

# South-Asian Dialogues on Ecological Democracy

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The practical work of SADED is the outcome of collaborative and creative work by many individuals and organisations forming a network or web of efforts, which does not have one centre. However, many SADED activities have been born out of the co-operative work undertaken by Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, CSDS, Lokayan and Siemenpuu. Here the conceptual and political context and activities of SADED will be briefly presented

The democratic control of natural resources is integral to the deepening and expansion of democracy, and to the survival of humankind. In this respect the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development disappointed all those who had any sensibility towards issues of ecological sustainability and equitable development of the humankind as a whole.

Modern science, social and economic processes, and policies tend to fragment life, issues and people's ways of looking at them. Democracy has come

## *The concept Ecological Democracy gives orientation to the work undertaken in the South Asian Dialogues on Ecological Democracy (SADED) framework.*

to mean merely representative political structures.

Despite this dominant thrust of institutionalisation over the past 200–500 years, which has culminated in the present processes of monopolistic, hegemonic, and humanly disempowering globalization, there is another perspective on democracy which is still widely espoused, intellectually and intuitively. It is an idea about relationships being based on equality, mutuality and respect for individual interaction – between family members, between communities, between human beings and the rest of nature, between genders; interaction in the market and the nation

state, and between peoples across the nations.

The challenge for all of us is to build politics around this perspective to channel all institutions towards ever-expanding and deepening democratisation.

No one organisation can aspire to fulfil the need for all the various types of interventions required to realise democratic values in all walks of life. What is needed is not a structure for unifying or homogenising the diverse, but rather a way for us to relate to each other, an attempt to 'own' each other and nurture each other's democratic interventions despite differences.

We need a space for enabling ideas or concerns about democracy and a platform for diverse interventions, a forum where people from diverse backgrounds can come and share their work and create new coalitions, without necessarily merging their respective institutional/organisational identities.

## **Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (The Earth is a Family)**

A network called Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (The Earth is a Family), a Coalition for Comprehensive Democracy, aims from this perspective at furthering, strengthening and deepening democracy in the economic, social, political, cultural, gender and ecological dimensions of life, from local to global levels.

We need an effort to engage civil society in dialogues on a number of crucial issues at various levels: local, regional and international. The dimensions can be articulated as:

- Empowerment of the daridranarayan,



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the 'last person' (Economic Democracy),

- Ecological regeneration and people's control over natural resources (Ecological Democracy),
- Ensuring human dignity (Social Democracy),
- Strengthening plural co-existence (Cultural Democracy),
- Deepening of democratic structures and institutions (Political Democracy),
- Evolving gender identities, relations and practices based on mutuality, equality and respect (Gender Democracy).

In the current phase of a phenomenal upsurge of democratic aspirations, new norms have to be agreed upon through a process of participatory dialogue – even with the adversary – at various levels of human collectivities.

One has to recognise the complementarity of the other's 'truth' and consciously avoid being judgmental regarding the other's viewpoint. The critical evaluation of other viewpoints has to be in an idiom, which encourages moderation and introspective engagement on all sides. Such processes are unfolding and can consciously and actively be pursued today.

People in South Asia have long cherished values, which, in modern times, are best expressed under the rubric of 'universalism' and various dimensions

of 'democracy'. Before the colonial interventions of the West, even when there were rulers of foreign origin, the participatory mode of governance from the grassroots to the top, devolution of political power at all levels, and cultural plurality were hallmarks of our socio-political system.

We had our own failings, such as the obnoxious practice of untouchability. The communitarian principles manifested through the caste system degenerated into hierarchical fundamentalism. But, despite all kinds of failings, the sense of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam has been part of our cultural sensibility since time immemorial. That is why our socio-cultural diversity is a source of strength and, in fact, the primary defining force behind our unbroken identity.

### **South-Asian Dialogues on Ecological Democracy**

South Asian Dialogues on Ecological Democracy (SADED) is a network, which aims at establishing ecological democracy in South Asia. The objectives of SADED are to prevent deepening of the crises in South Asia that have roots in ecology and natural resource use patterns, and to consolidate ecological democracy efforts in the critical ecozones while providing academic, intellectual and ethical support to the people as well as the civil society groups, so that

they have platforms to share their local/indigenous ecological wisdom with each other.

SADED's efforts, therefore, have aimed at strengthening and consolidating dialogues on ecological democracy. SADED aims at bringing together knowledge and experiences of the ways to improve the people's control over natural resources in a sustainable and equitable manner, so that this knowledge could be applied more widely in South Asia.

SADED also plans to connect with the representatives of diverse political streams in various elected bodies at different levels in South Asia in the development of some form of 'engaged' advocacy.

We do not want to compete with the existing advocacy efforts but to supplement them with an engagement, which advocates making debates holistic and critical, rather than single issue oriented.

SADED works also in close collaboration with the Centre For the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), which is an inter-disciplinary social science research institute reputed for its work on democracy.

One of the modes of enquiry and a way to influence the debate has been through an interface between intellectuals and activists. Lokayan, a small NGO in India was created out of a project at

SADED coordinator Suresh Nautiyal (left) with Asian and African friends in Asian Social Forum 2004.



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CSDS on Dialogues on Development, Democracy and Decentralization in 1980. In 1985, Lokayan was awarded the Right Livelihood Foundation Award.

SADED aims at increasing knowledge among the environmental movements, and being party to preparing a vision for action at the local, national and international levels. It also aims at creating a constructive dialogue about ecological democracy, especially at the local levels in different parts of South Asia (India and Nepal in particular) and among the grass root level movement groups, including organisations engaged in the empowerment of dalits (socio-economically deprived 'ex-un-touchables'), adivasis (indigenous peoples) and other socially and economically backward castes.

### **Local control and management of natural resources**

The activists of SADED hope that the dialogues will lead to improved envi-

ronmental care through the local control and management of natural resources in many localities and regions of South Asia.

If better environmental care and management of natural resources can again be made part of the local culture (like it was before the colonial period), the practices protecting the environment from destruction can be very long-lasting and sustainable. Many such practices were an integral part of South Asian culture for thousands of years before the colonial period.

Now Asia, and more particularly South Asia, will be worst hit with the global warming. The predictions and assessments are staggering: one third of Bangladesh may be submerged by the year 2050, and there is a danger of many islands, including the Maldives, totally disappearing. This would have disastrous socio-political implications for Bangladesh, India and the rest of South Asia as those who survive the flooding may well drown in the sea of

poverty, misery and consequent social violence.

And even without climate change, malnourishment is becoming gradually aggravated across the region, farmers in India are committing suicides and the violence against women continues to intensify. But we do not want to paint a picture of doom.

The tragedies unfolding before us have also prompted a myriad of responses. Issues considered earlier as belonging to the social work domain are increasingly seen as being first and foremost political. Most importantly, there has been a gradual coming together of diverse forces in a platform of resistance. These developments are happening both within each individual country as well as across the region.

In this context, the South Asian vision for deepening of democracy – shared at heart by many in other regions of the world, who build on other traditions, each with their concepts and forms of expression – has become more

urgent than ever.

The task cannot be left to civil society alone and it has to be taken to political levels in each of the countries. Moreover, there is no shortcut for achieving this. It can be built only through a sustained and regular process of dialogues among the different political actors across all the countries in the region and beyond.

### **Revival of traditional knowledge systems on ecology**

The history of democratic traditions predates the modern nation-state model of democracy that was adopted in South Asia in the second half of the twentieth century. Though not without contestation, the decentralised and local institutions for the conduct and management of the social and community life evolved in South Asia already some thousand years ago.

Whilst South Asia needs to engage in a dialogue with the other parts of the globe, the South Asian dialogues have also a lot to offer to the global democratic dialogue.

India, for example, has the largest surviving population of indigenous forest dwellers, whose ability to live in a sustainable way through centuries from the natural regeneration of the forest contains valuable experiences and lessons to be shared for the survival of the globe and its forests.

They belong to the 85 million people population of scheduled tribes classified in the constitution, and they have recently acquired constitutional rights of minor forest produce. Under the constitution, a formal consent should be acquired from the general body of the villagers before executing any development plans in their tribal areas.

At the same time, the Indian knowledge systems on ecology and nature conservation are experiencing a period of revival and new legitimisation. Although the 'developmental' mindset of colonised India is still chasing the elusive American consumer paradise, there are large numbers of experts, science policy planners and communicators



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(journalists, social activists and cultural and literary groups and persons) who are devoting themselves to the compilation of and documentation on issues of ecology and natural resources.

### **Mutual learning about community forestry**

In the 1980's and early 1990's there was a lot of constructive dialogue and exchange of ideas about ecological issues between Nepal and India. Nepal started to implement an extensive community forest programme that was aiming to distribute about 60 per cent of the country's forest lands to local communities.

The programme quickly halted the depletion of forests in many parts of Nepal, and the regeneration of forests was started on millions of hectares of land. The programme, had it continued, would have benefited millions of rural families by increasing the amount of food, fodder, organic fertilisers, mulch, good-quality firewood and small timber available for them.

There was also mutual learning between India and Nepal about community forestry, and many Indian states started community-forest programmes that were at least partially based on the Nepali model.

All this has changed, because international institutions like the World

Bank, IMF and WTO are putting a lot of pressure on Indian and Nepali governments, demanding that the community forest policies distributing large amounts of forest or farmland to rural communities or indigenous peoples should be halted and reversed, and replaced by policies promoting the full-scale privatisation of forest lands.

Also the civil war in Nepal has had disastrous consequences for both the nature and the people, especially the poorer segments of the population. Therefore, it is very important to increase the cooperation between the South Asian states so that they can resist the fundamentalist demands put forward by the World Bank, IMF and WTO.

### The urgency of dialogues on democracy

Besides dialogues at the South Asian level, a larger framework of North-South dialogue is necessary for supporting and sharing the aspirations of the South Asian people. It was necessary also in the past, but now it has become urgent. If one is to borrow the clichéd concept of 'global village', we cannot escape the fact that the diverse places and peoples in the world are becoming increasingly integrated. However, the terms of this integration have been one-way. The motives have been narrow and the outcomes rather distressing.

The global North – both in the geographical as well as political sense – have set the agenda of integration, whilst the South has had to follow. The South has increasingly become either a market place for products, a repository of resources or a sink for the by-products of production processes.

The outcome has been a further marginalization of increasingly large sections of people in the South. But the

distress signals are beginning to blink in the North also. The process is increasingly proving to be rather a losing track for the majority of the people in the world.

*If better environmental care and management of natural resources can again be made part of the local culture (like it was before the colonial period), the practices protecting the environment from destruction can be very long-lasting and sustainable.*

A South-North dialogue in this context is of crucial importance. Democracy can provide a foundational framework for that dialogue because of the fact that it embodies some of the most universalistic as well as humane values for relations between humans and between humans and non-human nature. The

dialogues between civilisations can be possible only within this framework.

### SADED's contributions to World Social Forum processes

SADED organised a major dialogue in the Asian Social Forum in Hyderabad, India, in 2003. The broad theme was ecological democracy, with emphasis on water, forests and energy.

The preparatory work with various networks for the World Social Forum Mumbai 2004 revealed that an intensive process of dialogues on various

dimensions of ecological democracy is needed.

SADED decided to focus on producing and compiling comprehension-enabling knowledge for the grass root groups on various dimensions of ecological democracy. The preparatory work for WSF consisted of network meetings in different parts of India and outside India, and the actual organising of the events in Mumbai World Social Forum in January 2004.

Organising ecological democracy dialogues at the Asian Social Forum 2003 and World Social Forum 2004 in Mumbai provided good opportunities to influence the debates globally. The World Social Forum process has already been of major significance for the movements working for another globalization, as well as for the new peace movement. However, the environmental issues have not this far received the attention they deserve in the World Social Forum process. SADED aims at making them part of the main agenda of the WSF processes.

Adivasi people's large participation in the WSF Mumbai 2004 was also a sign of hope for the sustainability of ecology globally as they, with their frank and honest expressions, invented a new idiom for ecological democracy. It was evident that without adivasis (trib-



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bal charter of ecological democracy, through which various elements of our polity and civil society organisations should be able to relate to each other. There are many documents of international significance that are relevant in this work, and we shall try to combine the wisdom of these documents prepared by global NGO leadership with the experience and knowledge systems of the South. Hopefully, such a document will address the divide between environmentalists and developmentalists.

The general focus of the dialogues will build on documents prepared by an eminent international group of activist experts, like the Earth Charter, Global Green Manifesto and Johannesburg Memorandum.

The aspiration of SADED is a synthesis of original social democratic dream, the Global Greens' dream and the new social movements' dream, which aims at preparing a global charter in a participatory manner, expressing the voices and visions of the majority of the world's people.

At this juncture in history, WSF appears to be the most promising paradigm for intervention from grassroots to the global level. At WSF, think tanks from diverse ideological, cultural, political and intellectual traditions are set into motion, providing a space where leaders of dalits, adivasis, peasants, artisans, informal sector workers and organised working class movements can come together for a creative engagement with each other, and eventually form global alliances to implement the dream of not just saving this planet from ecological disaster but also making it a better livable place. ●

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al communities) the talks on ecological democracy would have been hollow.

It also emerged that the issues related to democracy at the local (village), panchayat (autonomous local body), state and national levels remained important in India and elsewhere in South Asia from the environmental viewpoint.

### **Ecological issues to WSF**

For the first time, we were able to bring the ecological, green, adivasi issues to the centre stage of the WSF's self-organised events. Many of the important figures of the ecological orientation participated in our events. After the WSF process was over in Mumbai, our team members also got a big boost in their respective states like Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Delhi, Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttarakhand.

In terms of international dialogue, in addition to the ecological issues, we were able to draw the attention of European social democrats and other 'progressive' sections to the plight and perception of our oppressed majorities. We could also communicate the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (originally Gandhi-

an) principle of 'Last Person First', which informs all our governance, planning and policy formulations.

And in this endeavour, many South Asian as well as European organisations – like Global Greens, Friends of the Earth, Centre for Equity Studies, Lokayan, SADED, Coalition for Environment and Development Finland, Himalayan Peoples Forum, Uttarakhand Chaupal, SIDH, Rajendra Prasad Academy, Swasthya Panchayat (people's health advocacy group), Siemenpuu Foundation Finland and South Asia Study Centre – were all essential and integral participants.

At another workshop, The Challenges of Creating Ecological Democracy and Good Governance in the Central Himalaya or Uttarakhand held in November 2002, it was concluded that relentless efforts are essential for reviving the traditional ecological knowledge systems if we are to stand for real ecological democracy. It was decided to formulate a comprehensive policy perspective for good governance and ecological democracy in the Central Himalaya.

### **Global charter of ecological democracy**

SADED is aiming at building a glo-