

Gender and Climate Learning
Series

**COUNTERCULTURE, ORGANISING
AND CLIMATE ACTION:
A LEARNING BRIEF**

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Painting by Karabi Das

Why Talk About Counterculture?



Across social justice and political movements whether rooted in race, gender, caste, or even the digital sphere, lasting change demands far more than policy reforms. It emerges from countercultures: alternative ways of seeing, being, and organising that disrupt dominant norms, contest imposed narratives, and open space for new political possibilities.

Countercultures are not fringe subcultures. They are collective spaces where people reimagine identity, power, community, and the future. They use art, music, language, dissent, public expression, and shared cultural practices to build solidarity and shift narratives. Importantly, they turn isolated grievances into organised political momentum.

Yet in the climate space, counterculture is often treated as an “extra”, a fringe, artistic, or symbolic add-on rather than a central strategy. We believe it's the opposite: without countercultures, climate organising and movements cannot achieve the transformations we urgently need that are sustainable.

Across history, the most successful social movements; feminist, LGBTQ, Dalit, Black liberation, Indigenous, and digital rights have used counterculture to shift public consciousness, build solidarity, and reorganise power from below.

There is a rich archive of lessons in how these movements used music, language, identity, symbols, alternative norms, joy, grief, and collective imagination to transform what was politically possible. For the climate movement, these examples offer crucial lessons to transcend narrow technocratic solutions and build change rooted in people and power.



Painting by Sasmirekha Patra

Learning from Global Counterculture Movements

Black Feminist / Black Liberation Countercultures

Black feminist thinkers and organisers built expansive cultural and political ecosystems during the Civil Rights and post-Civil Rights era. They created one of the most powerful countercultures of the 20th century, centering lived experience, joy, refusal, care, and community safety as political strategies.

Audre Lorde's famous assertion that ***"the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"*** reminds us that oppressive systems cannot be undone using the very logics, structures, and hierarchies that created them. She urges us to create new tools rooted in community knowledge, feminist leadership, and collective care.

In the context of climate justice and rural transformation, this becomes a call to build countercultures; ways of living, organising, and imagining that refuse extractive development models, patriarchal governance, and top-down technocratic solutions.

Through poetry, music, political education, and collective identity-building, the civil rights movements reframed liberation not just as legal reform but as cultural survival and human dignity.

As Audre Lorde reminds us - **"Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought."**

As the Combahee River Collective wrote, **"Black women are inherently valuable... our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's."** And they reminded us that **"the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us."**

This was not just rhetoric, it was a countercultural worldview that sustained the movement through repression, created emotional resonance, and opened space for imagining futures beyond oppression. Climate movements have much to learn from this depth of cultural grounding.

Learning from Global Counterculture Movements

Indigenous Movements in Latin America / The Pacific

Indigenous communities stand at the forefront of climate justice, drawing on cultural cosmologies and ancestral stewardship and wisdom for which many have paid with their lives, even as their words and teachings continue to resonate powerfully.

Berta Cáceres from Honduras who was a Lenca leader was murdered in 2016, said during her Goldman Environmental Prize [speech](#), “In our worldview, we are beings who come from the Earth, from the water, and from corn... Let us build societies that are able to coexist in a dignified way, in a way that protects life... Let us come together and remain hopeful as we defend and care for the blood of this Earth and of its spirits”. She linked spiritual belonging, ancestral duty, and political struggle.

Indigenous communities stand at the forefront of climate justice, drawing on cultural cosmologies and ancestral stewardship and wisdom for which many have paid with their lives, even as their words and teachings continue to resonate powerfully.

They have built strong cultural counter-narratives rooted in land, reciprocity, and collective stewardship worldwide. In places like the Amazon and the Pacific Islands, Indigenous movements have used storytelling, dance, visual symbolism, ancestral cosmologies, and [ritual practices to articulate climate](#) and environmental justice long before the term “[climate justice](#)” existed.

These movements show that culture is not separate from strategy. It is the strategy, mobilising people, protecting land, and shaping global climate narratives through identity, memory, and tradition.

“Submission is not culture. We are here to demystify the idea that indigenous women do not participate in this struggle and to demonstrate that we are prepared to occupy any space,” Indigenous leader [Sônia Guajajara](#) from [Brazil](#).



Indian Counterculture Case Studies

The examples below highlight how several Indian movements have used counterculture to reframe public narratives, though they represent only a small part of a much wider landscape of transformative efforts.

The Women's Movement

The women's movement in India has long been one of the strongest countercultural forces, consistently refusing the dominant narratives that sought to confine women to domesticity, silence, and obedience. It did not merely critique harmful customs like sati, child marriage, or gender violence; it imagined entirely new cultural possibilities rooted in equality, agency, and justice. From the early reformers of the 19th century to the mass organising of the nationalist period, the movement drew upon strategies of collective organising, public ritual, storytelling, and the creation of new social norms through everyday assertion.

By the post-Independence era, women's movements were transforming private pain into public power, from SEWA's organising of informal-sector workers to the national uprising after the Mathura rape case, which forced the country to confront the culture of impunity surrounding gender violence. These were countercultural interventions not only because they resisted patriarchy, but because they rebuilt the cultural imagination of what women could demand, lead, and transform.



Today, the movement is decentralised, intersectional, and deeply embedded in community realities using legal advocacy, art, and collective memory. Women challenge workplace harassment, online abuse, discriminatory laws, and gendered exclusions in development and governance. Reforms like the POSH Act (2013) and the end of instant triple talaq mark important victories, even as patriarchy adapts and persists. As Sapana Pradhan Malla notes: crises, especially economic ones, expose how differently women experience vulnerability, highlighting why their knowledge and needs must shape policy.

Across all these phases, the Indian women's movement shows that counterculture is not an abstract idea. It is a lived practice of redefining dignity, asserting joy and solidarity, creating alternative systems of care, and refusing narratives that erase women's power.



LGBTQ+ Movement in India



The LGBTQ+ movement in India fundamentally operates as a counterculture: a movement whose values and norms of behavior are often opposed to the current, dominant socio-cultural and heteronormative mainstream. The queer rights movement in India has long been a radical counterculture. It began with the first Pride walk in Kolkata in 1999, not just a march, but a refusal in public space to remain invisible. That “Friendship Walk” carried symbolic power, asserting that queer lives belong in collective memory and deserve political recognition.



Over time, queer activists have woven art, performance, and community memory into their resistance. Groups like Nazariya QFRG use oral histories and storytelling to preserve LGBTQ+ collective memory and build a queer-feminist archive. Meanwhile, the Humsafar Trust has created safe communities, provided healthcare, and offered collective solidarity since the 1980s structurally resisting stigma and institutional exclusion through everyday care.



This counterculture isn't merely symbolic. By reclaiming public space, writing queer histories, and building community infrastructure, queer movements in India are redefining belonging, dignity, and justice. Queerness here is not just a legal identity, it is a **cultural practice of resistance**, rooted in memory, creativity, and collective agency, offering powerful lessons for broader social and climate justice struggles.

Dalit Movement

The Dalit movement, has always carried within it a fierce countercultural heart. Inspired by B.R. Ambedkar's vision of self-worth, resistance, and dignity, it refused to accept the caste order as inevitable or sacred. Ambedkar's own declaration, ***"Do not believe in fate; believe in your strength... learn to live in this world with self-respect"***, remains a powerful ethos found in his various writings. Through this, Dalits reimagined their identity not through victimhood but as a people reclaiming their humanity and refusing subjugation.



One of the most vivid expressions of this counterculture is found in Bhimsongs, the Ambedkarite lyrical tradition in Maharashtra. These songs are not just music; they are a cultural revolt, a collective voice that says, ***'We remember. We resist. We are here.'*** In public performances, Dalit-Bahujan icons and poets like Sambhaji Bhagat demand justice, dignity, and an end to caste violence, transforming caste pain into art, community, and political force.



Ambedkarite protest music, more broadly, including the legacy of the Dalit Panthers, turned dissent into a cultural infrastructure. These movements created their own newspapers, held symbolic acts (such as the burning of the Manusmriti), and utilised literature and music to establish what scholars call a counter-public, not merely a movement, but a parallel cultural universe rooted in resistance.

At its core, the Dalit counterculture is not an add-on; it is strategic resistance. It leverages music, literature organising, and self-assertion to challenge centuries of oppression. Through this deeply cultural work, the Dalit movement rewrote public norms, not just laws, by placing self-respect, community memory, and anti-caste identity at the centre of its politics.

Women, Counterculture, and Climate Resilience in Rural India

Across Khadaki, Dhorpa, Armori–Kithali and Bela villages, women are quietly building climate resilience through forms of counterculture that disrupt patriarchal norms and reimagine local governance. Instead of waiting for formal systems that are often delayed, corrupt, or exclusionary they create alternative spaces of learning, organising, and collective action.

Dhorpa and parts of Armori–Kithali offer a more explicitly cultural version of counterculture. In Dhorpa, women reclaim male-only domains, like open gatherings, traditional games, and informal assemblies and repurpose them into organising spaces where water issues, forest pressures, and climate impacts are discussed without fear. These acts disrupt the “normal” gendered structure of village public life, creating a cultural commons where women practice voice, solidarity, and accountability, skills essential for climate resilience.

Meanwhile, Armori–Kithali’s older *daru bandi* (liquor ban) movement continues to act as a symbolic memory of collective power, even as present-day dialogues remain male dominated. In Bela village, climate resilience is a collective effort, led by the woman sarpanch Sharada Shende but deeply rooted in the participation of the whole community, especially the women. Rather than following conventional rural development paths focused solely on roads or drainage, the panchayat has embraced countercultural approaches that integrate ecological care into everyday life. Native and fruit trees such as Peepal, and amla are planted, with saplings planted during social rituals like births or deaths, making environmental stewardship a shared cultural practice.



Painting by Srijita

These efforts are complemented by community-led renewable energy initiatives, waste management (including electronic vehicles and public composting), and the creation of a village seed bank, demonstrating that sustainability can be embedded in the village's social and cultural fabric.

This approach also challenges traditional power dynamics. Women are central to tree planting, seed collection, and maintaining ecological systems, while the sarpanch's leadership helps channel and coordinate these efforts. Bela has gained national recognition for its carbon-neutral initiatives, yet the sarpanch emphasises that the work belongs to everyone in the village. By combining women-led civic participation, ecological restoration, and innovative governance, Bela exemplifies how countercultural strategies rooted in community ownership and gender transformative leadership can build a climate-resilient village while redefining the very idea of rural development.

These changes have unfolded over time, making women powerful, resilient, and central to the village's transformation. Every village woman who has become a leader or aspires to drive change, has been linked to a network of women from other villages through the Mahila Rajsatta Andolan/Association, a group that has long nurtured women's capacities in rural India. Women leaders and facilitators from this group recall the challenges they faced in engaging village women, encouraging them to speak about their rights to resources. Through creative strategies like songs, poetry, informal gatherings, and women-only community nights where they gather from various villages to spend the night together, cooking, discussing, singing. Over the time they have not only built a strong network of women leaders but also established functional working groups like Bachat Ghats (savings groups) and Pani Samitis (water committees), which remain active in Gram Panchayats but also a network of women who are aware about their rights and are not afraid of speaking up for it.

Together, these villages illustrate that counterculture; whether through women's ecological leadership, reclaiming cultural spaces, or reviving past movements, is far more than social resistance.

It is a climate strategy: it strengthens community cohesion, restores ecosystems, diversifies livelihoods, and ensures that women's knowledge guides local responses to a rapidly changing environment. Women using counterculture to reshape the future of their villages and fight for climate justice is one of the strongest examples of how counterculture can unite people and amplify the climate movement in India.

Why Counterculture Matters for Climate Justice

Climate is not just a physical system but a socio-natural hybrid also shaped by culture, memory, and belonging. Mainstream climate spaces rely heavily on dashboards, datasets, and policy briefs, a necessary language, but not one that moves people. Transformation is a human project, and humans shift through meaning, emotion, lived experiences, and stories.

This is where countercultures become a strategic tool.

They make climate justice felt, not just understood.

They create emotional resonance; grief, anger, hope, recognition, turning climate from an abstract crisis into a lived reality that demands response. Countercultures invite people into a sense of belonging, the force that keeps communities organising even through challenges.

As is evidenced by major movements across the world, countercultures offer alternative ways of living that are cooperative, interdependent, and rooted in care, precisely the worldviews needed for climate action. They craft public narratives that marginalised communities can finally see themselves reflected in, enabling those historically excluded from the policy spaces to locate their own power and legitimacy.

Without cultural grounding, climate movements risk collapsing into technocratic echo chambers; elite, policy-heavy, emotionally flat, and fundamentally incapable of mobilising society at the scale required. A climate movement without counterculture is like a framework without practice where rules and reports exist, but real change never reaches the ground. To organise millions, we need more than reports and roadmaps; we need culture bold enough to confront power and expansive enough to reshape our collective imagination.

This learning brief is authored by Shraddha Mahilkar for Asar Social Impact Advisors.

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