

JUST Fellowship

(JUST: Just and Sustainable Transitions)

*Documenting grounded pathways of transition from communities,
landscapes, and lived realities*

An initiative by Samata and the Centre for Financial Accountability

Background and Rationale

A just transition refers to the process of shifting economies and societies towards more sustainable and ecologically viable pathways, while ensuring fairness, dignity, and economic security for workers and communities.

Just transition is not limited to the phase-out of fossil fuels. It spans multiple sectors and realities, including:

- Energy systems (coal, renewables, thermal power)
- Agriculture and agroecological transitions
- Transport and mobility systems
- Industrial restructuring and urban change
- Land use, ecological restoration, and resource governance

In the Indian context, transition operates across multiple and overlapping trajectories. On one hand, it involves shifts away from carbon-intensive sectors towards alternative energy and infrastructure systems—such as mega solar parks, large hydro, or nuclear—which themselves raise important questions of equity, land, and livelihoods. On the other hand, many regions continue to witness the expansion of coal, thermal power, and other extractive industries, reshaping local economies, ecologies, and social structures.

A just transition, therefore, must engage with both these dynamics—foregrounding questions of justice, livelihoods, ecological limits, and community agency across processes of both transformation and expansion. It cannot be treated as an afterthought, but must be embedded as an ongoing and integral process within development pathways.

Conceptual Framing: Reimagining Just Transition in the Indian Context

Just transition cannot be understood narrowly as a shift in energy systems or technological pathways. It is, at its core, about a deeper social, economic, and ecological transformation of society.

These transformations are not entirely new. They have been unfolding over decades, often in tension with dominant development pathways that India—and much of the Global South—has followed. These pathways have largely been capital-intensive, energy-intensive, and centralised, privileging extraction over regeneration, scale over sustainability, and growth over equity.

In the process, alternative trajectories—rooted in self-reliance, decentralised economies, ecological balance, and community autonomy—have been consistently marginalised. These pathways, grounded in local knowledge systems and collective governance, have remained at the edges of mainstream development thinking.

As the climate crisis deepens, there is a growing need to revisit and re-engage with these alternative imaginaries—both those that have existed historically and those emerging in the present. This is not about returning to the past, but about learning from it while imagining new futures that are ecologically viable and socially just.

At the same time, a persistent challenge in conversations around just transition is the way it often gets absorbed into global policy frameworks—particularly Euro-American ones—where it is framed as a new programme, funding stream, or technocratic shift. In the Indian context, this framing can be limiting.

Existing Points of Entry into Just Transition

Many of the building blocks of a just transition already exist within ongoing systems, policies, and struggles. The question is not about creating something entirely new, but about reinterpreting, reclaiming, and reorienting what already exists.

For instance:

- The Forest Rights Act, 2006 provides a framework for democratic control over natural resources, particularly for Adivasi and forest-dwelling communities, with potential to support both conservation and livelihoods.
- Employment guarantee programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)—recently replaced by the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025—can be reimagined beyond wage employment as tools for ecological restoration, land regeneration, and strengthening local economies, as demonstrated in some regions, even as the recent changes have attracted considerable critique.
- Labour welfare boards, social protection schemes, and initiatives such as Skill India already contain institutional and financial architecture relevant to transition pathways.

The challenge lies in aligning, repurposing, and integrating these mechanisms into a broader vision of just and regenerative transformation.

This requires thinking across multiple tracks:

- Strengthening implementation and accountability within existing frameworks
- Imagining new approaches where current systems fall short
- Centring community agency in decision-making processes

Community Agency and Governance

A critical limitation of earlier development models—and many current transition frameworks—is that communities have remained at the margins. Those most affected by environmental degradation, extraction, and economic restructuring have had the least say in shaping these processes.

If transitions are to be genuinely just, communities must be central—not as beneficiaries, but as decision-makers, knowledge holders, and stewards.

Post-Project Resource Transformation

When extractive economies—mining, industrial, or infrastructure projects—reach closure or exhaustion, they leave behind degraded landscapes, but also new forms of resources: land, water bodies, financial allocations, and institutional commitments.

The key question is how these post-extractive assets are governed:

- Can these resources be returned to communities?
- Can they be collectively regenerated and repurposed for long-term ecological and livelihood security?
- Can closure be reimagined not as abandonment, but as an opportunity for renewal?

For example, reservoirs created through large dams generate new livelihood opportunities, such as fisheries, which—if governed collectively—can support affected communities.

These questions are deeply political, tied to issues of land, rights, and governance.

Financial Dimensions of Transition

The financial dimension of transition is often framed as a constraint. However, significant resources already exist.

For instance, mechanisms such as the District Mineral Foundation, along with various cesses, levies, and budgetary allocations linked to mining, energy, infrastructure, and environmental compensation, represent substantial financial flows.

The challenge is that these flows are often fragmented, underutilised, or diverted. A just transition approach would require mapping these flows, strengthening transparency, and reorienting them towards ecological restoration and livelihood regeneration.

Across landscapes, whether forests, coasts, riverine systems, or mining belts, the challenge is not simply the absence of resources, but how existing resources are governed, and for whose benefit.

Implications for the Fellowship

It is within this broader context that the JUST Fellowship is being conceived.

The fellowship does not sit neatly within journalism, academia, or policy analysis; instead, it occupies a space between them—anchored in lived realities, shaped by field engagement, and attentive to the political and social complexities of transition.

It seeks to document and engage with emerging ideas and practices that attempt to re-centre communities within transition processes—drawing from both longstanding alternative imaginaries and contemporary experiments.

At its core, the fellowship explores:

- What transitions are currently unfolding on the ground
- How communities experience and interpret these changes

- What alternative pathways are being imagined or practised
- What tensions exist between dominant and alternative pathways
- What barriers prevent transitions from being just and equitable
- How these barriers can be addressed in practice

This framing recognises that just transition is not merely a technical shift, but a broader societal transformation requiring rethinking of power, decision-making, and resource distribution.

Fellowship Approach

The fellowship operationalises this conceptual framing through grounded, field-based inquiry.

It is premised on the understanding that transition is experienced not only as a structural shift, but as a lived reality. In many contexts, communities encounter transition as:

- Loss of livelihoods and economic security
- Displacement or marginalisation
- Reproduction of historical inequities in new forms

At the same time, there are emerging pathways that offer alternative possibilities:

- Community-led conservation and restoration
- Agroecological practices
- Localised and resilient livelihood systems
- Innovative use of public resources and schemes

The fellowship seeks to document these tensions and possibilities by:

- Grounding inquiry in specific landscapes and sectors
- Engaging directly with affected communities
- Examining governance structures, financial flows, and institutional mechanisms
- Exploring both dominant development pathways and alternative trajectories

What Makes This Fellowship Distinct

- **Community-centred lens:** The fellowship foregrounds socio-cultural, political, and economic dimensions of transition, with communities at the centre.
- **Grounded and field-based documentation:** It prioritises on-the-ground engagement and narrative-building over purely desk-based analysis.
- **Embedded within a broader ecosystem:** The fellowship connects with ongoing and emerging work within the organisation, including just transition hearings and related thematic initiatives.

The following sections outline the structure and operational design of the fellowship.

Programme Design

- Cohort size: 5 fellows
- Duration: 4 months - July to October (tentative)
- Eligibility: Open to Indian citizens who are researchers, journalists, practitioners, and independent writers. Applicants should have at least 2–3 years of relevant experience in areas such as livelihoods, labour, environmental issues, or related fields.

Scope and Focus

The JUST fellowship will engage with diverse transition landscapes, including but not limited to:

- Mining and resource extraction regions
- Industrial and emerging industrial zones
- Energy transition corridors
- Regions witnessing expansion of carbon-intensive systems and infrastructure
- Ecologically sensitive and restoration landscapes
- Sectors such as agriculture, transport, and infrastructure

This includes attention to:

- Post-extractive futures and resource governance
- Use of public finance and institutional mechanisms
- Competing development pathways across regions

The approach captures both transitions away from and into carbon-intensive systems.

Outputs

Each fellow will produce:

- One long-form article (6,000–8,000 words): An in-depth piece documenting and analysing a specific transition context, contributing to a growing body of field-based knowledge
- One short article (op-ed) (800–1,200 words): A concise, public-facing version of the long-form article, adapted for wider dissemination

The long-form articles will be compiled by the organisation into a collective publication (compendium/report) at the end of the fellowship. Fellows will be expected to independently pursue publication of the short article on external platforms.

The submissions can be made in English or Hindi. Recognising the importance of accessibility and inclusion, future iterations of the fellowship may explore multilingual outputs and broader dissemination strategies.

Support

- **Stipend: Rs. 40,000**

- Travel support (if required): up to Rs. 10,000
- Mentorship: Provided on a need-based basis, depending on fellows' requirements and mentor availability. This may include editorial inputs, periodic check-ins, and thematic guidance.
- Disbursement: The fellowship stipend will be released upon satisfactory completion of the agreed outputs and deliverables.

Expected Outcomes

Near-term outcomes

- Production of field-based, contextually rich knowledge outputs
- Wider public access to nuanced perspectives on ecological and economic transition
- A cross-regional cohort contributing context-specific analysis
- Documentation of governance challenges, financial gaps, and emerging practices

Long-term outcomes

- Strengthened discourse on equitable and just transition in regional and national spaces
- Greater visibility of community-led pathways and solutions
- Improved accountability in processes of land restoration, resource governance, and economic diversification
- A growing network of practitioners, researchers, and storytellers shaping debate and policy

Conclusion

In one sense, the idea of just transition is not new; it resonates with long-standing struggles and alternative visions that have challenged dominant development paradigms. Yet, in another sense, it is new, as the urgency of the current moment demands that these ideas be rearticulated, expanded, and connected.

What we are witnessing today is a convergence—and often a clash—between different pathways: extractive versus regenerative, centralised versus decentralised, exclusionary versus democratic.

The JUST Fellowship is an attempt to engage with this moment by documenting, questioning, and contributing to pathways that move towards a more just, equitable, and ecologically grounded future.

