Indigenous and Community Worldviews and Systems

To be able to draw insights and perspectives such as those discussed at the Sangam, we need to have some common understanding of what we are fighting against, what we are struggling for, and what are some common threads amongst us. The "[Declaration on Indigenous and community worldviews and systems](#)" is an effort to put this together on an evolving note. This session was facilitated by Ashish Kothari.

Reflections:

- The issue of language discussed above could be mentioned in a more nuanced way.
- There are many positive and evolving responses from various communities. In the note, it could be mentioned that a lot of work is happening but there are processes that obliterate these efforts.
- Examples of what is happening on the ground from this diverse group of people could be added, in each section of the note.
- The note could also include reflections that suggest that non-indigenous people are in solidarity with the indigenous and local communities, as allies or comrades.

- Often, researchers, and NGOs research indigenous communities. An ethical clause should be framed for those who want to study us and work with communities. A statement on research with indigenous communities could be included in the declaration, and also circulate for use by communities and researchers. It is imp that the communities don't just become informants, but are also recognized as co-researchers and co-authors.
- This statement has been drafted during a time when communities are feeling threatened. It is imperative to mention the context in which this note was prepared.
- The document is a participants' document, not on the behalf of the communities or organizations they represent. It can be taken back, discussed and consented to. A footnote will say, *"This note has emerged from this Sangam and it is from the participants and they do not necessarily represent their communities"*.
- Another footnote will also state that "Indigenous/ tribal/Adivasis/ST /and other traditional communities are free to represent themselves as they want."



One of our colourful dinners at Timbuktu Collective

Follow-up and way forward

1. Document stories of resistances and constructive responses and also spaces where traditional knowledge systems and modern systems intersect.
2. More case studies on alternative initiatives and examples of resilience can take place in individual or collaborative capacities.
3. People-to-people exchange by visiting each other's places and learning from one another.

4. To understand research ethics and protocols as filmmakers, researchers, NGO's, activists. Enable communities with this knowledge so that researchers and communities can mutually agree on research methods and outcomes.
5. Democracy and governance Sangam. The governance Sangam can include the process of documenting various governance systems across India. Ashish will share the questionnaire used for Goba research, for others to conduct similar research. The governance Sangam group can discuss this further on.
6. Regional/ local Sangams discussing "worldviews".
7. MadeGowda, Prakash Bhoir, Karma Le, Uttam, Mayalmit, Sahil, Jibi, Nirmala, Sadhana will take the declaration statement to their respective communities.
8. A group that helps put together resources about the constitution, laws and amendments. Extract information from sources such as Dhaatri, IISC, National Law school, etc first.

Working group to understand research ethics:

Lakshmi Venugopal, Chhaya Namchu, C. Madegowda, Archana Tomar, Urvi Shah, Ameer Hamja, Minket Lepcha, Mayalmit Lepcha, Sahil Nijhawan (consult on protocol work with American Tribes)

Working group for laws and constitution:

Archana Tomar(Lead), Neema Pathak Broome, Dhaatri (organisation), Ameer Hamja, Uttam Bathari

Governance Sangam (Along with the Kalpavriksh team and other organizers):

Archana Tomar, Lakshmi Venugopal, Sadhana Meena, Nirmala Kerkatta, Karma Sonam, Uttam Bathari

Reflection circle

Towards the end, we held a reflection circle to conclude and state our last thoughts regarding the Sangam, facilitation, dialogues, way forward, experience, etc. A few prompts provided were:

1. What was good for you?
2. Any highlights from the 3 days of Sangam
3. What are you taking away from here?

Key reflections:

- ➔ Language and translation are always crucial and challenging. But it was taken care of very well by the organizers. Most gatherings are unable to ensure that each

participant is comfortable and able to understand the conversation, but in this one, there was no such difficulty.

- Care and understanding was at the core of the event.
- Timbaktu's hosting left no leaf unturned. The food, accommodation and cultural events tied everyone together.
- Felt very equal here, as opposed to a conference. The space was designed such that even unheard voices were heard naturally.
- Going back to the thought that there is so much to do with our own communities.
- It was good to have more women's representation and voices than usual.
- Found out that we are all fighting the same kind of problems and struggles. We also have solutions amongst us and are all doing something to resist it.
- Felt there was a lot of depth to the sessions which enabled the surfacing of many thoughts which would otherwise be latent.
- People resisting in faraway places can lose hope and inspiration. Such spaces are able to re-instigate that.

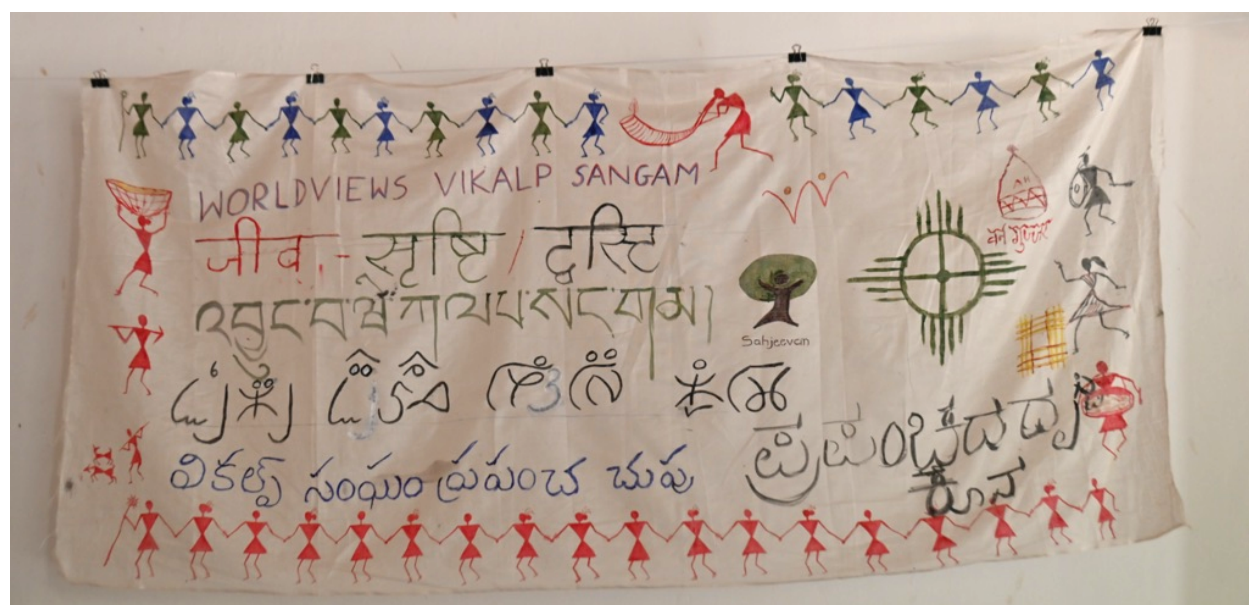
Annexure 1: Participants

	Participant Name	Organisation	Community	Region
1	Seno Tsuhah	Northeast Network	Chakhesang tribe	Chizami, Nagaland
2	Mayalmit Lepcha	Affected Citizens of Teesta	Lepcha	Sikkim
3	Alyen Foning	Storyteller	Lepcha	Kalimpong, West Bengal
4	Minket Lepcha	Storyteller	Lepcha	Sikkim
5	Chhaya Namchu	Researcher	Lepcha	Karnataka
6	Stan Thekaekara	Just Change India		Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu
7	Uttam Bathari	Gauhati University	Dimasa	Assam
8	Ameer Hamja	Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan	Van Gujjar	Uttarakhand
9	Virginius Xaxa	Independent Indigenous Researcher		Delhi

10	Karma Sonam	Nature Conservation Foundation		Ladakh
11	Pramila Bhoir	Community member	Warli	Mumbai, Maharashtra
12	Prakash Bhoir	Community member	Warli	Mumbai, Maharashtra
13	Asha Bhoie	Community member	Warli	Mumbai, Maharashtra
14	Sonal Kachap	Dhaatri	Oraon	Jharkhand
15	Sadhana Meena	Dhaatri	Meena	Udaipur, Rajasthan
16	Nirmala Kerketta	Dhaatri	Munda	Jharkhand
17	Archana Tomar	Sutradhaar		Karnataka
18	Bhojabhai Mesurbhai Saniya	Kutchh Unt Ucherak Maldhari Sangathan	Maldhari	Upleta region, Gujarat
19	Jat Adam Suleman	Kutchh Unt Ucherak Maldhari Sangathan	Maldhari	Kutch, Gujarat
20	Mahesh Popatlal Garva	Sahjeevan	Garva	Gujarat
21	C. Madegowda	Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment	Soliga	Karnataka
22	V Ramesh	Deccan Development Society		Telangana
23	K Mogulamma	Deccan Development Society	Dalit	Telangana
24	G Narasamma	Deccan Development Society	Dalit	Telangana
25	Sahil Nijhawan	Nature Conservation Foundation		Arunachal Pradesh
26	Nawa Jibi	Community member	Idu Mishmi	Dibaang Valley, Arunachal
27	Alex Jensen	Local Futures		Ladakh
28	Lakshmi Venugopal	Inner Climate Academy		Chennai

29	Shrishtee Bajpai	Kalpavriksh		Maharashtra
30	Urvi Shah	Kalpavriksh		Maharashtra
31	Neema Pathak Broome	Kalpavriksh		Maharashtra
32	Ashish Kothari	Kalpavriksh		Maharashtra
33	Sadia Sohail	Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung		Delhi
35	Abhishek Chauhan	Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung		Delhi

This report is intended to be translated to various languages and shared with the participants for documentation and reference purposes.



Worldviews Vikalp Sangam written in various languages of India by participants. Warli border by Prakash Bhoir from Aarey, Maharashtra.