

# **Dateline Mumbai: the 2004 World Social Forum**

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**Three years on from the first World Social Forum in Brazil's Porto Alegre, an organiser of the latest WSF in India presents his vision of the purpose of this global gathering of activists, popular movements and NGOs.**

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Tens of thousands of participants, over a thousand seminars and conferences, testimonies, cultural events and more: together, these make up the World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai, from 16-21 January 2004. The movement that was launched in Brazil in 2001 in opposition to the model of neo-liberal globalisation (which is advocated by one of its architects, Peter Sutherland, in his latest interview with openDemocracy) is expanding its base and widening its perspective.

Like the earlier forums, the one in the city of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) will engage social movements, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academics, activists and others who question the economic and social policies of neo-liberal globalisation.

Institutions such like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and above all the giant trans-national corporations (TNCs) have attempted to skew an already unequal world economy in favour of an exclusive globalised élite and against the interests of the vast majority of humanity. In their relentless drive for profit, markets and domination, the ruling elites in the northern hemisphere have sought to restructure the international system through wars and conflicts.

Representatives of the peace movements that rallied against the war in Iraq, exposing the linkages between a new imperialism and wars and conflicts, will again come together with social movements to exchange experiences and develop a common strategy. And because this Forum is taking place in India, there will be discussion about sectarian and communal violence, and attempts to find ways to forge a secular front that can challenge the growing threat of religious sectarianism and fascism in India and beyond.

The WSF will also see large public meetings on a great range of issues that concern the women's, labour, environmental, peace, human rights and other movements. Thousands of NGOs and movements have teamed up for self-organised seminars and workshops for wider and deeper discussions on issues that concern activists.

## **Unity in diversity?**

Can such a large, diverse event move beyond being a festival to formulate an alternative? Will the concept of an open space become amorphous and unstructured? Does the alternative have a name? Can it offer a conclusion that will work? These questions are part of a dialogue between the insiders and outsiders, the critics, the cynics and the idealists, that are bringing terms like 'neo-liberal' 'imperialism' 'militarism', 'activism,' into public discourse. It is leading to new coalitions and sensitising one movement about another – as it asks environmentalists to support women's rights; labour to engage with transsexuals; and all to work against inequality, war and oppression.

The debates within the WSF are likely to show that there are multiple approaches to the main issues, and no one clear answer. There are many contending approaches to globalisation, for instance. Do multilateral financial institutions need merely to be influenced to become more sympathetic to the poor, or to be comprehensively restructured? Will expanding the UN Security Council to make it more representative suffice, or does the organisation require a sweeping reorganisation? How do peace movements tackle the issues of nuclear disarmament and demilitarisation in the surcharged atmosphere of a global 'war against terror'? How can environmental concerns best be balanced with needs for development?

The relationship of social movements to political parties – particularly the left, centre-left, and socialist parties – has been much debated at previous forums, and will continue to be key. Coalition-building will continue, where individuals from many parties join in to help allay some fears of the 'traditional' left or a particular ideology dominating this process. Collective decision-making and learning through experience will persist in helping all groups involved to shed inhibitions about the NGO sector and its image as 'aided' and single-issue organisations.

Some have questioned whether the money spent on convening such a big meeting in a developing country, where so many are in great need, is being spent wisely. But consider this comparison. The Mumbai forum, at about \$2 million, will cost less than an eighth of one Apache combat helicopter (\$16.76 million) or one twenty-ninth of an F-15 fighter aircraft (\$58.31 million).

But the benefits of the forum should not be judged on the basis of numbers. More broadly, it will help mobilise public opinion, deepen democracy, reclaim the public voice and strengthen the role and capacity of "peoples' movements". In a context where states and leaders are seeking to make globalisation irreversible, this remains the only way to redress the balance of power so that people have a say in their future.

## **The power of an idea**

The first three World Social Forums in Brazil gave impetus to many social forums around the world, from local to continental ones. In the last year alone there have been Asian, European, Latin American and Pakistani Social Forums. In India, peoples' movements have convened local social forums in many cities in the approach to the Mumbai WSF. Each has addressed local, national and international issues, helping to foster a public culture of debate and discourse.

The WSF in Mumbai is also about individuals who have made important contributions with their ideas and resistance. These include the Iranian Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi, American Nobel economics laureate Joseph Stiglitz, French small farmers' leader Jose Bové, Canadian activist Maude Barlow, Algerian freedom fighter Ahmed Ben Bella, Trevor Ngwane, author Arundhati Roy, activist Medha Patkar, Asma Jehangir, Marxist theoretician Samir Amin, Nguyen Thi Binh (vice-president of

Vietnam), Nora Cortinas of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, United Nations special rapporteur on violence against women Radhika Coomaraswamy, British member of parliament Jeremy Corbyn, the *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors) and Peace Boat from Japan, Palestinian militants, and delegates from more than ninety countries.

There will also be a parallel World Parliamentary Forum, and a Youth Camp. Artists will perform in the evenings, and film and theatre festivals will take place simultaneously. As Mumbai prepares to welcome delegates, well-known Indian artists have lent their skills to paint suburban trains with the WSF message. Given the scale of the meeting, one can expect some confusion and even a little chaos, but there will be no lack of vision or resolve.

What began as a ripple in the form of the first WSF in 2000 has become a wave and can turn into a tsunami. No alternative emerges in a day, but events such as these can become an irresistible movement from below that alters history and shows that another world is indeed possible.