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# Radical Ecological Democracy: A Path Forward for India and Beyond

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The search is on for sustainable and equitable alternatives to the dominant economic development model, and the emerging concept and practice of “radical ecological democracy” can contribute to this search. This new framework places the goals of direct democracy, local and bioregional economies, cultural diversity, human well-being, and ecological resilience at the core of its vision. It arises from the myriad grassroots initiatives that have sprung up in India and other parts of the world. Although efforts to amplify and spread such a paradigm face the enormous challenge of overcoming the resistance of entrenched institutions and mindsets, current practice suggests opportunities for making progress. Ultimately, the wide embrace of radical ecological democracy will require the spread of the core values underlying the framework, a transition guided not only by hard-headed rationality but also by a strong ethical and emotional foundation.

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## The Crisis of Mis-Development

Every day, we see new evidence that our current model of development is straining the resilience of the biosphere and producing glaring economic inequalities. Levels of poverty, deprivation, and exploitation remain unacceptable, while conflict over access to natural resources, food, and water grows more frequent. The roots of these crises lie in structural problems within the economy, society, and humanity's relationship with nature. All of this calls for a fundamental rethinking of the human project in the twenty-first century.

India reflects these myriad problems, its sordid story of inequality masked by the glitter of the new urban pockets that business and political leaders proudly showcase. Four decades of state-dominated "development" followed by two decades of corporate-dominated economic globalization have led India down the path of unsustainability: it now has the world's third largest ecological footprint. While some forms of poverty have been reduced, others persist. Sixty million people have been forcibly evicted by "development" projects. Roughly three out of four Indians suffer from deprivation of at least one of the following basic needs: adequate and nutritious food, safe drinking water, sanitation, energy, gainful and dignified employment, education, health care, and adequate shelter. India continues to fare poorly in most global surveys of human indicators. Net job growth in the formal sector has benefited less than 5% of the population over the last twenty years, condemning tens of millions to exploitative conditions in the informal sector. Economic inequality is high, as the richest 10% own over half of the country's wealth.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the lure of "growth" as an engine of well-being still holds sway. In a recent high-profile debate, two of India's most eminent economists, Amartya Sen and Jagdish Bhagwati, sparred over whether the country's top priority should be growth or redistribution. Bhagwati took the mainstream neoliberal view that higher GDP growth rates would help to lessen poverty and deprivation, while Sen argued that a focus on investment in education, health, and social services would be a more efficient way to achieve such goals. While Sen is right to emphasize economic rights and social welfare, he, too, remained trapped within the growth paradigm, underplaying the centrality of the ecological precipice on which some of us are precariously standing—and off which many have already slipped. Neither of the economists focused on pathways to shared well-being led not by the state, nor by the market, but instead by communities and collectives of citizens.<sup>2</sup>

## Another Paradigm

We can find elements of an alternative pathway in the thousands of grassroots initiatives, resistance struggles, and movements for social transformation around the world that point to a very different vision of the future. This emerging framework respects the limits of the earth and the rights of other species while pursuing the core values of equity and social justice. With its strong democratic and egalitarian impulse,

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it seeks to empower every person to be a part of decision-making, and its holistic vision of human well-being encompasses physical, material, socio-cultural, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Rather than the state and the corporation, this emerging framework—referred to here as *radical ecological democracy*—puts collectives and communities at the center of governance and the economy. Based on the twin fulcrums of ecological sustainability and human equity, it offers a systemic approach to social transformation, resting on political, economic, socio-cultural, and ecological pillars, which we shall consider in turn.

### *The Political Pillar*

In central India, the indigenous Gond community of the village Mendha-Lekha has a saying *Dilli Mumbai mawa sarkar, Mawa nate mate sarkar* (“It is our government in Mumbai and Delhi, but we are the government in our village”). The village *gram sabha* (assembly of all residents) meets regularly to make key decisions by consensus and insists that any decision regarding the use of land or resources within its territorial jurisdiction can only take place with the *sabha’s* consent. It has set up subsidiary bodies like *abhyas gats* (study circles) to provide the necessary information to guide its decisions. Outside of regular meetings, any villager can call for the *sabha* to convene if an urgent matter arises. In Venezuela, neighborhood assemblies arose in the 1980s around the notion “we don’t want to be a government, we want to govern.” Recent far-reaching changes in governance include the devolution of power to *consejos comunales* (communal councils), with about 44,000 established already.

These examples of direct democracy challenge the notion that the heart of democracy lies in elections for representative bodies. Shades of such participatory democracy existed in ancient Greek and Indian societies, though sections of the population were then excluded.<sup>3</sup> In the modern variant, there is no formal exclusion (though *de facto* exclusion could result from existing power and status hierarchies and must be vigorously guarded against). These new models have sprung up not only in villages, but in cities as well. City-based communal councils in Venezuela contain between 150 and 400 families each. In India, urban wards are considerably larger and more unwieldy, stimulating discussions both within government and in civil society networks about decentralizing them into smaller units (such as *mohalla sabhas*, or neighborhood assemblies).

Grassroots democratic units, however, cannot work in isolation, since some decisions need to be taken at larger scales, from regional landscapes to the planet itself. Village and city assemblies or communal councils need to be embedded within larger institutions of governance (what Gandhi called “oceanic circles”) with elected representatives from the local bodies. The challenge is to ensure that such institutions do not become power centers dominating the grassroots. Promising policies for countering such domination include the right to recall, regular election of representatives, rotation of officeholders, mandatory consultation with constituents,

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and full transparency in decision-making. For example, the northeastern Indian state of Nagaland has enacted legislation empowering village councils with substantial decision-making powers, including some control over the allocation of government funds for education, health, and power. Likewise, the new Aam Aadmi Party in India, which arose out of a popular anti-corruption struggle, incorporated *swaraj* (self-rule) and support for mechanisms like the right to recall into its recent election manifesto.<sup>4</sup>

How will such direct democracy translate into national governance (assuming that nation-states persist)? Neither capitalist nor state-centered socialist countries have been willing or able to cede power to the grassroots or to be fully responsive to local self-governance. The concept of the “communal” or “plurinational” state that has emerged in several Latin American countries holds interesting possibilities. Such a state, in theory, accommodates channels of communication and delegation that enable empowered grassroots communities to influence provincial and national decisions and respects the identity and voice of a plurality of cultures and peoples within the country. However, in practice, officials remain extremely reluctant to relinquish their centralized power, which is inextricably linked to the continued reliance on large-scale resource extraction.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding such limitations, such efforts provide valuable lessons and principles for envisioning a more democratic state.

Of course, even in a decentralized world of radical ecological democracy, the state would still have a legitimate role, at least for the foreseeable future. Some functions would remain crucial, even as the form of the nation-state changes. Not the least of these is the protection of the weak, both human and non-human, and the guarantee of fundamental rights. The state would also be important for generating financial resources for public services, enforcing environmental regulations, and ensuring personal and collective security—but all in the spirit of service to the public rather than accumulation of power.

In the new vision, political boundaries would become sensitive to ecological and cultural contiguity and diversity. In western India, seventy-two riverine villages have formed the Arvari River Parliament, which meets regularly to make ecological, economic, and social decisions. In Venezuela, communal councils used social, cultural, and economic relations to define geographical boundaries. In Australia, the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative is attempting an ambitious linkage of landscapes over 3600 kilometers.<sup>6</sup> Each of these cases has local socioeconomic, political, and ecological peculiarities, but all are attempting to combine radical localization with larger-scale, bioregional decision-making.

Eventually, such an approach may lead people to question nation-state boundaries and jurisdictions. The fragmentation of bioregions and communities by political boundaries has caused considerable ecological, social, and economic distress. Throughout history, such boundaries have been continually questioned and often

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changed. Treating bifurcated regions—like the high Himalaya (currently separated between India and Pakistan on one side and India and China on the other) or the world’s largest mangrove stretch (divided between India’s and Bangladesh’s Sundarbans)—as an ecological unit governed democratically by local communities that span countries could provide shared benefits and lasting peace.

Bioregions would not be the only determinants of political boundaries; cultural and economic factors would be influential as well. One’s identity and relations need not be limited to a single territory; there could be fluid, diverse, and overlapping identities. A young fisherperson could belong to the Sundarbans ecoregion, to a larger cultural community of Bengalis, and to a virtual global community of youth using new communications technologies to supplement local methods of knowledge generation and information dissemination.

In our increasingly interdependent world, the great challenge of global governance comes to the fore. While the United Nations is currently organized around nation-states, the creation of peoples’ assemblies at global and sub-global levels could offer a more democratic alternative.<sup>7</sup> A path forward might only emerge as direct democracy at the grassroots level grows and merges with new forms of participatory communication and networking. There is space for a diversity of solutions, as long as they rest on shared principles of irreducibility, subsidiarity, and heterogeneity: a minimal set of matters are properly assigned to the global level, decision-making goes to the most local level feasible, and diverse local approaches to meeting collective goals are accepted and encouraged.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Economic Pillar*

Recent economic crises have led many to question the centrality of growth and globalization in economic decision-making and to explore possibilities for greater localization that embed production and consumption patterns within communities. Dozens of companies and cooperatives in India, for instance, are enabling farmers, craftspersons, fishers, pastoralists, and industrial manufacturers to have increased control of the entire chain from raw materials to marketing. Although achieving widespread capability for high-tech production will likely take some time, decentralized, community-based production of solar products has already begun. With the democratization of knowledge, science, and technology, there is no reason why this cannot happen for other high-tech products that society considers necessary.

Even where centralized or large-scale production and services may remain necessary, the radical democratization of the workplace is possible. Innovations in Argentina, Venezuela, and other countries demonstrate the feasibility of non-hierarchical, worker-led production processes. Consumer cooperatives are beginning to bring greater attention to ecological and social concerns in products and production

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practices. Worker-owned production, retail, and banking—as well as author-owned publication houses—are appearing in various parts of the world. Examples include the Self-Employed Women’s Association of India, the Seikatsu Consumers’ Club Co-op of Japan, and the Mondragon Cooperation Corporation of Spain.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, direct producer-consumer linkages are in many instances eliminating the exploitative middleman or corporation, especially where government or civil society facilitates the process. There is greater demand to reclaim the central role of the “real” economy from the “virtual” one at the heart of recent economic crashes.<sup>10</sup> Although these initiatives remain marginal, they suggest the emergent potential of economic democracy.

Efforts to decentralize control over natural resources are an important feature of localization efforts. Such control rests on the principle of subsidiarity, the belief that those living closest to ecosystems and resources have the greatest stake in them and at least some of the essential knowledge for managing them. Of course, the obstacles and limitations to localizing control are significant. In India, two centuries of centralized policymaking have crippled community institutional capacity and eroded customary rules. Moreover, a localized economy does not necessarily imply local democracy: local elites can dominate decision-making or contribute to divisive partisanship. Moving toward more localized natural resource management will require sensitivity to these pitfalls and proactive steps to avoid them.

Moreover, economic democracy entails the right to dignified, secure livelihoods, what the International Labour Organization (ILO) and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) call “decent work.” There are myriad opportunities for harmonizing this goal with that of sustainability: organic farming, renewable energy development, efficient resource use, public transport, small-scale manufacture, and recycling projects, to name a few.<sup>11</sup> Current efforts provide a hint of what might be possible. For example, Jharcraft, an initiative of the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, has enhanced the livelihoods of 250,000 families by providing credit, technological assistance, recognition of producer cooperatives, and marketing opportunities to an array of craftspeople. Several villages in India have reversed the trend towards outmigration by revitalizing local economies and reducing social inequities. Some western Indian villages have done this through watershed management, enhancing agricultural productivity, and investing in health and educational facilities, while others in southern India have achieved it through small-scale industrial manufacture and dialogue-based resolution of caste tensions.

Finally, economic democracy requires new economic thinking. This includes new theoretical frameworks for ways to assign value (including the intangible and unquantifiable) and to achieve sustainability and equity through steady-state economies, as well as practical applications of new indicators and measures of well-being. It means the embrace of local currencies and non-monetized forms of exchange like time banking, and it demands that we rethink the nature of larger-scale

trade to make it harmonious with local self-reliance and environmental stewardship. These new approaches are all providing challenges to classical economics, which has traditionally ignored the immorality of extreme inequality and the reality of ecological limits.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Socio-cultural Pillar*

Inequities inherited from both traditional and modern attitudes and social patterns continue to plague contemporary society, and alternative initiatives are not immune from their vestiges. Hierarchies and exploitative relations along axes of gender, ethnicity, race, and status must be addressed unyieldingly, starting with efforts to create progressive pockets within conventional society. While movements explicitly challenging inequities and divisions based on birth will remain crucial, we can also tackle such disparities through collective action that bridges such divides. In India, the initiatives of *dalits* (the so-called “outcasts” of Hindu society) and *adivasis* (indigenous people) for forest conservation, agricultural sustainability, and manufacturing-based livelihoods, and against destructive “development” projects, have increasingly pushed dominant castes or classes to accept their equal status. Equally important, the strong role of women in the leadership of these movements has brought about greater gender equity. At the same time, youth-led initiatives have gained the respect of elders, reducing rigid age-related hierarchies and inequities. For example, in the western Indian village of Nayakheda, youth mobilization around reclaiming rights to forests and generating livelihoods based on forest produce has brought together previously conflicting elders of two ethnic communities. In the northeastern Indian state of Nagaland, student associations have contributed to village decision-making through their initiatives on conservation, hygiene, education, and health.

The loss of cultural diversity has accompanied the dominant market-based, growth-driven development paradigm. The globalization and commercialization of mass media are homogenizing global culture in terms of food, dress, language, and even thought. Radical ecological democracy seeks to reverse these trends by sustaining the Earth’s cultural diversity, including its threatened languages. In India, the NGO Bhasha is attempting to do just that by documenting extant languages and providing schools and other learning environments to promote their revival.<sup>13</sup> This type of effort helps maintain the knowledge, wisdom, and worldviews that provide invaluable cultural resources for community response and creativity in a time of ecological, social, and political change and uncertainty.

Encouraging the synergy of various kinds of knowledge is equally vital. The global Indigenous Peoples’ Climate Change Assessment combines the observations and information of indigenous peoples with those of modern climate scientists to understand the many dimensions and impacts of climate change and to generate appropriate adaptive mechanisms.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, public health initiatives in India have empowered communities by combining traditional and modern systems that

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strengthen the links between safe food and water, nutrition, preventive health measures, and curative care. Indigenous peoples groups have also been active in international conventions and forums on creating indicators for sustainability, justice, and other goals.<sup>15</sup>

We must also learn to transcend artificial boundaries between the “physical,” “natural,” and “social” sciences, and between these and the “arts.” Ecological and human systems do not fall into neat disciplinary boxes; landscapes are not amenable to straightforward boundaries between the “wild” and the “domesticated,” the “natural” and the “human.” The more we can learn, teach, and transmit knowledge in holistic ways, giving respect not only to specialists but also to generalists, the more we can understand nature and our place within it.<sup>16</sup>

Public involvement in scientific and technological innovation and development is also important in dismantling the monopolization of knowledge. Debates around GMOs, geoengineering, climate change, and other issues have underscored the failures of a knowledge generation model dominated by corporations and the state, where intellectual property regimes and bureaucratic red tape restrict access. While by no means flawless, alternative models of public innovation and research, such as those seen in the agricultural sectors in Cuba and southern India, point to possibilities for democratizing knowledge.<sup>17</sup> The explosion of open source technologies, copyright-free material, public generation, and peer review of material (e.g., Wikipedia) has helped keep knowledge in the commons.

Finally, the arena of the self will be central to the socio-cultural pillar for a new society. The relationship between the individual and society has often been contested as traditional collectivism gave way to the extreme individualism of modernity. Resolving this tension requires exploring new ways to balance and find harmony between the individual and the collective. Effective engagement in social movements recognizes the legitimacy of both, as well as their mutual reinforcement: empathy and concern for others can contribute to individual transformation and fulfillment as personal ethical growth can contribute to meaningful involvement with collective causes.<sup>18</sup>

### *The Ecological Pillar*

Achievements in the political, economic, and socio-cultural arenas will be illusory and fleeting unless we are able to safeguard the fundamental environmental conditions that make life on Earth possible. This requires understanding and recognizing ecological limits, restoring degraded landscapes, conserving what remains of ecosystems, and respecting the right of the rest of nature to thrive. The urgency of this task, as well as the need to find synergies between ecological resilience and human well-being, makes this a central concern for social transformation.

The meaning of “conservation” is a cultural construct imbued with and shaped by

## Achieving sustainability requires recognizing the inherent rights of nature and its species.

dominant worldviews. This is evident in the struggle over protected areas, where bureaucratic or narrowly-defined scientific approaches have led to conflict with marginalized peoples and often backfired on conservation itself.<sup>19</sup> Fortunately, conservation paradigms have begun to shift in the last decade, emphasizing the need for such “good governance” principles as respect for rights, participation, accountability, and transparency. This also includes recognition of sites for conservation that are governed by indigenous peoples and communities and the importance of local knowledge systems.<sup>20</sup>

At a broader level, sustainability needs to be pursued across the entire landscape and seascape and in both rural and urban areas. We can learn from the experience of indigenous peoples in combining the democratic, spiritual, social, and economic dimensions of sustaining ecosystems for generations. We also learn from the rest of nature, which works less in the linear way—from resources through to waste—of our conventional economy, and more in circular and complex systems involving biochemical cycles, recycling, and reuse. Several initiatives for food, water, and energy sovereignty and security are seeking to mimic these “virtuous cycles” and sustain or enhance resilience.<sup>21</sup>

Achieving sustainability also requires the “official” recognition of an ethical position that faiths and communities around the world have long held: the inherent rights of nature and its species. Bolivia’s Law of the Rights of Mother Earth, Ecuador’s inclusion of the rights of nature in its constitution, and New Zealand’s recognition of a river having a legal voice are all steps towards such recognition.<sup>22</sup> Of course, we have a long way to go; there have already been difficulties in implementation, as seen in the controversial case of Ecuador’s approval of oil drilling in Yasuni National Park. Yet constitutional and statutory provisions are important as a signal of intent and as tools for people to use in defending nature, and themselves as part of it.

### Challenges and Pathways

The transformation towards a sustainable and equitable world is obviously not going to be easy. Resistance from the votaries and beneficiaries of the dominant system is inevitable. We can see this in the enormous clout of private corporations and the military-industrial complex, and more subtly by the reinvention of capitalism in the form of “green growth,” corporate social responsibility, and techno-fixes. At the same time, the inadequacy of knowledge and information subverts efforts to manage complex webs of ecological problems. Last but not least, public apathy enables the forces of conventional development to drive the world down its perilous path.

As stubborn as these hurdles are, the growing number and reach of peoples’ initiatives to resist the system and create alternatives offers hope. Peoples’ movements and civil society organizations (including progressive workers’ unions) will continue to be the primary agents of change for radical ecological democracy. At times, sections

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and individuals within government, political parties, and academic institutions have taken the lead or assisted communities and civil society organizations, and we must continue to push such institutions to play a stronger and more effective role. Over time, as communities become empowered through decentralization, political parties will feel greater pressure from their constituencies to reorient their focus to issues of well-being based on sustainability and equity.

Businesses will make adjustments in the face of consumer pressure though, in the long run, the capitalist corporate sector will have to yield to forms of community enterprise that share the means of production and distribution, a public sector managed by the state (under full democratic control), and the emerging “social enterprise” sector, where it is genuinely public-oriented. International agencies, under pressure from peoples’ movements, have an important role to strengthen environmental and human rights treaties. Ultimately, the state itself must be transformed to play its critical role as guarantor of rights, facilitator of communities, and regulator of industry, at least until such a role is no longer needed. Each country or people will have to find its own pathway to a more accountable state, which will depend on mobilization at the grassroots level with linkages across spatial scales from the local to the global.

### Local-to-Global Movements

In this era, we are witness to an important historical conjunction between the local and the global. At one extreme are the localization movements that have been the center of attention of this essay. At the other is the growing mobilization around global issues, such as climate change, the global financial system, and the hegemony of multinational corporations. The conditions of the contemporary world are fostering mutually-reinforcing local and global mindsets. More than ever, individuals are members both of immediate communities and the community of humanity, just as local ecosystems are part of one global ecological system. Greater awareness of our interdependence comes with each new global crisis, and with it the possibility of greater unity.

Transforming this potential for linking the local and the global (the ‘glocal’) into cohesive action is one of the biggest challenges we face. A crucial task is proposing credible, coherent, and understandable alternatives at a systemic level. Evocative and powerful dreams and plausible scenarios are certainly a part of this. Not every vision has to be couched in “pragmatic” terms, but without a dose of pragmatism, they will remain unconvincing. To become politically powerful, the movement towards radical ecological democracy at the local level—or at the planetary level, toward a Great Transition—needs to combine the practical and policy-level grassroots work with broader mobilization.

This requires building platforms where practitioners, workers, thinkers, visionaries,

## Sustaining motivation and cohesion will require a common framework of values and principles and a shared vision of the world we want.

politicians, and artists can gather, searching for synergy even as they retain their diversity of perspectives and ideologies. Sharing a common enemy (the “system”) will not be sufficient for sustaining motivation and cohesion: that will take a common framework of values and principles and a shared vision of the world we want. Articulating common values and visions of well-being from indigenous peoples, local communities, and civil society can enrich the transcultural mobilizations now proliferating.

Local movements will have to push harder for participation at formal national, regional, and global forums to make them less state-centric and more people-centric.<sup>23</sup> They will be critical to ensuring that environmental and human rights agreements have teeth and that economic and trade agreements are subservient to them. The actions of the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank will have to be resisted if such organizations cannot be fundamentally restructured to elevate human and ecological well-being over profit. Peoples’ assemblies, bound together through national, regional, and global federations, will be important to counterbalance or even replace the current nation-state-dominated United Nations.

Grassroots mobilization for radical ecological democracy will be fundamental to this broader movement. The challenge is to scale up these small, scattered initiatives without losing their site-specificity, to cultivate synergies, and to link them to form a broader global network to advance the radical ecological democracy agenda. Such a movement need not ignore nor undermine the rich diversity of local ecological, cultural, political, and economic conditions. Key lessons, like the essentials of what made a successful initiative thrive or a failed one collapse, as well as the values and principles that underlie them, must be transferred from one place to another.

A consensus of such values is emerging, including ecological integrity, equity, diversity and pluralism, governance based on subsidiarity and direct participation, collective work and reciprocity, resilience, and the rights of nature.<sup>24</sup> This evolving worldview can be used to show the essential differences between the emerging vision and the dominant system, and serve as a rallying point for cultural and behavioral change. The Great Transition will rely as much on emotions, ethics, and feelings, as on facts and logical-rational thinking. The change has to be through the heart as much as through the head.

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21. Andy Jones, Michel Pimbert and Janice Jiggins, *Virtuous Cycles: Values, Systems and Sustainability* (London, International Institute for Environment and Development and Commission on Environmental, Economic, and Social

Policy, 2011).

22. For a few examples, see <http://celdf.org/rights-of-nature-background>.

23. Note that here and subsequently, “national” is not necessarily equated to the “nation-state” but extends to peoples considering themselves nations, such as Canada’s indigenous peoples or the ethnic communities in “plurinational” Bolivia.

24. See an evolving list of such values in the Peoples’ Sustainability Treaty on Radical Ecological Democracy at <http://radicalecologicaldemocracy.wordpress.com>.

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## About the Author



Ashish Kothari is the founder of the Indian environmental group Kalpavriksh. He has taught at the Indian Institute of Public Administration as well as several universities. He coordinated India’s National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan process, served on the boards of Greenpeace International and Greenpeace India, chaired a global International Union for Conservation of Nature network on protected areas and communities, and helped found the global Indigenous Peoples’ and Community Conserved Territories and Areas Consortium. He is currently on the Board of the International Centre for Environment Audit and Sustainable Development of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. Active in movements relating to development, conservation, and natural resource rights, Ashish Kothari is the author or editor (singly or with others) of over 30 books, including (with Aseem Shrivastava) *Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India*.

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