Conversation with Ashish Kothari

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you start by introducing yourself and the organization? What brought you to Global Tapestry of Alternatives?

Ashish Kothari: My name is Ashish Kothari, and I work in India with an environmental action group called Kalpavriksh, which I helped start when I was in high school. It's about 45 years old now, and I'm still working with them. A lot of the work Kalpavriksh has been doing, with networks in India in particular, has been critiquing the mainstream models of development and economy, neoliberal economics, and very centralized forms of political governance. In the last 15 years, in particular, we've been exploring the question: What are the alternatives to these models?

If we're saying no to big dams and extractivist projects, authoritarian governments, gender inequality, and all the problems that we have, and if we're also saying no to the systems underlying these problems–patriarchy, capitalism, racism, anthropocentrism, to name a few—then what are we saying yes to? If we're saying no to that, what is it that we want? We've done a lot of work in that line of inquiry, even in the initial years, looking at alternatives to mainstream models of conservation, which are really a Western model of exclusionary conservation, where things happen like people are kicked out of habitats but tigers are protected. We felt that there were community-led alternatives, based on local traditional knowledge, but with modern knowledge built into them. In that sense, there's some work on alternatives already happening.

Over the last 10 to 15 years, we have been tackling that much more head-on in terms of exploring the alternatives to the various types of problems we have by working with communities who are finding their own pathways towards alternative health systems, education, governance, gender justice, conservation of natural ecosystems and wildlife. We're trying to see how these could connect together, and to identify the narratives that are emerging from them–from the ground, so to speak—around

what people feel are alternative visions of how society could look without the problems that the currently dominant systems have created.

This is the work we've been doing in India, but then over the last few decades, we've also been connecting to groups elsewhere in the world. In the last decade or so, we’ve been working with movements on the commons, on solidarity economy, on alternative economies, on degrowth in Europe, on alternative visions of wellbeing, like Buen Vivir and Sumak Kawsay in South America, and on native indigenous population visions and practices in Australia and North America. We’ve been working with African movements as well, trying to bring back notions of Ubuntu and many others into current movements, and a lot more.

From all of that work, this idea emerged in 2016 of creating a platform in India that tries to confluence alternatives. We call it Vikalp Sangam, or Alternatives Confluence. Then we wondered: Why don't we create something more global that enables the linking of different networks across the world on a horizontal platform; not building a humongous, hierarchical organization, but weaving together organizations? This is why we call it Global Tapestry of Alternatives. We make sure that every moment in the network is unique, but that they also have commonalities. These commonalities–values, solidarity, diversity, interconnectedness, working as communities, and working with nature rather than against it, and so on–become the threads with which we weave together this tapestry. That's how it began.

2016 is when the idea came, but we formally launched it in 2019, and we have about 70-80 global networks or regional networks that are in some way or another connected with this Global Tapestry, including the Wellbeing Economy Alliance.

Ashley Hopkinson: What makes your work distinctive in this space? Would you say that being a network of networks, where people connect to each other on a horizontal playing field, is what makes you distinctive? Are there other things that make your work stand out in this broad field of inquiry?

Ashish Kothari: Well, one is exactly what you said: trying to create a global network that is not top-down and hierarchical. That, of course, has its own serious challenges. We're trying to avoid the pitfalls of what others, including the left movements, have attempted in the past. But there are at least three other things that make it distinctive.

One is the very clear focus on radical alternatives. We define radical alternatives as those that challenge the currently dominant exploitative system and grant much more power to the people and

also to the rest of nature, so respecting both the rights of nature and human rights, and multiple other aspects of what wellbeing could be.

The second thing that is distinctive is the attempt to try and cut across sectoral boundaries. There are many international networks that are focusing, for instance, on sustainable smallholder-based agriculture, like La Via Campesina, or on gender justice, like the World March Program. We have sectoral global alliances, but we're trying to build something that cuts across sectors, where you learn from each other, where you can constructively critique each other and deepen your understandings and your actions, and where you can widen the collaboration and the network.

The third thing is to make it as cross-cultural or intercultural as possible. We know that there are enormous challenges of language and translation, challenges of different cultures working with different notions of time, and different kinds of discussions and dialogues. There's so much diversity out there. We're trying to locate spaces in which these intercultural and cross-cultural dialogues can take place.

It's a combination of all of these factors that we hope makes the Global Tapestry unique. I should add that in the first three years after conceiving this idea in 2016, we spoke to many networks around the world to ask, "Is this space needed? Do we need something like the Global Tapestry of Alternatives?" We launched it when we got a more or less resounding yes, including from people within the World Social Forum, which is one of the largest and most influential civil society global networks that we have. Most felt that we do need something that focuses almost exclusively on radical alternatives and connects to movements of resistance and protest.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say has been one of your big insights or takeaways from this work over the years? Is there something that someone else who is in this space, trying to change the system from the outside, can learn from? That can expand beyond the work with Global Tapestry, to the perspective you mentioned earlier of, "We don't want this, but what are we saying yes to?"

Ashish Kothari: There are quite a lot of things, but two stand out off the top of my head. One is the realization that we don't have any final answer. There's no end point to this journey. It's not like the end of history kind of narrative. We may have come across, let's say, a brilliant solution to some energy needs that doesn't go down the fossil fuel pathway, or even the large-scale renewable pathway, or we may have found some of the most wonderful initiatives at claiming and creating food sovereignty on the ground. But that doesn't mean that that's the end of the story. For instance, 5,000 Dalit women in South India created food sovereignty for themselves and the next few generations, which is great, but

that doesn’t mean everything is set. There are new challenges, there are new contexts, there are new generations. There has to be a constant journey of evolution, learning, doing, making mistakes, learning from those mistakes, and so on. That's one thing that we feel is very important. For this to happen, we need cross-cultural or cross-geographic learning and cross-sectoral learning because nobody can do it alone. No single culture is able to deal with the global level of crises that we have.

The second thing is that a lot of positive energy comes in when you talk about positive outcomes, when you talk about alternatives, and when you celebrate what's happening on the ground and how communities are responding to crises with their own innovations and creativity. Now, this is a hypothesis, and somebody needs to study it and see if it is actually the case, but it seems to be true over the last decade or so, in the work we do with the Alternatives Confluence process in India, with the Vikalp Sangam process, and now with the Global Tapestry. Many groups are able to stay together for a longer period in positive-outcome spaces compared to spaces that are about critique, resistance, and protest. This outlook helps communities, groups, people, organizations, and social groups work together and not succumb so easily to ego issues, to the politics of ideology, to so many things that have been bugbears in all the collaborative processes that we've been trying within India or globally.

Ashley Hopkinson: I think there might be something to that. As a journalist, when you cover social issues, you're often at the crisis center, asserting "This is the worst thing that's happening," over and over again. It can wear you down. My theory is that if you're able to cover how people are responding and explore the responses that are coming to the surface, it’s helpful. It can keep you in the space of riding around those tough issues for longer.

Ashish Kothari: Yes. Maybe I can add a third thing that I feel is very important. The dominant system, whether it's capitalism, or state domination, or patriarchy, is very good at convincing us that they know the answers. For a long time, they would deny that climate is an issue. Now, they can't deny it anymore, but they say, "Don’t worry. We have the solution. We have carbon fixing, we have geoengineering," and blah, blah, blah. For a long time it was poverty. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund all claim to have the solutions.

For us, working on radical alternatives, it becomes very, very important to try and figure out how we can distinguish between those so-called solutions offered by the same the system that's created the problems–and I would include Sustainable Development Goals, to some extent–and those ideas that are challenging the system and its attempts to try and sustain itself.

A lot of so-called sustainable development is more about sustaining the profits of corporations and the power of the state than sustaining the earth. For us, it has become crucial to ask: What are the people's

solutions? What solutions are genuinely radical, going to the roots, changing paradigms and systems? We have to remember that this is a learning process and a constant evolution.

Ashley Hopkinson: You mentioned connecting community groups, and the value of bringing in community voices, and we know that interdependency is a big part of how wellbeing economics works. Can you describe any program or practice within the organization that has brought people together in a collaborative way that you feel has been particularly valuable?

Ashish Kothari: In our networks, just like in the organization I work with in Kalpavriksh, we've always tried to create a sense of everybody participating in decision-making. There are no formal hierarchies–no president, secretary, or chief in Kalpavriksh, nor in the Vikalp Sangam process, nor in the Global Tapestry. The idea is that everybody participates, and everybody is part of the decision-making.

Of course, we know there are hidden hierarchies. There are capacity issues, there are inequalities. We have to try and consciously deal with them, to build those capacities, and enable those who are reserved, shy, not able to speak, or not wanting to speak, to have a voice in some way. This is always evolving. It's a challenge, and it's not easy.

It also means that decisions sometimes take much longer than if you had a chief executive officer or somebody who would say, "You guys don't seem to be able to decide. I'll decide it all." It can take much longer, and sometimes it's frustrating, but what we find is that when a decision is made, there's a much greater stake, and a much greater buy-in from everybody because everybody's had a chance to have a voice. Even if there's dissent, at least that dissent has been heard. That, I think, is one thing.

I would say it's the same within communities –the attempt to establish a much more democratic, consensus-based decision-making process is so important. It’s worthwhile to look at some of the most interesting initiatives trying to create radical democracy, self-governance, autonomy, or self-determination on the ground; it's called different things in different places.

Take the Kurdish Freedom Movement and their attempt at trying to create local, radical, eco-feminist-based democracy, or the Zapatista movement, in what is today called Mexico, of indigenous peoples trying to create self-determination. Neither of these has any centralized state, or any centralized unit, making all the decisions. It's very centralized, yes, but it’s also distributed. They coordinate over larger landscapes. For instance, there are several villages in India that have declared, “We elect the government in New Delhi, but in our village, we are the government.”

Those local governments make decisions by consensus, and everybody needs to be part of it. Even if one person disagrees, there will continue to be discussions until there is a consensus. I know at least one village has taken 12 years to reach a particular decision. It was a difficult one about recombining all the private land in the village. This was agricultural land, which for generations had been with families, that was then recombined. That took 12 years to come to this revolutionary decision.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision-makers, such as governance, can do to help improve collaboration and advance progress when it comes to alternatives and moving us forward in a different way?

Ashish Kothari: Going back quickly to that village that said that we elect the government in New Delhi, but in our village, we are the government–the second part of that statement is about radical democracy and the first part is about saying because we've elected the government in New Delhi, we will make it accountable.

There is a two-way process that's very important when the citizens, or the so-called subjects of the state, or students in an academic institution, assert their power. We are all born with that power, and unfortunately, in neoliberal democracies, we willingly give it over to politicians and bureaucrats. But we are all born with that power, and when we collectively assert our responsibility to make our own decisions, we also make those who are currently in power accountable, transparent, and responsible.

From their side, if they are truly making decisions for the benefit of people and the earth, then they need to move towards policies that enable that kind of transformation. Let me give you an example from India. In the 1990s, two amendments were brought into the constitution giving village self-governance and urban neighborhood self-governance much more power. Not full power, and there are still flaws in the system, but local assemblies were given power over about 20 different functions. That's a very significant policy shift towards distributed or decentralized decision-making. Some other countries in the world have moved in that direction.

If I were head of an academic institution, for instance, I would try and see how participatory I could make the syllabus, or how I could make the campus more ecologically sensitive, or more diverse and inclusive in terms of the kinds of people that are there. I would try and involve the whole academic community, not just the faculty and the staff, but also the students, in that decision-making.

If I were head of state of a country like India, I would look at what policy decisions would allow much more decentralized power to exist. How could we promote much more local economies rather than globalized economies? I would say we need shifts of this kind, which would reduce my power and

increase the power of the people and the rest of nature in whatever ways possible. That's what I think so-called leaders and decision-makers should be doing. Whether they are or not is a separate issue.

Ashley Hopkinson: Where have you seen work happening that gives you a glimmer of hope, and that makes you feel we have the potential to push and shift?

Ashish Kothari: The examples that I've mentioned are, to me, the biggest signs of hope: the Adivasi Indigenous Movements in Central India, the Kurdish Freedom Movement, the Zapatista Movement, the Movement for Food Sovereignty started by 5,000 Dalit so-called outcast women in South India. However small or big they might be, there are very big signs of hope. Those 5,000 Dalit women, who are the most marginalized section of Indian society, the so-called "untouchables," achieved food sovereignty in Tamil Nadu in South India, against all odds. They have done this, and they now hold their heads high. To see that level of confidence and articulation, especially compared to 30 years back, is a total revolution. But they didn't stop at transforming their own local lives. They then created networks across India to set up what's called the Millet Initiative of India, to try and push for millets, which are the oldest grains, in many parts of South Asia and Africa.

They brought back many different kinds of millets into their agriculture and claimed food security and sovereignty. They then started pushing for policy shifts in their state government and provincial government, and also in the national government, to move away from the central focus on wheat and rice, which is what the Indian government has been doing, and to bring this very large diversity of millets, including pulses and lentils, back into people's food choices, into production processes, and into food aid programs.

They also created a more global network of sustainable agriculture. They moved from the very local to the regional to the national and eventually the international. This kind of very deep, local work, and the subsequent widening of the process through networking, advocacy, and policy shifts is a very big sign of hope.

The other one I can think of is the shift towards much more decentralized decision-making. The example I gave you about the amendments to the Indian Constitution is the sort of shift that has happened in many other countries. People have been asserting that we need to have more control over decision-making in our own lives.

Many countries have devolved self-determination powers to indigenous peoples. This has happened, for instance, in Latin America, to some extent in Canada, to some extent in Australia, and a little bit in South Africa. Wherever there are strong movements, we see the reclaiming and recognition of

territorial claims. We see people recognizing that lands that have been seized and taken away in colonial times need to be returned to communities.

These may have started as small movements, but they spread, and as news spreads, movements start in other places. People say, "If they can do it, so can we." These are the biggest signs of hope.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's really powerful. What have you found to be challenging in this work, and how are you managing these challenges?

Ashish Kothari: We’re always short of human power and financial resources. That's a common thing that’s been there for a long time. It doesn't stymie us or paralyze us, but it's there. It's an issue.

I think more important than that is the challenge of breaking through human weaknesses to work together. By that, I mean things like ego, lack of maturity around how you work with other people, lack of humility, and continued patterns of inequality that probably all of us exhibit in some way because they’re so internalized. For me, patriarchy and casteism are very internalized, sometimes without my even consciously recognizing them. In some way or another, though, that might come out. These challenges within interpersonal and interorganizational dynamics are very important.

The other challenge is that the systems we're fighting against are very clever. Sometimes, they can evolve faster than we can. People have been saying, "Capitalism is collapsing” for decades, but we know that it's not because it's reinventing itself all the time.

Now, you have green capitalism, because like I said earlier, they can't deny that ecology and climate are huge issues. Now, they're saying, "Green capital, green growth, green capitalism, green economy is the solution." There's that constant reinventing. Because of that, what for us was sometimes a relatively easy narrative is very challenging. We used to be able to say things like, "This kind of open strip mining is really bad," and most people would agree, except for those who were profiting from it. There'd be a lot of public support, and governments would have to give some kind of lip service to it. It’s become harder, now, because now they say, "We are only going to do this much mining, and then we'll restore it. We'll make sure it goes back to the same ecological state it was in, and we'll move to the next one." They’ve become much more clever in hiding the impacts that they’re having.

This is a big challenge for us. It's a challenge to confront that and to become sharper and sharper in our critiques, and it's also a challenge to convince the public because they have a thousand or a billion times more advertising budget than we could ever have to reach the public. If they come up with arguments that are very "convincing" from an ecological standpoint, and if I make an ecological

argument, the public will say, "You're right, but this company is already dealing with it, so why are you worried? Plus, they're giving us jobs." Supposedly.

The UN has been fantastic with a lot of human rights and environmental treaties, but increasingly, it also succumbs to this kind of green-wash that's taking place.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support–and when I say right support, I mean the people are there, the money is there–what would you like to see better prioritized? What would you like to see grow and move across geographies, too?

Ashish Kothari: One thing that I have found to be very powerful is storytelling, so I'd love to see a lot more support for people on the ground to tell their own stories in whatever way they feel comfortable. It could be audio, visual, art, writing–whatever is comfortable for them in their own language. Then, there is the attempt to translate that into different forms so it reaches a much larger audience.

We have a website that has about 2,000 set stories from across India over the last 10 years, but that's still the tip of the iceberg. We feel there are probably 200,000 stories out there. Most of these fantastic initiatives are not being shared or talked about, so only those who are in it really know about it. I'd love to see more support with both storytelling and outreach regarding these stories.

Another thing is more exchange programs and more opportunities to visit each other. We know that there's an ecological footprint involved, but I don't think there's a substitute for that kind of connection. I'll give you an example. About two decades back, a delegation from those 5,000 Dalit women farmers that I spoke about earlier went to the Parque de la Papa, which is the potato park in Peru, and one of the places where the potato originated. Now, it's where Quechua indigenous peoples have also been achieving food sovereignty and controlling a large biocultural landscape. They went there, and those farmers visited them in South India.That exchange program is documented, and I think there's a film about it.

That exchange program created so much buzz in their heads and hearts and so much learning. One learned participatory filmmaking from someone else, another learned to create a restaurant with their own traditional recipes. That kind of learning, and even more importantly, the heart effect of knowing that far away in a different part of the world, somebody is doing something very similar, is so important. They also incidentally discovered that the word for earth, mother earth, was Panchamma here, and Pachamama in Peru.

Through the Global Tapestry, we're hoping that there will be not just online dialogues, but actual physical meetings with each other, going to each other's territories, learning from each other, expressing solidarity, and becoming stronger. That kind of support would be great.

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you define wellbeing economics? What does a wellbeing economy mean to you?

Ashish Kothari: It means many things. Firstly, the economy is embedded within ecology, and not the other way around. Satish Kumar, who started the Schumacher College explained to me a long time ago. They said that economy means the management of home, and ecology means the understanding of home, from the Greek word *oikos*. They asked "How can you manage home unless you first understand it?"

The economy has to be embedded within ecology. Of course, that makes great sense, in many cases, seeing what's happening to planetary boundaries. That then means that the economy is much more about the relations of production, reproduction, exchange, care, and share than it is about money and finance. Gibson Graham talked about community economies, or diverse economies, which still exist, but they're hidden, because we only see the financial money tip of the iceberg.

Community economies include the care that women give in the household, grandparents looking after grandchildren, how nature cares for us in so many ways, and other things like that. All of that is hidden, and I'm not suggesting we should monetize it, but rather, that it should be recognized as a central part of the economy.

Then there is self-reliance, and the idea that every local region, no matter how big, will become self-reliant, at least for basic needs like water, energy, housing, sanitation, education, and health, rather than dependent on somebody a thousand miles away.

I also think that those who are actually laboring and producing things need to be in control of the means of production. Whether they're workers in a factory, craftspersons working on their tools, farmers working on the land, indigenous people working in the forest, or fishing communities in the seas, they need to be in collective control over the means of production, not capitalists in the state.

I think if we put all of these things together, then very different indicators of wellbeing will arise. Instead of the GDP, which is totally nonsensical, we would ask: Does everybody have clean water? Does everybody have good nutritious food to eat? Does everybody have good social relations? Does everybody have decent housing? Does everybody have a voice in decision-making? Does everybody

have access to good healthcare? Those would become much more meaningful indicators of whether a society is doing well or not, not GDP percentage economic growth.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything I didn't ask that you would like to add to the conversation?

Ashish Kothari: The only thing I would add is that one of the things we've been using in India, and now also globally, is what we call the flower of transformation. What we say is that if you're thinking about a wellbeing economy, it can't be separated from a radical democracy, which is political decision-making, which cannot be separated from the struggles for equality and nondiscrimination–gender equality, LGBTQ rights, non-ableism, non-casteism, whatever the struggles might be. That cannot be separated from supporting the diversity of cultures and knowledge systems, and having cultures and knowledge systems in the commons rather than privatized. All of this has to be built on the foundation of ecological sanity and wisdom. This flower of transformation has five petals: economy, politics, society, culture, knowledge, and ecology.

It’s a bit of an artificial distinction, but basically, what we're trying to say is that we can't talk about radical politics, or the wellbeing economy, or any of these without looking at the intersections of the other petals, and without having ethics and principles at the core of that flower of transformation: solidarity, diversity, generosity, interdependence, human rights, rights of nature, simplicity.

In India, some of us call that sort of holistic transformation radical ecological democracy, or we use the Indian term, *swaraj*, *eco-swaraj*, which means self-rule, self-determination with responsibility, ecological and social responsibility. We try to look at things more holistically.

I often say that it's very difficult to answer a question like, what is wellbeing economy unless we are also looking at these other elements. It’s a holistic transformation that many of the initiatives on the ground are attempting, and that we need to be doing across the earth.

Ashley Hopkinson: That’s wonderful. Thank you.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*