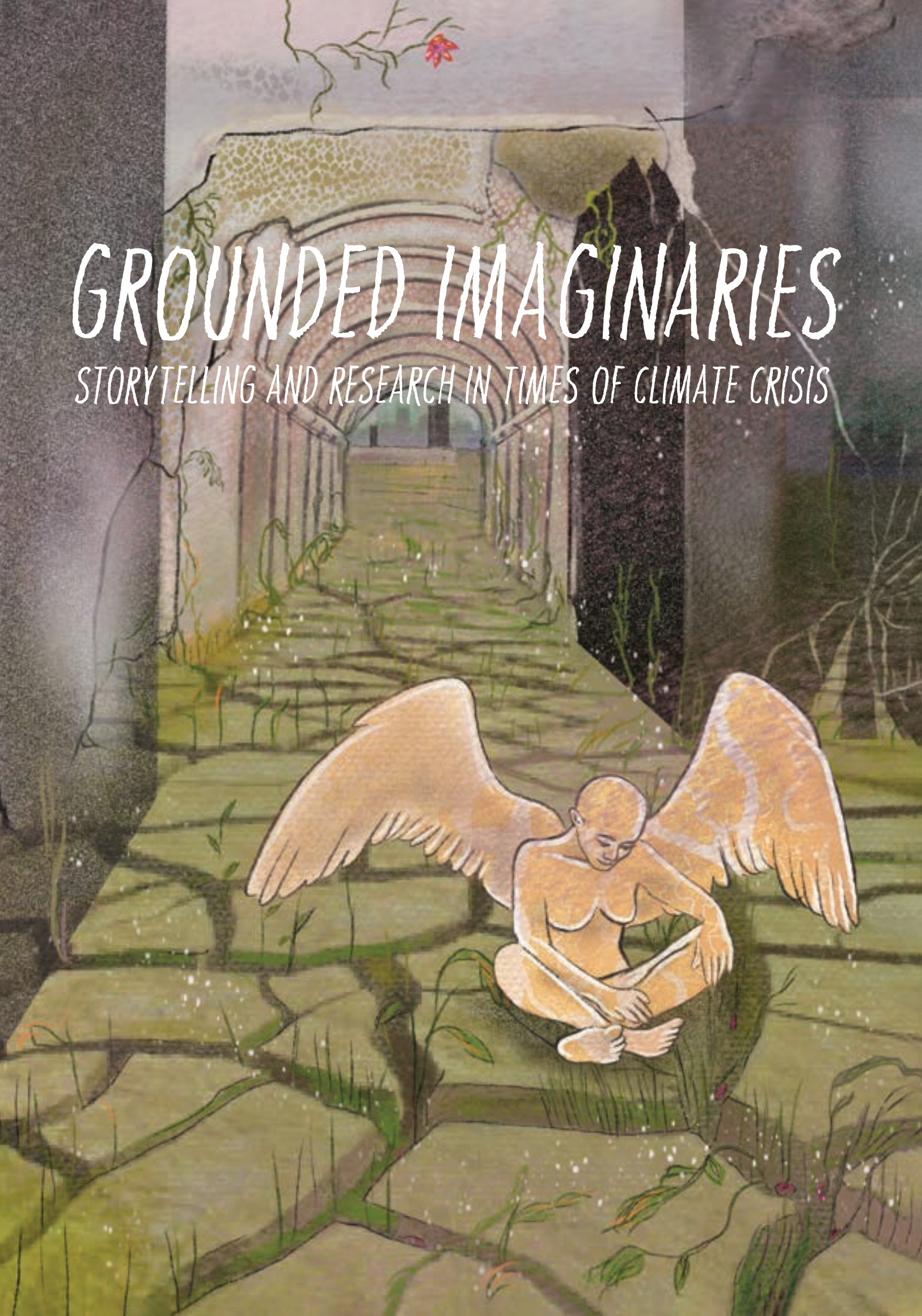


GROUNDING IMAGINARIES

STORYTELLING AND RESEARCH IN TIMES OF CLIMATE CRISIS



This is a publication of the Grounded Imaginaries research project, a collaboration between Sydney Environment Institute (SEI), University of Sydney, Australia, India and Bharat Together (IABT) and the Social Entrepreneurship Association, Auroville.

This project is made possible with the generous support of the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation.

A softcopy of this booklet can be found online at the following web address:

https://bit.ly/Imaginaries_Booklet



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Welcome, please read this first

Grounded Imaginaries was a storytelling-cum-research pilot project that involved youth fellows, cultural creatives, and seasoned inquirers who yarned stories with communities responding to the climate crisis from the ground up – and what you have in your hands is a diary of this project.

It traces our experiential journey (stories, theories, processes, ideas...) and acts as a report of the activities carried out as part of this project that ran from October 2021 till the end of March 2023, but don't expect any graphs or statistics. After all, we did say this is a storytelling project.

The booklet is made up of four sections: **Section I** – the story of the project | **Section II** – the stories of our research fellows | **Section III** – the media outputs that complement the project's academic publications | and finally, **Section IV**: your story and your imaginaries.

Throughout Section I: the story of the project, you will find two distinct kinds of writing:



this symbol indicates knowledge pieces

The knowledge segments are informative pieces that build on each other, becoming a sort of manifesto to help grasp what is meant by Grounded Imaginaries. It's the chronicle of our learning journey and inquiry – pertaining largely to frameworks, theories, concepts, and such – with prompts for further reading and references at the end.



this symbol indicates process pieces

In the process segments the project diary side comes alive. Here we share how we created the project design, who participated, and how it all happened in practice. It's not always adhering to chronology, and might include some inside jokes.

This is partly intended for people who might consider organising a fellowship program in the future. (This project was a pilot so we do hope someone is going to do something with it after it ends.)

Section I consists of 'knowledge' and 'process' pieces braided together, often riffing off each other, into a recurring flow. However, you can flip through the segments focusing only on one type if you like. If you are interested only in 'knowledge' for example, feel free to skim, or skip, the 'process' pieces (and vice versa).



A third symbol you will find is a signpost to portals that link you to deeper realms beyond the scope of this booklet, which you can look up at the back of the document.

There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.

– Ursula K. LeGuin

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WHY STORIES?



Stories shape our reality – the stories we tell ourselves, our co-conspirators, our nemeses, our world and its systems; our limitations as well as our ability to imagine beyond our limitations. In turn, our perceptions, our experiences, our notions of reality – give form to our stories.

Stories we inhabit become a vehicle of our conditioning, defining the roles we play. Albeit just as easily, stories cut through our polarities, prejudices, and social roles.

Be it through visible layers of words and visuals – or invisible, multi-layered smells and feelings – stories can connect our individual experience with planetary-scale issues. Stories speak to our whole being; beyond clicking our rational mind into order, beyond evoking some emotional resonance.

Since the very beginning of human existence, the magic of storytelling has spun lifelines into our lifetimes. Our species' effervescent and contemplative nature keeps our heads in the stars, while our feet touch the ground. Stories allow us to traverse boundaries and embody non-human elements with ease, intuitively arising while fabricating fantasies (often profound) early on in our childhood, ageing into poetry that seems to descend from higher realms, to terraforming tales that led our scientific explorations of the Earth and our Universe, and most recently to a shared conversation with Artificial Intelligence (à la ChatGPT).

*"We will reassert the role of storytelling as more than mere entertainment.
It is through stories that we weave reality."*

— the Dark Mountain Project

words from The Manifesto, written by Paul Kingsnorth and Dougland Hine


Stories offer portals through which we can converse with our subconscious, with our fellow creatures, with faraway galaxies. Fusing with their messengers and carriers, stories become a process that continue to grow within us even after the storytelling session concludes. Stories once prominent can go to sleep and be awakened centuries later, or in different places. Kin stories of our ancestors teleported through beings and landscapes, with a kind of fluidity and metaphysical quality that we seem to have lost. At some stage, compartmentalisation set in, bringing with it false dichotomies – and we drew borders that obstructed the flow. But the essence of such stories is still alive, and evolving, ongoing in their adapted retellings, binding us like some kind of social glue, and we might just be witnessing their collective revival.

*"For most of human history, myth was a durable mode of knowledge transmission,
kept alive and resilient by the breath-laced web of communal storytelling.
Practical information about survival and sustenance was next within compelling
narratives that prized the epic stories of multi-species communities over the
monologues of human individuals. Just as we plant a seed in soil, so were vital pieces
of agricultural and ecological lore planted into stories that were built to survive
environmental and social collapse.*

*Mythtelling, as primarily oral and embodied, was revitalised by the same ecological
cycles that depend on a balance of decay and regrowth: breaking down dead wood to
generate new soil. "*

— from "Rewilding Mythology"

A course organised by Advaya, curated and hosted by Sophie Strand

Dissolve in the creative depths of storytelling through the crisis with
Advaya  the Dark Mountain Project

Usà puyew usu wapiw!
(He goes backward, looks forward.)

A saying among the Cree people, tells of a porcupine who backs away into a rock crevice, from where it can consider what lies ahead.

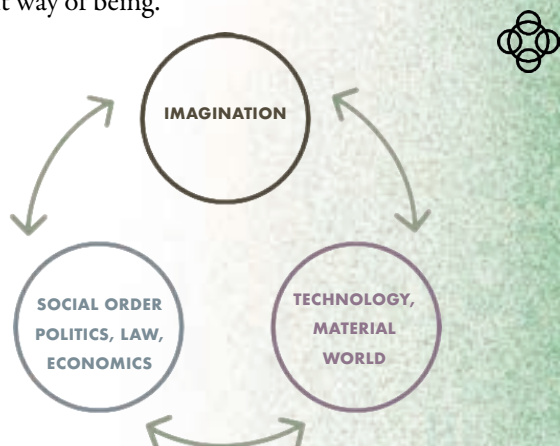
“In order to speculate safely on an inhabitable future, perhaps we would do well to find a rock crevice and go backward. In order to find our roots, perhaps we should look for them where roots are usually found.”¹

- Ursula K. Le Guin

In this current era then, we aim loftily, to write over (at once moving backward and looking forward), the myths of our times. To harness the power of the multitude of stories: mine, yours, intergenerational, societal and cultural that would unleash radically reimagined alternative futures. From a space of remembrance, we tap into consciousness that is latent; we amplify our resilience. We set out for new Imaginaries.

We use these words interchangeably: stories, narratives and imaginaries. Stories and narratives are common tongue, but what do we mean by imaginaries? To be precise, “imaginaries” refer to the implicit or background assumptions people make about how the world is and what we can do about it. An imaginary refers to the systemic ways in which the frames, and the framers, co-shape our lived experiences – from which the shaping originates. A web that is a multi-systemic, multi-dimensional ecology,² in which imagination is one dimension.

In this infographic, we see how imagination influences the social order: politics, law, economics – the rules of the game – which in turn influence how technology and our material world are constructed. Meanwhile, both the hardware and the software of society determine what can be imagined. In short, a shift in the story realm has knock-on effects that can tip the whole codependent scheme of factors into a qualitatively different way of being.



For a succinct understanding of what we mean by Climate Imaginaries, listen to Professor Danielle Celermajer, the lead investigator of the Grounded Imaginaries project, in the first episode of the Reimagined Futures podcast



EMERGENCE OF THE



Academics/activists (ArtacademiCTIVISTS?) from far ends of the southern hemisphere unite! Bushfires and floods in Australia are fresh in world memory, the pandemic is shaking India. If ever there was a sense of the Apocalypse, it is now. In 2020, it became trending to say: Crisis is the new normal. The available boxes of possibilities constrain action, responses, and sense-making. The transdisciplinary nature of things takes root. A praxis-based, inquiry-led project design, generously sprinkled with integral wisdom, beckons.

I was born from a dream held by humans who were passionately upset (they probably still are) with the state of the world in general, and the state of stories in particular. Their lives are intertwined with their work and they speak of a shift for humanity – some believe it is on its way; others believe it is already here. They get this endearing glint in their eyes when they hear stories of systems change, of worlds where many worlds converge, of a more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.³ Mine is a story of a storytelling project, born out of emotional as well as mental churning.

GROUND IMAGINARIES PROJECT

Allies Assemble

I speak to you now from an intentional community called Auroville in Tamil Nadu, India. I am housed by the Social Entrepreneurship Association (SEA), a hub for initiatives and explorations that aim to respond honestly to the state of the world. What attracted the team at SEA to the Sydney Environment Institute (SEI) was their approach to academia – not as separate from society but smack in the middle of it. SEI are into theatre, film, dance, theory, creative expression, as well as scholarly writing. This felt important when confronting a topic as holistic as imaginaries or societal narratives.

Up in the north of the country, another partner, India and Bharat Together (IABT), becomes an ally, bringing in a wealth of experience from working with youth and awesome project organising skills! They feel like buddies to the SEA team as they both work with young people and are members of the same network of activists exploring alternatives in India: the Vikalp Sangam. This network was the web through which I came to India – and onward to SEA and IABT.

The Vikalp Sangam (or confluence of alternatives) is a unique congregation of grassroots activists and solutioneers, nudging each other towards a world they call the Pluriverse⁴ – where there is space for a polyphony of stories and tales of development and progress, grounded in practices that ooze with life. Their belief in a radical ecological democracy connects local initiatives into a Global Tapestry of Alternatives. Sister movements in South America and South Africa share this aspiration and together they seek to bridge place-based community perspectives with planet-scale coordination.

With allies in place, Zoom meetings are launched where faces get connected to particular expressions, backgrounds, and names. The sessions prod at the ground to gather healthy compost material, getting ready to plant seeds. A proposal comes together, is sent out into the cloud, followed by a long silence.

An affirmative response comes through from the donors at V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation – who have pledged to spend-down

their endowment over the next fifteen years to forward climate research. The cloud bursts as it rains resources! The seeds start sprouting.

And so, I was named the ‘Grounded Imaginaries Project’. But enough from me, I will hand over the talking stick to Gijs and Pragnya from SEA, who embodied my purpose as their own. They will share with you the rest of the story from the perspective of Tamil Nadu.

The excitement of new beginnings courses through our veins. Our mission is as clear as it is vast: to find and share stories of community responses to the ecological crisis, and do this in a way that empowers the protagonists, the tellers and the audience of the stories.

We would say it back then and we would say it now again – the imaginaries we seek may not seem tangible yet, but still feel very palpable. By recounting our story to you, we invite you to witness this quest through these words and visuals – to trigger your hopes, your emotions, your imagination — honouring the intangible and the real.



ANTHROPOCENE



Although we are wary of imposing a single narrative on the many ways people are making sense of our time, there is a common pattern that shows up across watersheds and storysheds: a planetary reflection. What Earth sees when it looks in the mirror looks a lot like us, humans. In science we speak of the Anthropocene – the first geological era named after a single species. Humans shape worldwide cycles of core elements such as carbon, water and biodiversity, as well as underlying factors such as temperature and acidity, making us a force of planetary proportions. These days what shapes human society shapes the Earth, which blurs the lines between social and natural sciences. Storytelling is now clearly a biophysical act. Cultural eruptions have the power of extinction-level volcanoes, the impact of powerful stories is at par with that of the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs. Not in a metaphorical sense, but for real.

“We imagined ourselves isolated from the source of our existence. The fallout from this imaginative error is all around us: a quarter of the world’s mammals are threatened with imminent extinction; an acre and a half of rainforest is felled every second; 75% of the world’s fish stocks are on the verge of collapse; humanity consumes 25% more of the world’s natural ‘products’ than the Earth can replace – a figure predicted to rise to 80% by mid-century. Even through the deadening lens of statistics, we can glimpse the violence to which our myths have driven us.”⁵

— the Dark Mountain Project

As the tectonic plates of our belief systems collide and shake the foundations of our civilisations we feel the web of life tugging in unexpected corners, as fires change the colour of the Siberian permafrost from white to red, warm winters turn the white Himalayas into stone grey, and the legendarily vibrant coral reefs turn white with fear. Needless to say, human stories built on stability and control are rapidly going out of fashion.

“..The climate crisis is a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination”⁶
— Amitav Ghosh

Coining of the term Anthropocene is a seismic event and a big step towards acknowledging the scale of our human impact. But there's plenty about it that's controversial. First of all, calling this moment a geological era can put us on the wrong footing. Some say we have 10–20 years to make a U-turn, others estimate 100. There are no known geological eras of such a brief timespan.

Secondly, some say calling humans the most destructive force the planet has ever seen only feeds steroids to the ego beast within us. Yet again, placing human supremacy at the pinnacle, unattainable by others.

And thirdly, such a generic term presumes a level of homogeneity that leaves little space for local context.

*“Modernity has generally insisted on viewing nature as an already-completed product to be maintained and/or mined, clashing strongly with various cultures’ ideas of an unspooling and endlessly dynamic reality which never stops changing. (..) if we are interested in re-establishing our roots, sinking them down into the world that feeds us and is fed by us, the question is less whether we are ‘human’ than whether we are held in the loving, capricious, demanding, and meaningful embrace of a specific place, a specific habitat: a Somewhere. This is the way that we escape this false question of ‘which we are’ (inherently destructive? inherently masterful?); by becoming a part, rather than standing apart.
(...)”*

The here-and-now is far from ideal, as it states, but “not pretending to be somewhere else” might mean becoming a part of what life still exists where you stand, however polluted, enclosed, devalued; digging into the earth and shattering the concrete that stops it from breathing, shattering the abstract and placeless ‘humanity’ that is foisted upon us rather than identifying with it over our own Somewhere.”⁷
— Return Fire

By including these considerations, we add the questions they suggest into this labyrinthine conversational inquiry that endeavours to shake up the global climate narrative: what ARE relevant and appropriate ways to think about the impact of our species’ actions on the rest of the planet? – including the impact of how we think about such questions.

We are responding to the need to balance the single species bias by adopting a more ecocentric worldview, decentering human narratives, and inviting the non-anthropocene.



For a beautiful example of inquiry into the nature of our uncomfortable relationship with unintended ecological consequences of modernity, we recommend you to visit **Feral Atlas**



FRAMEWORK

As we embarked on a sense-making journey of our own, we shape-shifted into our mushroom-selves and the mycelium of our dendritic brain reached out to potential sources of clarity and coherence. As the hyphae spread out into multiple directions, they fused with some frameworks and rejected others, lingering longer with those that resonated and nourished the scope of the inquiry.

We investigated frameworks such as Deep Ecology (a school of thought founded by Nordic philosopher Arne Naess, who spent as much time observing lichen as he did reading books), and Indic schools of thought going back thousands of years that posit consciousness of all beings and non-dualism as a compass to map the realms of human consciousness and ways of life dedicated to the cultivation of this sacred superpower. We danced with the work of Donella Meadows, system thinker extraordinaire, who entangled the worlds of levelheaded policymakers tasked with eradicating hunger and disease with strands of embodiment, love, and visualisation. We asked ourselves how to do justice to the 'justice' part of climate justice.



EXPLORATIONS



To feed your curiosity related to these and other sense-making tools, shape-shift your way to the portal



Where we are writing from, in Auroville, we would use the term ‘inner work’ for much of this inquiry – as opposed to work intended to shape the world around us. But when human stories shape the planet, the distribution of resources, the survival of species – is this distinction still helpful? Or is inner and outer work actually the same? As our work on the world (praxis) shapes our physical environment, including the air we breathe into our brains and the water we drink into our nervous system, creating the vessel that holds the conscious mind, so too does our thought (theory) shape our choices and behaviour, which we now know shapes the world.

Grasping the essence of Grounded Imaginaries required multiple layered lenses: fractal, and kaleidoscopic. The vastness of Grounded Imaginaries did not adhere to any ONE of the frameworks we explored. It burst at the seams. It consumed multiple nutrients – fed by a multispecies diet – it revealed fuzzy boundaries – it grew – it made space — it kept asking questions.

This project is not finished and this booklet is not a conclusion. You are invited to compost these pages and feed them back into the ongoing churning and cycling of meaning making and Earth shaking.



DEEP ECOLOGY

Key concepts include the recognition that we as ecological beings are completely intertwined with all cycles of life, from the fast-paced exchange of atmospheric gases to the glacial-paced weathering of rocks. Deep Ecology calls upon humanity to act as responsible Earth citizens and allow ecological awareness to inform all we do and how we think of ourselves. Once we realise our Self does not end at the boundary of our skin we can redefine Selfishness to become acts of Earth care. I stand for the river, because it is a part of me and I am a part of it.

What we kept from this exploration is a constant questioning of our own arbitrary boundaries. As project participants we constantly include and exclude topics and directions, making this report as much a chronicle of the attention flowing through our bodies, settling on an area of interest and then moving on to another, as an account of what we found out about our research question.

INDIC PHILOSOPHY

Important concepts include study of the atman (*self-inquiry*) and debate about the nature of reality – whether there is something beyond the material world or not (*charvaka*), whether there is free will or not (*aajeevika*). *Astika* schools follow the ancient *Vedas*, whereas *Nastika* schools including Jainism and Buddhism seek other sources of truth. Indic epistemology identifies multiple sources of knowledge, namely perception (*pratyaksa*), inference (*anumana*), verbal testimony (*abda*), comparison (*upamana*), presupposition (*arthapatti*) and non-apprehension (*anupalabdhi*). Evolution can be seen as the result of the abstract consciousness (*purusha*) interfacing with “that which changes and can be known” (*prakruti*). Their dance creates intelligence and thereby duality which lies at the heart of our spiritual crisis. Self-inquiry as practised through yoga is a quest to find the pure consciousness residing within our inner being – the *atman*. There are various paths (*bhakti yoga*, *jnana yoga* and *karma yoga*) and it is up to each seeker to find which path best suits their personal nature.

Indic philosophy, read from an ecological lens, invites us to retract from the conquest of nature, and accept the supreme responsibility borne by our species, towards Earth and all its species: to evolve further, together, to a space of being that at once embodies all the universes.

What we kept from this exploration is a recognition that the root beneath the visible crises is a crisis of perspective, a case of mistaken identity. We also resonate with the plurality of paths (no one size fits all) and the notion that hierarchy need not be denied, but held responsibly, with strong accountability for the stewardship of our communities, our home, and our fellow beings.

SYSTEM THINKING

Main concepts include the way that interconnected elements together enable a particular behaviour that can not be predicted by looking at them in separation – the famous whole being more than the sum of its parts. This gives rise to studies of system dynamics, which describe nonlinear processes such as exponential growth and collapse, disproportional impact of inputs or interventions on the state of the whole, and system archetypes or recurring patterns such as boom-bust cycles, exponential growth and decline, strange attractors and regimes alternating between semi-stable states like a pendulum.

What we kept from this exploration is a focus on patterns and their drivers. What causes obviously dysfunctional ways of being and relating to be reproduced despite our better judgement? Or in the words of Otto Scharmer: “why do we keep recreating a world that none of us want?” How do multiple systems that can be understood on their own interact to create hybrid systems – layering realms such as economy, culture, ecology and politics?

CLIMATE JUSTICE

The fundamental idea behind environmental justice or its subset, climate justice, is to secure the rights and protect the interests of socially and economically marginalised sections of the population. The impact of any crisis, including the climate crisis will be unequally distributed, mediated by forces such as capitalism and political imperialism, racism and casteism, patriarchy and gender relations. And those suffering most are not causing the problem. Oxfam reports that over the past 25 years, the carbon impact of the top 1% of the wealthiest human beings was twice that of the bottom 50%, so responsibility for the impact and the capacity to make change is distributed very unevenly. Environmental justice also acknowledges the long-standing role of indigenous communities and nature-based communities as protectors, nurturers and stewards of ecosystems.

What was critical to our process was the prominence of the justice principle in helping us identify the stories that we wanted to share with the world. It also allowed us to gain a deeper appreciation of the social movements in our respective regions and understand how people have been fighting for their own rights as well as the rights of nature and other non-human beings.

SANGAM LANDSCAPES

Tamil Sangam were assemblies of Tamil scholars and poets, dating back to the Sangam period that extended from roughly 200 BCE to 200 CE. Sangam literature, associated with legends that perhaps predate this period, offers a geographical categorisation of the landforms that undulate across Tamil Nadu – also referred to as the Sangam landscapes – which were utilised as a classical poetic device to echo the five '*tinais*' or 'modes', depending on the nature, location, mood and type of relationship that is being expressed – a place- and community- based essence to capture the inner universe.

These *tinais* or 'modes' are:

Kurinji are mountains 🏔️ Mullai are forests or pasture 🌿 Marudam are agricultural areas in plains or valleys 🌾 Neithal is seashore 🌊 Pālai are wastelands or desert-like conditions 🌵 (not seen as naturally occurring ecology, emerges when other landscapes whither)

Each named after a flower characteristic of that landscape, these *tinais* are also associated with animals, Gods, seasons, time of the day, water source, soil types, occupations that these landscapes evoke – symbolically alluding to socio-economic order, occupations and behaviour patterns. They also refer to sentimental connotations of each landscape: lovers' meetings, patient waiting, lovers' quarrels, separation, and the anxiously awaited return.⁸ From an ecocritical perspective, the richness of cultural narratives merged in completeness with ecological spheres are invaluable to forge a grounded, localised eco-literature of today.

We embraced this framework to help define the geographical scope of our project design, in parallel to our theoretical exploration. It seemed the land itself spoke back to us with a navigable framework that dates back to an ancient time the land we're on has witnessed. While we did not end up selecting geographies that correspond to each of the Sangam landscapes, at least we wanted our research sites to correspond to a highland, forest and a coastal point of view. Agilely, we held the suggestion to introduce a modern landscape to this ancient pallet: the city. As with the others, this would come with its own vocabulary, symbolism, associated sounds and smells.

What also stayed alive from this exploration was the bioregional landscape lens this framework offered that first aroused our curiosity – at once land-based and story-based, and very grounded in reality.



THE PROJECT SETS OFF

Could the collective venture of shifting and aligning our lenses be any different if we try to emulate 'being in place' with this array of abstract concepts? By morphing our body, mind and senses into spaces and physical environments that don't segregate the mental/physical or theoretical/creative or formal/informal? We sure thought so.

And when the time came for us as Tamil Nadu coordinators to meet the fellows who we had onboarded in person, we designed an orientation programme by drawing heavily on the metaphorical use of relationships between discourse, space and place. Orienting ourselves as we gather at the station before setting off for our field destinations and on the wider fellowship journey. Becoming more-than-action researchers for a multidimensional research topic warranted a more-than-usual initiation. We facilitated space for a distilled download of project goals and outcomes, theories and ideas, as well as collective sense-making, and in that – a sense of a collective self.

And so, quite literally, there came to be an Orient-'station' – a place to gather our 'luggage', where

a leather suitcase held scribbled scraps of paper: our intentions and aspirations – for ourselves, for each other. We searched within for some extra baggage we may be carrying that wasn't needed on the Grounded Imaginaries journey, so we emptied the suitcase of these qualities, lightening our collective load. There's a stationary bus parked here in Auroville, which we got on, and one by one assumed the role of the 'driver', sharing with our 'passengers' some snippets from the road of our life – where we've come from, where we're hoping to drive them towards, and how, with this project as our 'conductor'.⁹

To sharpen our intellectual vision, we soared a bit higher to consider things from above. To help us see with new eyes, many migratory birds swooped in to share their wisdom from across the world. They took us to visit their own worlds of varying skill and expertise and metaphysically wide-ranging places where they had learned to sing their songs, adorned with anecdotes foraged from real-life experiences.

We built trust with each other and accumulated focus via embodied activities with Omid, a performance artist trained under Marina Abramovic. Naveen, a student of yoga and evolutionary leadership, hosted a process-oriented workshop to

explore depth psychology and archetypes borrowed from the Mahabharata.

Guy, a medical anthropologist, shared his experience as a scholar in dealing with positionality, vulnerability and preconceptions while on field, opening space to turn our reflexive gaze inwards and allow serendipity to play a role in social research.

Tanya, a professor of Development Communications, steered us through crowded cafés, conducting mock assignments in participant observation, shadowing, and taking field notes – elucidating ways to build authentic relationships with communities.

Nagesh, a veteran activist, conjured visionary hope, tracing the legacy of social movements in India to build historical perspective for the work we are undertaking.

Lakshmi, a Deep Ecology and Work-that-Reconnects facilitator, helped us navigate, and root into, our ecological selves.

The cross pollination culminated in us chirping out an emergent language that would guide our expedition. These sessions helped trigger new ways to engage with, and the know-how to disengage from the multidimensional crises that would be intimately close to us, going forward.

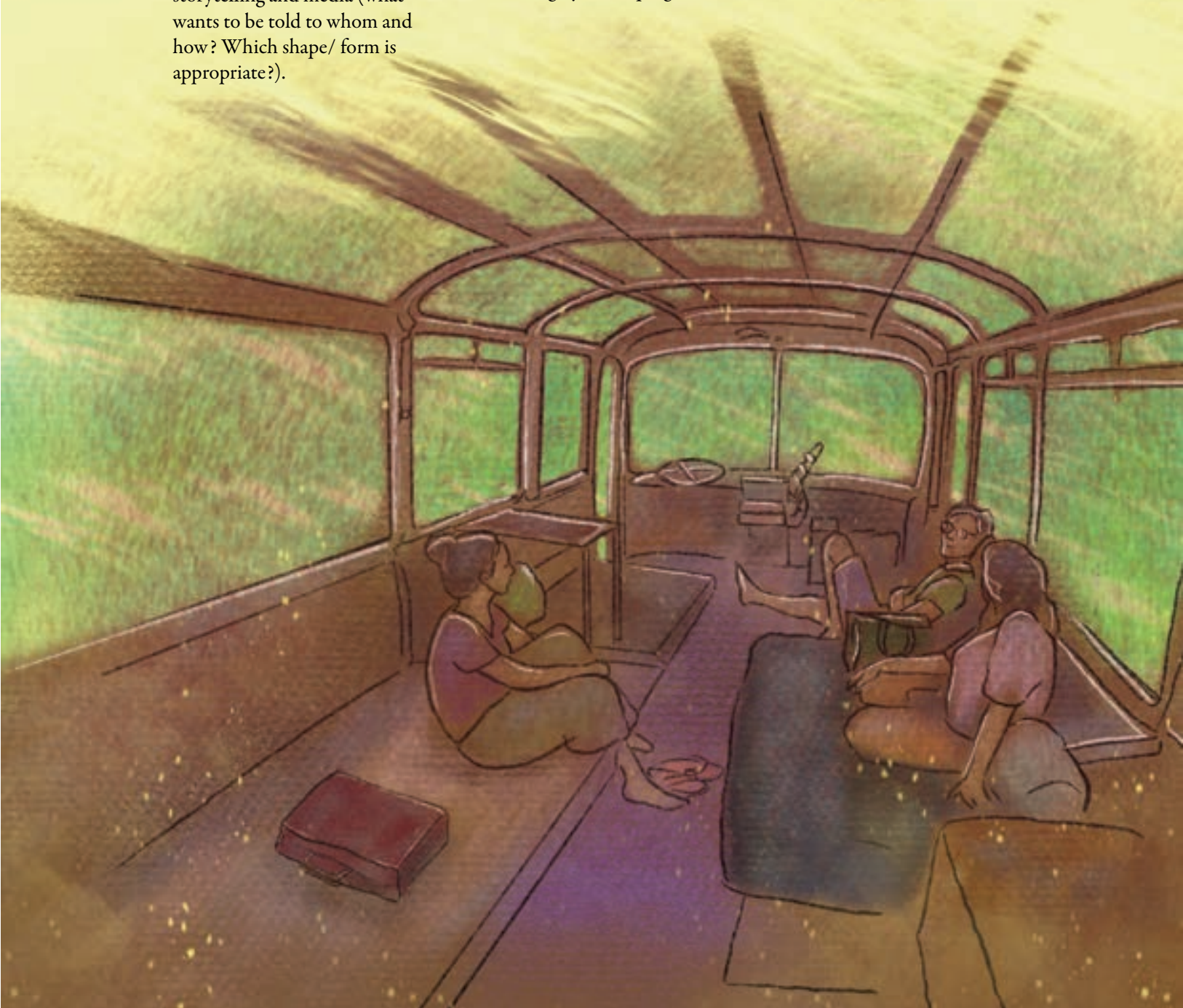
In the program design, we purposefully included five strands to be continuously woven together – aspects of the whole that deserve attention. 1) the self (who am I and what am I becoming through this work?); 2) the community (who are the people I am sharing time with and what collective patterns emerge?); 3) the ecological crisis (how does it manifest itself in my site?); 4) academic scholarship (what concepts and theories help make sense of what I am observing and how do I observe?); 5) storytelling and media (what wants to be told to whom and how? Which shape/ form is appropriate?).

These became touchstones that we would return to during the year for a regular zoom-out-zoom-in

‘We left thoroughly churned, and definitely quite confused. We had with us a new word – Imaginaries – we held it lightly and curiously in various contexts and attempted to forge our own meaning of it in a localised context as well as a potential meta-narrative. Our partners kept making fun of our jargon – calling us the ‘imaginary’ fellows.

We attempted to gamify our own learning by developing

tools on the go, stocking up a tool-kit for knowledge creation. One memorable example is the World Game in which we built on systems thinking and practice to create a symbolic mandala using sticks, shells and kitchen vessels to represent different manifestations of the multi-dimensional nature of current crises and how we perceive them as interlinked. Playmobil and lego figurines playfully embodied the darkness of our times, physically webbing the interconnectedness of the converging crises.



POLYCRISIS

No crisis exists in isolation. To observe the many ways in which responses to climate crises take shape requires a multidimensional perspective.


“A simple narrative might identify the extraction and burning of fossil fuels as the culprits in causing catastrophic climate change, but these processes cannot be simply sifted out from the ways we live and then eliminated. They are baked into the infrastructures that support and perpetuate the habitual forms of eating, working, communicating, building, taking leisure and moving that constitute life for that part of humanity which is the beneficiary of extractive capitalism.”¹⁰

— Danielle Celermajer

For many of us, there is something attractive and seductive about exploring the nature of collapse and disaster – perhaps it’s a dark kinky streak we prefer to deny, maybe it’s a way to brace ourselves for dystopian times ahead, or maybe a way to rise above the mundaneness of stability and boredom of peace. When a storm is called “mother of all storms” or a fire is “unprecedented”, there is a pull deep within us that wants to hear more. How bad is it exactly? Such detail and gore is served to us everyday through news cycles that edge on mass hysteria. But then again, we are living through the Sixth Mass Extinction (where 1 million species face extinction within decades,¹¹ through the Age of Inequality (where the richest 1% of Americans own more than the poorest 90%)¹² and through a crisis in democracy¹³ (where a third of the global population lives under authoritarian rule, and the number of countries leaning to authoritarianism is three times that of those leaning to democracy). We often underestimate the direct human suffering that is caused by our addiction to fossil fuels. Did you know more people die from air pollution than from malaria and smoking combined? In India burning coal, oil and gas causes 2.5 million premature deaths per year. In China, it kills 3 million people.¹⁴ If you want to put a price tag on that: it’s estimated to cost \$ 2 trillion worldwide – roughly TEN times the entire global development aid budget.¹⁵

Most existential risks reinforce each other in a convoluted web of destruction. Take for instance political polarisation: this reduces trust in stability-providing institutions such as courts and academia. Fearmongering is a popular tactic among authoritarian regimes who present themselves as saviours from wicked problems such as global recessions or pandemics that are actually beyond their control. With the premise of their popularity based on a lie, they need to cover it with more falsehood, leading to a vicious cycle of less freedom in media, less informed voters and more radical extremists in power. India, the most populated country in the world, is currently under the spell of a religious fanatic while its neighbour China is turning from a one-party state into a one-man state. Centralisation of power reduces dialogue, stifles collective intelligence, and breeds corruption.

Economically speaking we are living in a planetary monopoly, where neoliberal capitalism has wiped out any alternative model, replacing evidence-based policies with ideological doctrine and self-fulfilling prophecies. If the only measure of success is Gross Domestic Product then there is no hope for sustainable resource management because Nature does not speak economesese. What started as twins growing up in the same Oikos, economy (oiko-nomos) and ecology (oiko-logos) have become enemies, unable to recognise themselves in the eyes of the other. Similar to the inability to see value in the living world, our economic system denies the most vital aspect of our collective household: care work. What is left is a picture of a spoiled larva, eating its own mother and drowning its nest in its own excrement while singing the praises of its efficiency and professionalism. Apologies to the larvae...



All this gives rise to a gnawing sense that our lives are caught up in a sticky mess, with nobody to blame but ourselves. The growing unease and anxiety, coupled with a decline in community life have led to an epidemic of mental ill-health, ironically often concentrated among those who have access to material wealth. Sold on the premise that money would bring freedom, the affluent classes now find themselves alone and isolated. Unhappy people are easy prey for charlatans selling false solutions often involving scapegoating and/or exploiting minorities / beings endowed with less power, leading to another vicious cycle of dissociation and violence.

Ecological, political, economic and psychological crises are reinforcing each other in multiple ways, pulling down the world in a Dance Macabre that continues to attract and inspire droves of humans to rededicate their life energies to its continuation. The show must go on. Why? Because that's how the saying goes. And because others around us continue their complicity. This gives rise to yet another dimension of the polycrisis: cognitive dissonance.¹⁶ Most of us do realise that something is wrong, but we brush aside our doubts, put up a brave face and pretend like we are in control. Because the severity of the realisation is just too much to bear. The degree of mess is so intense that we recognise it as something that would require time. Time to process, to grieve, to heal. And that is time we don't have. Or at least that is what we tell ourselves.

All this to say that the climate crisis is not a single thing. It is triggered and deepened by a series of convoluted other crises that need to be taken into account if one wants to comprehend its essence.



GROUNDING IN PLACE

Next in the story of the project we reached the stage of grounding our quest for community responses to the climate crisis in the lands of Tamil Nadu. As the polycrisis shows up differently in each location, we looked for a range of socio-ecological landscapes to base our inquiry in. Inspired by the Sangam landscape lens we selected a highland, forest and a coastal point of view – respectively Nilgiris biosphere, Auroville and Chennai – each matched with a research fellow to steer the project on location.

Each of our fellows brought their own story of relating to a part of the territory. Janet had been on her own immersion journey in the Nilgiris, documenting indigenous herbal practices; Rohit had been active in the youth league of the environmental movement in Chennai; Deepthi had already been volunteering in the greenbelt of Auroville, and had been exposed to the residents resistance movement in Auroville, protecting its regenerated forests. This meant that we could hit the ground running, with a lived understanding of the local complexities. It also meant that we needed to expose our biases and zoom out to reflect on the unintended limitations brought by our own lenses and affiliation networks.

From a fellowship perspective, this relation with the location was crucial, because we could not have parachuted random strangers into alien fields expecting them to self-manage and start producing in such short notice.

From a research and community relationship perspective, it was important to diligently justify our site selection. Some of the considerations that guided us included:

- Geographic variety (including both rural and urban realities);
- Using the project to document those stories that had not yet exhaustively been told by others – even if that meant that access to data was a little harder;
- Selecting sites that were able to do something with the outputs of the project after its end date (and/or benefit from association during the project to gain skills or knowledge);
- Looking for places that exemplify convergence of ecological and social crises;
- Chemistry and “click” with communities, either directly or with the help of a Field Partner organisation. We recognised that asking people to share their stories of crisis responses required intimacy and trust.

To guide ourselves through the chaos we introduced a core structure to the work: phase I = broad immersion, phase II = deep research, and phase III = output creation and dissemination. In the immersion phase, the intention was to build rapport and see the socio-ecological systems through the eyes of its members. Some fellows ended up volunteering with the communities, offering support in direct response to the causes being championed within the community.

For the fellows, this was a formative (if not transformative) process. The project asked for both self-awareness and sensing into the social and environmental dynamics of the places they proposed. It's quite a stretch, but lies at the core of what at SEA we call 'evolutionary leadership. As we acknowledge the power of stories, it makes our choices of which ones we amplify and which ones we ignore, all the more sensitive.

As you will see in the Fellows' Two-Way Periscope section, this process played out very differently in each of the three cases, both in terms of the fellows' approach as well as the kinds of responses they found. While Janet roamed between many sub-regions of the highly heterogeneous mountain range, taking up multiple roles and trying out various angles, Rohit followed a very systematic process of selection, data collection and project management, and Deepthi allowed an intimate circle of respondents to inform her path.

The fellows' styles were also different. Janet took on more of a journalistic, conversational style and was wearing many hats including mentoring her own interns and apprentices and building relationships with the indigenous communities to absorb their perspective. Rohit kept actively weaving together his community relationships, his personal inquiry into

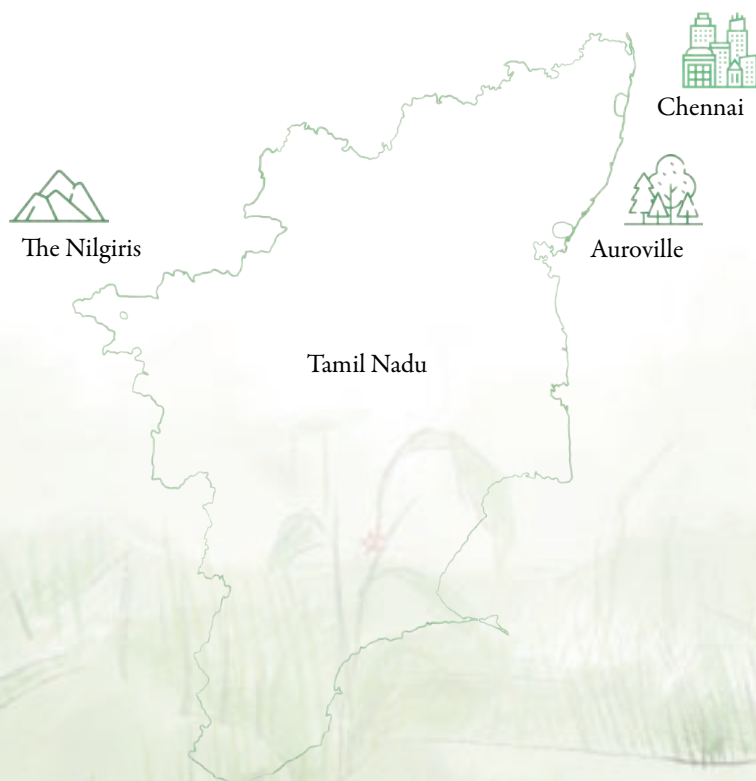
Chennai's climate activism discourse and his academic aspirations. Deepthi stayed as close as possible to the residents' voices and their authentic expressions.

Institutional relationships emerged contextually. In the Nilgiris we worked with our Field Partner, Keystone Foundation, on ongoing community outreach platforms such as the community radio station led by Manickam who became a close colleague and was instrumental in the production of the street art at the end of the project.

In Chennai the partnership with the local activist group IRCDUC (Information and Resource Centre for Deprived Urban Communities) was very close, reinforced by an active involvement of Joel's dual role as IRCDUC leader and community fellow with us.

Auroville was a story of its own as it's SEA's home turf, so everyone was a neighbour and/or friend / colleague/ family member.

As we sent our project fellows to their respective sites they received one more instruction: when you look for stories of change be wary of inadvertently falling for the lure of the dominant stories of our time. These can be so internalised that we fail to see them for what they are...





Dominant Imaginaries and their Subversion

As we unmasked the faces of the polycrisis, now we shall unveil the stories that keep them in place. The hegemonic narratives establish their rule with an iron rod, moonlighting now as an evil tyrant and then disguised as our saviour. Pervasive as the air we breathe, they are so ingrained in us that we do not realise they are but stories. The memes, beliefs and cultural references that make up dominant discourse shade every social sphere and have even colonised our individual brains.

The incapacity of *homo sapiens* to directly comprehend the entirety of unabridged reality means that we use semi-permeable filters and categories which allow certain thoughts to flow, and block others. In healthy conditions, this self-regulation helps us function and not get bogged down in a state of constant overwhelm, but when conditions change and our sense-making shields fail to change along with them we end up with a mismatch. Rebecca Solnit describes this very clearly: “people follow the old versions, like outdated maps, into dead ends.”¹⁷

Acclimatising to modernity, we got used to writing off the local in favour of the global, the artisanal in favour of the industrial, the collective in favour of the individual. In the name of progress and development, we deleted much of what the world needs today to respond to the polycrisis in polycultural ways... We live in unprecedented times. We have never been with these many humans, never with this level of entanglement across social and ecological systems. Everything is on edge, poised to either collapse into chaos or be reborn. We don't know what shape the responses will take, but we know the Old Story is broken. This story goes by many names and has many faces: the Story of Separation, the House of Modernity, Moloch, Wendigo, Extractivism, Consumerism. As we map this pantheon of *asuric* forces we narrate to you three dominant imaginaries of our times that engender inaction, and obstruct prospects of transformative futures.

Business as Usual

I am the strongest of them all – the Emperor holding court, ruling over your collective imagination. I tell you clearly: all may not be well, but it's the least bad option out there. Representative democracy, for all its flaws, is as good as it gets, and so is market capitalism. Best not rock the boat too much because you have much to lose: your way of life, your standard of living, your certainty that you are one of the good guys. Keep calm, drink your fairtrade latte and drive your electric vehicle. Remember the saying "If you are not a socialist in your youth you have no heart, but if you are not a capitalist when you grow up you have no brain." I am so powerful that I don't need to enforce my will. You will do it for me. You know you have internalised my censorship when you hear your brain telling your heart to shut up and put yourself first. Adam Smith is said to have coined the term 'Invisible Hand'¹⁸ to describe how stability emerges at a meta-level, even when individual actors act selfishly (ie: maximise utility at the micro-level). You see, the fact that things are the way they are is proof that that's the way they should be. If mega-corporations are taking over then apparently they are the best at meeting customer needs. My worldview is reproduced at an industrial scale and pace, not just ruling commerce, but the public sector, academia and even your notions of personal growth. When confronted with a problem I have a one-size-fits-all response: a new market, a new agreement among nation-states and another large private sector stimulus package. If that doesn't work, repeat the same but use different words.

Techno Fix

My colleague Business As Usual can sometimes be in denial about the severity of the crisis, but I am not so blind. My name is Techno-Fix and I will sell you a solution that will blow your socks off – and incidentally also blow shareholder value through the roof. My champion is Elon Musk, who is ready to save your species even if it means ditching your planet. In my story you are invited to complete the disconnect from Nature in the most irreversible ways: with my help, you become the new Gods in town! Sensors will yield Big Data that will be fed to 'server farms' where algorithms will churn out smart applications that learn faster than any carbon based life form. Artificial Intelligence combined with nanotechnology and genetic engineering reprograms the operating system of Life on Earth. Welcome to Planet 2.0. Beware of those who question my experiments. They are Luddites and enemies of progress, denying the poor people access to the goodies they deserve. When confronted with a problem I can always propose a new technology to engineer away the side-effects of the previous technology. If this creates new unintended consequences that's ok because there will always be more engineers to fix them – as long as you keep sending students to my school of thought.

Doomsday

If reading the above makes you feel a little cynical, welcome to the club! Every time you hear of a solution to the polycrisis you'll be sure to find out that it was false. Carbon credits? False solution. Solar power? False solution. Paris Agreement? False solution. Your resistance may help to buy some time, but Earth has already passed the tipping point and runaway global warming is not waiting for you. So why bother?

My name is Doomsday, also known as Armageddon or Apocalypse. I am here to tell you that humans are a plague and don't deserve to survive. You will go extinct relatively soon and it's better that way. You messed up the planet and She will be better off without you. The best course of action is to prepare for war, because hunger and extreme weather will definitely lead you to kill each other. When confronted with a problem I keep telling you "I told you so."



Grounded imaginaries are creeping up on the powers that be in storyland. As fissures keep spreading across their monolithic facade the renegade bards of the other worlds that are possible seek them out and wiggle their wedges to widen the cracks and give birth to Pluriversal verses.

Grounded imaginaries are born out of opposition to the aforementioned imaginaries, but the call for subversion does not imply a rejection of all they have to say. Our future will probably not be devoid of markets, nation states, technology or belief systems. But we advocate for: a restructure of the mechanisms, a renovation of the access, a rethink on their use, a reimagination of their true purpose – plus the removal of restrictions that keep out a whole spectrum of beings and ways of being. What the dominant imaginaries have in common is a focus on separation. What is included in the market versus what is externalised? What is included in technology versus what are ceteris paribus assumptions? Some degree of analysis may be helpful for synthesis, but synthesis can only come from ‘holonic’ imaginaries – that viewpoint you access when you take a step back from the categories and the disciplinary blinders.

Easier said than done. To get there, we have to let go of the imposition of ideologies that claim to hold the whole together. By distancing ourselves, we expose the narrow narratives sustained by these dominant imaginaries that hold back radical imagination and alternative futures. We break their spell by choosing to stop believing in their power over us, and then we find a countercurrent, swim our way out where virtuous circles rather than vicious circles flow freely.

Agency

Driving change towards hope - individually or collectively - is a ride that's uncomfortably close to the shadows. Blindly following inspiring stories is a trap that catches many seekers of guidance and certainty. Of course there is merit to surrendering and unlearning our need to control. However, it does not relieve us from the responsibility to participate as best we can, with all faculties including our critical mind and original self expression.

What kind of stories are we looking for? And how do we relate to them? Accepting that the future will surprise us, asks us to come prepared with a range of coping strategies and explorations. Stories we want more of are those that lead to more response-ability, at the individual, community and systemic levels. Those are the stories that deserve to be nurtured and amplified.

The Vikalp Sangam collective hit the nail on the head when it published a series during Covid called “Extraordinary Work of Ordinary People¹⁹”. What if your neighbourhood initiative could be part of a wave of bottom up transformations? Linear notions of scale and legitimacy go out of the window, and the scope of imagination can adjust to accommodate a range of emergent, transformative actions. We must reprogramme our membrane: what we trained ourselves to write off as insignificant deserves a second glance, and may turn out to be at the core of the next generation of stories!

What would need to happen for a civilisation to open up to a distributed, decentralised imaginary, and actively resist authoritarian stories of macho quick-fixes in favour of horizontal, collective, practice-based empowering tropes?

- For one, it needs to recognise that the Old is truly broken. Old habits die hard and to step away requires proactive un-learning.
- Secondly, it needs space for softening of fixed ideas and rigid notions. Like the caterpillar dissolving into a chrysalis before it can become a butterfly. This also means asking newfound heroes to step back and make space, dissolving their fame and keep questioning their message.
- Thirdly, it needs to live into the stories with body, mind, heart and soul. Only in this mix can we find the wisdom to discern true calling from mirage. Amidst the ocean of data, it's physical living context that helps separate sense from nonsense. Such a civilisation is a place based civilisation.
- Fourth, it needs a sustained influx of stories with the right balance of diversity and relatability so that they keep the civilisation on its toes without going crazy (what in learning design is referred to as the “stretch zone”). This requires unprecedented levels of freedom and access to media and public dialogue.

Now we have ingredients for our recipe, we need instructions: HOW will these disparate, isolated stories of localised responses form a comprehensive imaginary? Rather than ‘replicating’ we like to talk about ‘ripplicating’ when we talk about scale. No two communities are going to respond in the same way, but the action of one will inspire and enable more responding – triggering a cascade of agency that gradually becomes the New Normal. Metaphors that help see this process tend to be borrowed from the forest, which is why you might end up noticing grounded imaginaries ‘rhizomatically ripplifying’ around you.

“To imagine beyond the specter of the colossus is no easy task, especially when we are hardwired by the cynicism of our time to conflate imagination with ‘kumbaya’ idealism. But the great fallacy at hand is that the radical imagination is not the domain of the individual; rather it is the dominion of the collective. It is the spirit of community, of collaboration, of collective care in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.”²⁰

— Mohamud Mohamed



DEEP DIVES

WAYS OF WORKING

Grounded imaginaries as a project has tried not to give in to haste. We are not in the business of fast-science or fast-media. So, the year, and our phases, transitioned slowly.

First, we wanted to let our fellows simmer in their research sites, stew in the relationships with place-based communities and meander along the paths of the local storytellers, led by their inner curiosity. The landscapes in which they put their ear to the ground kept throwing back questions and mazes of paths of inquiry, and their relationships deepened with time. We could have spent the entire year in this phase, but had to move on. Reluctantly we put up boundaries and filters, leaving many loose threads for later.

During the next phase, deeper waters beckoned, away from the here-and-now of the day-to-day, into analysis, transcriptions, and intense reflections on the sheer variety of ways in which the polycrisis lands on each site and shapes community responses. We learned from the experiences of others in our inner circle and wider circles and used the tools of the global academy: literature reviews and virtual seminars. Stepping back from the sites we could see flashes of worldwide commonalities and patterns emerge.

Our academic approach was grounded in systems science and anthropology (ethnography to be precise). We tapped into the thought-web of the

University of Sydney who hosted a Methods²¹ Lab where scholars shared their practical approach to data collection, analysis and reporting, including some cutting edge inter-species research. Tanya, our non-resident research guide, took a few months off to share her field work expertise with the fellows.

Cooking this intellectual soup made us crave for more time back on site, with new questions to ask the communities and fresh hypotheses. This happened, but all too briefly. Warily, a realisation set in: we could go on repeating this forever, adjusting the course of our voyage with each iteration.

In the beginning, we assumed all learning would play nice with each other: as we unravel the entanglement of stories in our own lives we can use this sensitivity to see patterns of ‘storification’ around us, and vice versa. We learned that learning about the world sometimes requires pausing the learning about ourselves.

The coordinators were now tugging at the fellows to shift to the third phase: to bring the community narratives to the world. We curated some exposure sessions on identification of story threads and the art of story crafting. Initially, this felt wildly shocking – moving from a space of intimacy and deep trust into the open. How to cut loose the stories from their origins into something public? The fellows wondered “would the audience see what we have seen?”

And the stories themselves were boundless, the possible forms of media endless. We needed to bridge the skills available with the level that the stories demanded.

Overnight, we gave ourselves crash courses on mediaspeak for conceptualising, creating, and disseminating podcasts, videos and publications. We tried to stay faithful to where our story began. All that muddiness we'd encountered, all that grounded authenticity. We strove to find a tone that would speak to the community as well as the world-at-large, and spark inspiration and power.

What kept coming back was the routine of long listing and short listing – diverging, converging, breathing in and out. We used it for selecting our sites (starting with over 30 location options), selecting field partners, and zeroing in on outputs / types of media. We were inspired by transboundary initiatives such as the Dance your PhD movement,²² and the trend of academic journals publishing video articles.

Rather than scholarship or media, our specialisation is weaving. For anyone attempting a project like this in future (which we recommend!) it's good to

keep in mind the balance between professionalism (depth) and spontaneous laymen's innocent curiosity (width). Perhaps there is such a thing as a professional amateur?

We believe transdisciplinary work to be an antidote for the separation that causes alienation, and doing it feels integral to refabricating our shared reality. But this lived practice doesn't (yet) come with a blueprint – it requires learning by stumbling. Swirling together the grassroots with the academia and the media – plus our own shapeshifting has been hard but gratifying.

Once you start unravelling it's hard to stop. We are in a mode of questioning all but the most resounding truths. What we can say is that this approach brings a posture of humility, tentative nature of findings and understatement. This feels warm, but it also raises the question: how can a gentle murmur of whispering wonderers upend the evil Empire? To be honest, we have no idea. It's a leap of faith, faith in the power of stories to act in disproportionate ways (morphic resonance²³), faith in humanity recognising what is good for itself in the end, faith in our own ability to play a role in the transformation.

MUDDYING THE WATER

While recording evidence of grounded imaginaries in active responses, we also wanted to simply muddy the waters, to make space for newer ways of looking at our circumstances and shaping our sense-making and realities. In Indic philosophy, we learn about the Gunas: sattva, rajas and tamas. The clear water itself may be sattva, the mud is tamas and the ripples are rajas. In over-rajasic times there is too much turbulence. Unless we add some mud we can't get the water to settle down and show its clarity.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr is said to have said:

"I wouldn't give you a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity. But for the simplicity on the other side of complexity, for that I would give you anything I have."

The dominant imaginaries tend to become a default explanation, prematurely jumping to simplicity.

To avoid such bias, our fellows cast the net wide and asked their respondents very simply: what has changed? And how did you respond?

Among the project team we felt we needed to embody this approach, otherwise it would be akin to not hearing a tree fall in the forest. Take what is a given, and turn it on its head. Enter: a new way of thinking.

Among the project team, we felt we needed to embody this approach, otherwise it would be akin to not hearing a tree fall in the forest. As we traversed this journey, not always efficiently, as can be expected when wading through muddied waters, we found ourselves inhabiting many stories; sometimes drawn to familiar worlds that the dominant imaginaries held out, then swimming towards the thresholds of new imaginaries, looking for islands where these could be experienced, stocking up and taking rest before muddying on.



COMMUNITY & COLLECTIVES

We purposefully chose to document stories of responses by communities rather than corporate or government sectors because they are underrepresented, but also because they have better chances at adjusting to the shifting challenges being thrown at us. They are better equipped to accommodate diversity, connect praxis with theory and embody the full array of ways of being. Their potential is suppressed by censorship, regulation and cooptation as they pose a threat to the dominant power structures, but they also suffer from self-induced limitations such as ideological infighting (think of the many types of bickering leftists), misplaced professionalisation (think of obsession with ‘impact indicators’) and lack of experimentation which requires a healthy dose of messiness.

As power tends to infect even the most humble leaders in our collectives, we look for genuine diffusion of power in the responses that shape alternative futures. False solutions is a term we hear a lot in climate discourse, but more often than not they refer to falsehood in technical shortcuts. Social shortcuts are another source of falsehood: toxic patterns of leadership that concentrate power in the hands of too few people with too little accountability. As an association for Social Entrepreneurship, we are well aware of the ‘hero-preneurship’ trap. Too many stories of social change turn out to be stories of individuals – either with a saviour complex or just a lack of buy-in from the communities, which reduces their chances of success. Not just in terms of outliving the problem (succession planning is a notorious weak point in the social sector), but also out-adapting the complexity. It takes a village to keep up with the changing nature of the polycrisis. New stories of effective change-making are likely to come from people who excel at collaboration, convening shared sensemaking, compassion, and re-enchantment.²⁴

India has a rich legacy of people’s movements – ranging from the Bishnoi and Chipko protectors of the forest to the Quit India freedom fighters, from the Right to Information and anti-corruption drives to the Jal, Jungle, Zameen and Forest Rights campaigns and the recent resistance against the Citizenship Amendment Act²⁵ and the Farm Act that saw thousands of farmers camping on the gates of the capital for many months. Covid showed us a resurgence of modern day solidarity and mutual aid. Stories of such examples of people’s power are critical as a vaccination against despondency and fatalism that can result from (the threat of) authoritarian take-over. These stories tell us “we the people are the ones we’ve been waiting for. YES, we can mobilise, rise up and take charge. NO, we don’t need a big man or woman to save us or show the way.”

The grassroots are at their strongest when they are connected. In our sites, we saw intersectional crossovers between urban poor and young climate activists, between indigenous groups who had shunned each other for decades, and between community members who got used to ignoring each other and taking each other for granted. We can't be sure to succeed if we are united, but we sure can't succeed as long as we're divided.



In this project, we attempted to practise what we preach about sharing power. There was very little hierarchy and a strong sense of solidarity. Fellows were free to interpret the objectives to their local context and interests. Communities whose stories we collected were kept in the loop and treated as the primary audience for the outputs.

In order to embed the project in the lives of the communities involved, we participated in various kinds of community engagement events, ranging from exposure visits to training workshops to gatherings where members convene and share stories amongst themselves.

We held strong intentions of sharing the opportunity granted to us via this project with young people, not just to compensate for the dominant trend in society to reward seniority, but also because youth are often blamed for caring too much about stories and not enough about “substance” – i.e. means of production and such. This is a chance to show the elders that stories matter, and young voices matter.

When you witness the accounts of the fellows' explorations we invite you to judge for yourself whether our approach made a difference. Did their own agency help them recognise it in the sites they studied? Did their experience of being part of a collective prime them to sense community dynamics? Did fuzzy boundaries help them hear the more-than-human voices?



“Transformative initiatives differ from mainstream or reformist solutions in a number of ways. Ideally, they will go to the roots of a problem. They will question what we have already identified as core features of the development discourse -- economic growth, productivism, the rhetoric of progress, instrumental rationality, markets, universality, anthropocentrism, and sexism. These transformative alternatives will encompass an ethic that is radically different from the one underpinning the current system.”²⁶
— Ashish Kothari

THE MORE THAN HUMAN

How do we escape the monocultures of the mind to find the polyvoices of our being? Our aspiration is to tell stories that offer pathways for societal transformation, and that means crafting with, and for, a more inclusive society. What does the mongoose say? How does the mountain think? What does the stream bubble out on its meandering path? How would it feel to put ourselves in someone's paws/wings/roots? If we could feel the air on our fur/feathers/bark/scales, what stories would we tell?

How can we rewrite our language, rewire our brains, re-sync our bodies to make the long way back to where our inability to know our fellow species does not restrict us? There is a space where we can see, hear, and feel differently. From here, we can glimpse a multitude of stories. Here, our stories create alternate realities, shared by more kinds of creatures.

But how do we get there? Can one go alone, or do we need to climb that peak together, pulling each other up the steep and arduous climb? Danielle Celermajer is a trained mountain guide in this realm. An eloquent advocate for multispecies justice, she started her career in human rights but moved beyond the focus on a single species. In the same way that it is morally abject and arbitrary to exclude certain groups of people (who we accordingly assign 'minority-hood') from universal rights, it is equally arbitrary to exclude certain species. What's more, exclusion comes along with oppression and violence, and speciesism is used as an excuse for humans to avoid fulfilling our moral and political obligations. Denying non-human beings a place in our political and legal systems is a choice, and a questionable one at that. Finally, the premise of the individual – indivisible and independent – has lost credibility. You and I carry countless microbes in our gut, and our cells are mixed with mitochondrial DNA inherited from prehistoric non-human ancestors. Our entire being is held in relationship. Being is relating.

*"Multispecies justice is an invitation to rethink justice for our time. In a world where extractivism, untrammelled development, widespread poisoning of lands, waterways and atmospheres, industrial animal agriculture, and fossil fuelled climate change are all leading to the mass killing and destruction of other animals, forests, rivers and ecosystems, multispecies justice suggests that these harms ought to be considered not merely as unfortunate events, but injustices. It is becoming more obvious that justice for humans is impossible without taking seriously the need for a healthy and functioning environment and the health and flourishing of other animals."*²⁷

*"Multispecies justice insists on the need to account for other beings, with their own radically diverse life projects, capacities, phenomenologies, ways of being, functionings, forms of integrity, and relationalities."*²⁸
— Danielle Celermajer

Multispecies Justice in Environmental Politics

There are more and more organisations and societies that are practising this other-species inclusion. Famously, rivers in Ecuador, New Zealand and India have received legal personhood and can now argue their own cases in court – actually quite late if you imagine that commercial corporations have been allowed to do so for over a hundred years. In the Netherlands, artists founded an Embassy of the North Sea²⁹, and others started a new organisation form called Zoop³⁰ which requires humans to hire a board member who will speak for non-human interests. Some firms appointed Nature on their Board³¹ within mainstream legal bodies.

The oldest practice in the school of Deep Ecology is the Council of All Beings³². This is a ritual in which people tune into the perspective of a creature of natural element and channel its voice during a dialogue with others doing the same, together simulating an ecosystem-wide equivalent of what Bruno Latour calls the Parliament of Things³³. It evokes an entirely different worldview in which everything is constantly in conversation with everything else.

Once you start seeing the world like this it feels ridiculously myopic to limit governance to a single species – and even more absurd to limit it to entities like corporations and nation-states that are furthest removed from this ongoing exchange of voices and squeaks, croaks and buzzes. The corridors of power are known to be eerily quiet when it comes to non-human sound.



At multiple stages during the project's journey, we tried to channel the voices of the more-than-human around us, but we are not sure if we did justice to the intention. During the Orient-station, we were taken through a Work that Reconnects spiral, we journaled with trees and found a spot in nature to which we could return to pick up the ongoing conversation with the more-than-human.

While producing the podcast episode about Auroville greenworkers we specifically included the foresters' observations on their relationship with animate Earth.

In the Nilgiris, while watching the gaur munching tea leaves as they adapted their lifestyle to new routes – that took them between patches of Sholai forest through tea gardens – we wondered what they, and other local inhabitants felt about the tea plantations rolling over their hills.

In hindsight, this was probably the hardest challenge to live up to. For similar projects in the future, we recommend appointing a dedicated spokesperson for the more-than-human angles to avoid this aspect getting sidelined by all the other concerns.



.....TWO WAY.....

PERI

... SCOPE

The ground was set, and reset in cycles of immersion and returning to refill stations for nutrient absorption, the fertile soil now poised and ready for new life forms to take root.

As you turn the following pages, a two-way periscope gives you a sneak peak into each of the fellows' respective landscapes, which in turn invite you to reconstruct your imaginary.

The fellows and the landscapes each bring their unique skills and networks, questions and curiosities.



Climate change adaptation doesn't figure outwardly in their everyday work. But threads of resilience-building and adaptation are visible throughout....Resilience, in this context, is about helping people tide over big and small crises, environmental or otherwise, using a wide range of strategies.


PERUMBAKKAM

RESEARCH FELLOW: ROHIT

The climate crisis adds yet another dimension to the consequence of urban marginality. The effects of climate change that we are seeing are not linear or straightforward. Rather, they are multi-dimensional - rising health costs, loss of livelihoods, diminished savings, low opportunities for upward mobility and an overall reduction in quality of life, and physical and mental well-being. This is the climate reality of Perumbakkam.

What is possible, sensible and justifiable in the future depends on the stories we tell ourselves, about ourselves today....In order for change to occur, people have to first create stories by looking into the future and imagining what could be in a different world.





Will things be easier
for us 50 years from now?
Will we be happier than we
are today?

Huh!
You will never
know the joys of a
good, strong, satiating
millet breakfast with
your rice based foods.

This
was my
home until i was
asked to move to
reserved areas for
me. Those areas are
becoming smaller
and smaller with
lesser and lesser
food

We
were their
food, vessels,
housing .. just
about everything.
Now we have been
removed and
replaced

We
have
always
flowed abund-
ant and free
here. Sometimes
people accuse us of
rage when there is
too much rain and
we flow, causing
landslides.

We
are so famous
that there are stories
of all kinds about us.
Do you know that rock
honey here is a special
kind that is slowly
disappearing?

I am
unchanged from
the time I was born as a
part of the Nilgiris. I know
the honey collectors for
thousands of years. I see
their faces less and less
over time.

My
friends
have gone miss-
ing quickly in the
last few years. Where
did they go? Other
trees have been plant-
ed here instead, a
lot of Eucalyptus
for sure!

THE NILGIRIS

RESEARCH FELLOW: JANET

Tourists get excited when they see us in the towns! Could you keep getting love from whose lands you trample on? But what can we do, we have no home anywhere else either.



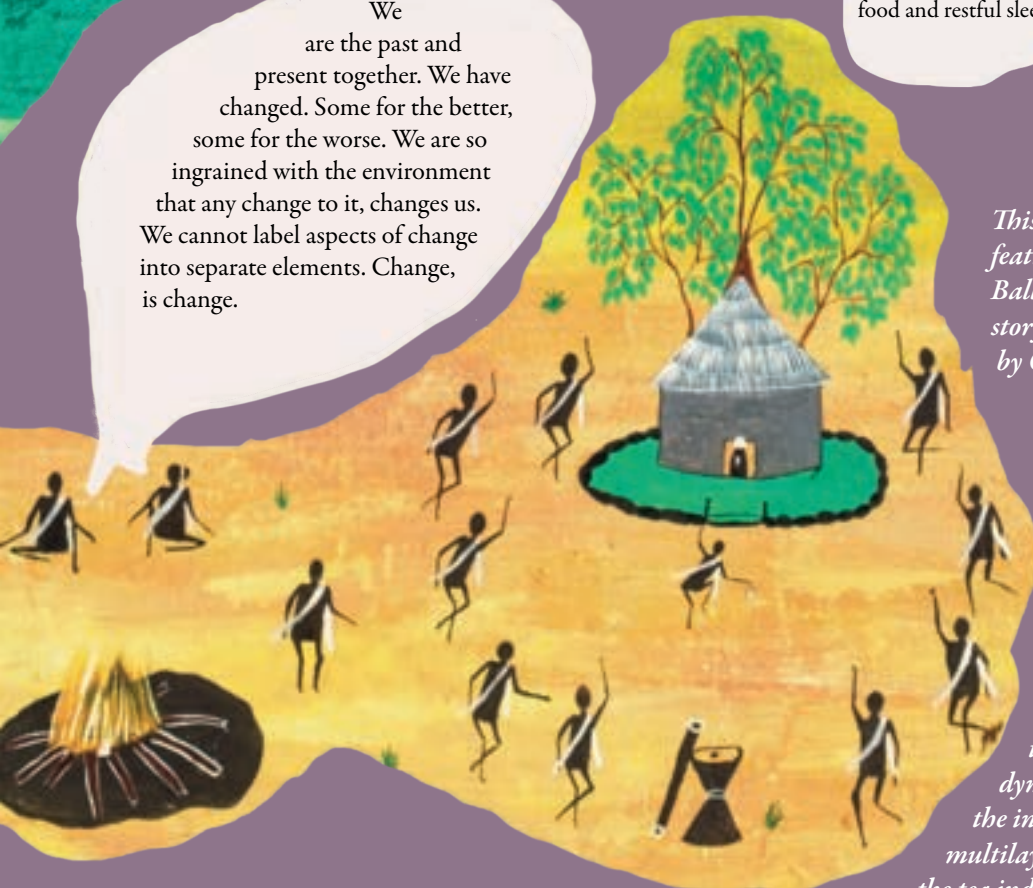
We have stood here for thousands of years. The Nilgiris region gets its name from us. The blue hue that you see become greener as you come closer. We were forests and grasslands that begin brown and dryish with scrub jungles towards the plains, thick evergreen forests, endemic shola forests making way to grasslands at the higher elevations. Our pristine lakes and forests have given way to tourism based housing and housing projects named after the now extinct natural features.

We grow very well here. So well that the entire mountains contain us. Have you ever wondered why you drink tea, is this habit irreplaceable or do you just crave something warm and comforting?



I wonder if my ancestors were happier 50 years back. They would have had cleaner water, better food and restful sleep.

We are the past and present together. We have changed. Some for the better, some for the worse. We are so ingrained with the environment that any change to it, changes us. We cannot label aspects of change into separate elements. Change, is change.



This collage is created from elements featured in 2 murals painted by Aadhi Ballan, a young Kurumba artist, during a storytelling community engagement curated by Grounded Imaginaries.

Our rendition presents an ongoing conversation between the people and the landscape - a metaphorical collage to Janet's explorations of the Nilgiris across the Ooty-Coonor-Kotagiri region during the project. On this journey, we encountered complex communities of human and more-than-human elements that co-exist in dynamic relationships - predominantly: the indigenous communities, the complex multilayered ecology of the Western Ghats, and the tea industry - influencing each other deeply, creating stories that carry on through centuries.

AUROVILLE

Research fellow: DEEPTHI

“A place for
unending
education”

A community in pursuit of
Human Unity, through the Evolution
of Consciousness



“We (humans) are not the only species on Earth”



INSTAGRAM



Collectively run by all project partners, Instagram offers a platform to interact with the world at large, nudge more sense-making and find more allies. It's our cyber-mycelium.

WEBSITE



Official digital home of the project. Go here for academic articles, more knowledge portals and references. Check out the stunningly designed SEI Magazine while you are at it.

SHORT FILM



Forthcoming: a short film telling the moving story of a sweet couple regenerating barren land and unleashing a mass movement of seed savers. Based on one of the Auroville case studies.

VIDEO ESSAY (8:30 MIN)

We are experiencing a collective cluelessness that the writer Amitav Ghosh calls 'The Great Derangement'. The stories that command our lives obscure the reality we're living through. This video essay looks at the power of stories and what they can offer us in these unpredictable times.



<https://bit.ly/the-stuff-of-imaginaries>

PODCAST

A seven-part podcast series co-created by all project partners, featuring all sites from North India, Tamil Nadu, and Australia. Explore critical questions and myths surrounding life in a climate-changed future.



<https://reimagined-futures.podbean.com>

DOCUMENTARY (16 MIN)

Narratives from the Nilgiris painted on the wall. How street art highlights the beauty and complexity of the Nilgiris, celebrating both human and wild elements that intertwine to become the Nilgiris.



<https://bit.ly/mountain-murals>

SOVEREIGNTY **UBUNTU**
ECO-SWARAJ **GAME B**
DECENTRALISATION **SUBSIDIARITY**
AZADI **TERRITORIES OF LIFE** **BUEN VIVIR** **HOLISTIC**
HORIZONTAL AUTONOMY **EMERGENCE** **POST-CAPITALISM**
SPIRITUAL ANARCHY **INTERSECTIONALITY** **DECOLONISING**
QUEER LOVE **INTERSECTIONALITY**
DEMILITARISATION
PEER LEARNING **CR REVOLUTIONARY LEADERSHIP** **SACRED ACTIVISM** **COMMUNITY RESILIENCE**
PREFIGURATIVE SOCIETY **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**
INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEWS
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING
COSMOVISION **MUTUAL AID** **PREFIGURATIVE UTOPIA** **PLURALISM**
EMERGENCE **DESCHOOLING** **POST-DEVELOPMENT**
PREFIGURATIVE UTOPIA **DEGROWTH**
ETHICAL BANKING **POST-HERO** **KINSHIP**
MUTUAL AID **ALTERNATIVE FUTURES**
ANTI-CASTE MOVEMENT **INQUILAB**

INVITATION TO CONTRIBUTE
TO THE

4TH
IMAGINARY

ALTERNATIVE ECONOMY COMMONS
FROM EGO TO ECO **RIGHTS OF NATURE**
ALIVELIHOODS **EARTH STEWARDSHIP**
ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION **OVERLAND TRAVEL**
CLIMATE ACTION *ANTI-GMO* APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY
BIODIVERSITY MULTISPECIES JUSTICE ZERO WASTE
CURRENT-SEES **ECOLOGICAL STORYTELLING** VISIBLE MENDING

Grounded Imaginaries are (y)ours to create, so that we can (re)create the world(s) we want to live in and see more of. This is an invitation to take up the task of imagining the stories that shape our shared future.

What stories of people's responses to our multiple crises do you see around you that could do with some re-telling? Which ones make you feel inspired and optimistic about the path ahead? Which ones help expose how the Old is trying to cling on to and/or co-opt the New? Which ones do you feel like playing out yourself?

This project offered us a chance to collect some stories and use a few frameworks, but there is plenty more where that came from! Here is a kaleidoscope of concepts, catch phrases, multitude of responses to trigger your imagination.

This is an open call to use these lenses and tools, participate in weaving them together, mixing and matching and adding more colours and flavours to the mix.

You can always send in your story to the Vikalp Sangam website which already has over 1000 stories from across India. Just follow this link: <https://vikalpsangam.org/contribute-a-story/>

UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME TRANSITION MOVEMENT **TRADE JUSTICE**
SOLIDARITY ECONOMY **SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP**
DEEP ECOLOGY **LOVE ECONOMY** FARMERS MARKETS
LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS **ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION**
WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK DIGNITY FOR ALL
SLOW SOCIETY **EDIBLE WEEDS**
PANPSYCHISM TIME BANKING
REWILDING

POLY CULTURE **OVERLAND TRAVEL**
ECO FEMINISMS
SLOW FOOD/SLOW FASHION/SLOW TRAVEL
REGENERATIVE LAND USE
TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE
MULTIPLE FORMS OF WEALTH
GIFT ECONOMY
CLIMATE JUSTICE
BIO REGIONALISM
RADICAL IMAGINATION
LOCALISATION
ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY
INCLUSIVE VALUE CHAINS

FURTHER LEARNING [PORTALS LEAD HERE]

Note: Suggested material that by no means pretends to cover the full breadth of the topics or the multiple perspectives that coexist, but here are some publications and platforms we found useful. Numbers indicate the references from footnotes in the text.

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Global Tapestry of Alternatives | globaltapestryofalternatives.org

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The Anarchist Library | theanarchistlibrary.org

Emergence Magazine | emergencemagazine.org

Participedia | participedia.net

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NOTES



Our Research Fellows

Deepthi is a biomedical researcher turned sports photographer turned sport physiologist who shuttles between being researcher, a coach, and a practitioner. She is a curious being who lives and volunteers in Auroville, an intentional community in Tamil Nadu, South India. She is intrigued by the sacred relationships people who work on the land build with each other and the more-than-human.



Janet Orlene, based in Bangalore, likes creating questions wherever she goes. That's why she is an experience-designer who creates opportunities to practise empathy. She also enjoys working with a cross-section of communities because she believes that allows her to design while quietly uprooting invisible prejudices. Also their food. She likes eating.



Rohit was born and brought up in Chennai. He is currently working on creating spaces and tools for environmental education through a non-profit called Project Living Cities.

Our Partners in India



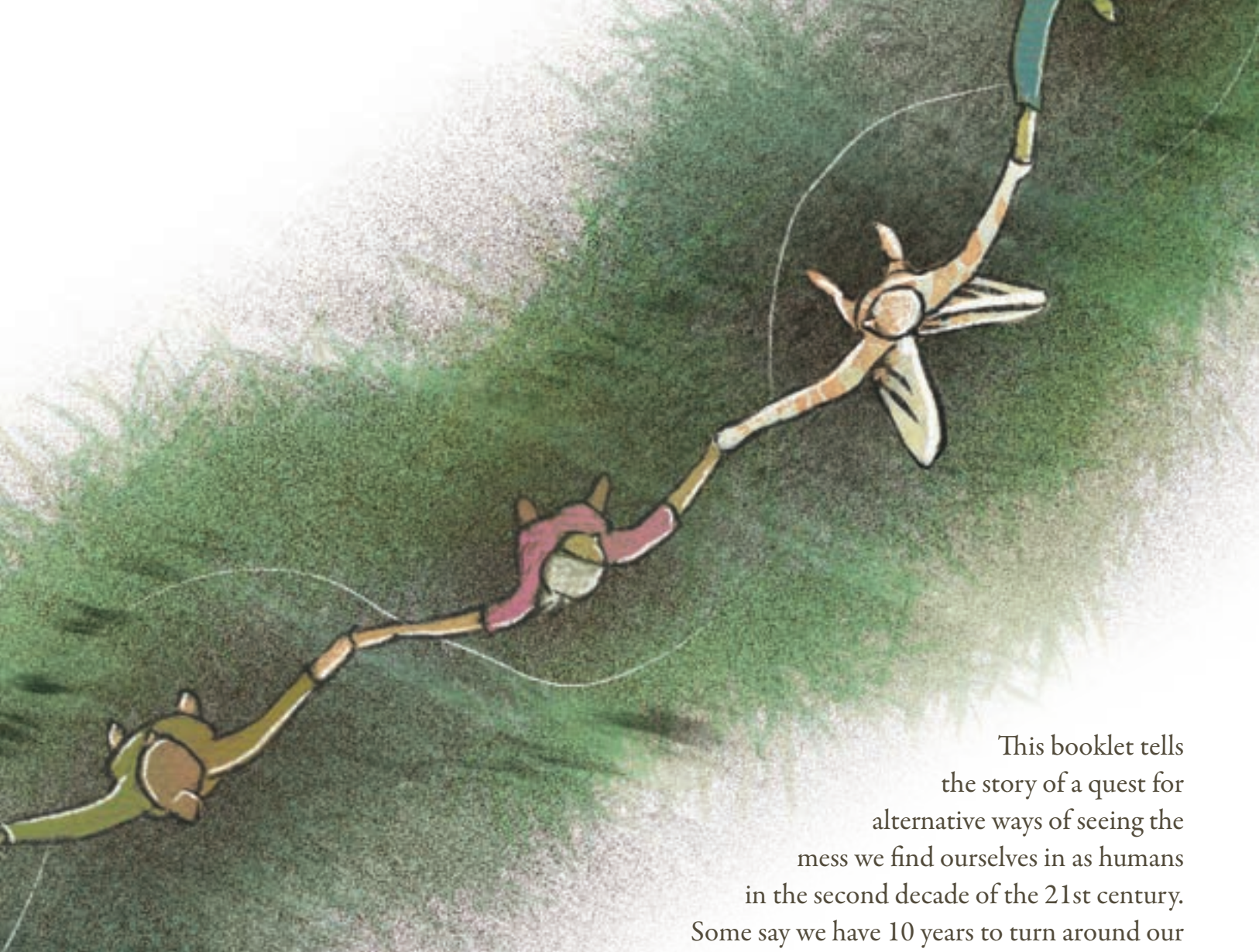
Project Partners



*Our endless gratitude to the web of collaborators who brought the Grounded Imaginaries project to life. **Our roots:** our wider project team and partners, and our fellows, who embraced the ethos of co-creation so wholly, rooting a collective sense that this journey belonged to all of us; **our shoots:** the communities who shared space with us, and all the participants and community organisations that showed us what grounded resilience looks like; **our blooms:** the designers and media creators whose creative power took the multimedia outputs beyond what we could ever imagine; **our migratory birds:** many that go unnamed who flew in and out of various stages of the project, sprinkling their wisdom and enriching the inquiry by adding new dimensions.*

GET IN TOUCH WITH US: groundedimaginaries@gmail.com

PHOTO CREDITS | Perumbakkam Collage: Deepthi Indukuri, Natasha Thomas, IRCUDUC | Nilgiris Collage: Mritunjay Kumar (Mural by Aadhi Ballan) | Auroville Collage: Deepthi Indukuri



This booklet tells the story of a quest for alternative ways of seeing the mess we find ourselves in as humans in the second decade of the 21st century. Some say we have 10 years to turn around our collective behaviour, others say 20 or 50, but there is widespread consensus that our current way of life is leading to biosphere collapse.

Our mission is as clear as it is vast: to find and share stories of community responses to the ecological crisis, and do this in a way that empowers the protagonists, the tellers and the audience of the stories.

The Grounded Imaginaries fellowship was an 18-month research-cum-storytelling project that took place in Australia and India, carried out by young scholars and cultural creatives who immersed themselves among local communities grounded in specific landscapes impacted by climate change, and then helped tell these kinds of stories as they saw them unfold.

The booklet is a playful and visionary glimpse into our collective journey – combining intellectual inquiry, process documentation and graphic illustration of some of the key concepts. It also includes learning resources for sense-making and response-shaping through the crisis, and “portals” to the multimedia outputs created as part of the project.

