

India Social Forum Turns Focus On New Issues

Saturday 18 November 2006, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 14 November 2006).

NEW DELHI, Nov 14 (IPS) - What do you call a five-day-long gathering of 50,000 people, which features more than 350 panels, conferences, seminars and workshops on a range of social, political and cultural issues, along with film festivals, musical and dramatic events, and colourful marches by diverse groups dancing for different causes?

Is it a carnival, jamboree or an extravaganza which does not serve much of a purpose except for promoting bonhomie among like-minded people? Or is it an important space for discussion and debate for civil society movements as they struggle to evolve alternatives to corporate-led globalisation and build a strong enough thrust to bring about social and political change in the long-term interests of underprivileged people?

Going by the experience of many participants of the India Social Forum (ISF) held in Delhi Nov. 9-13, the answer would seem to be a mixture of the two.

"There is simply no doubt that participating in the Forum with its festive atmosphere and its staggering variety is an ennobling experience for most activists, despite all its limitations," says Dunu Roy, director of Hazards Centre, a Delhi-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) which works on livelihood issues of the poor.

The ISF is part of the World Social Forum process that began in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 2001. The WSF was conceived as a direct challenge and ideological-political counter to the World Economic Forum, a gathering of the world's 1,000 biggest corporations, government leaders and business consultants, held annually in Davos, Switzerland.

The WSF grew organically out of struggles in both the global South and North against neo-liberal globalisation and its iniquitous and skewed consequences. It was preceded in 1999 by dramatic protests in Seattle, Washington, against the World Trade Organisation, and fired by new Southern mobilisations. These included the Workers' Party in Brazil, the Zapatista uprising in Mexico, the anti-Narmada dam struggle in India, and the Ogoni people's movement against oil multinationals in Nigeria.

For its 2004 event, the WSF shifted its venue to Mumbai. India also hosted an Asian Social Forum in Hyderabad in 2003, which proved a huge success, drawing three times the original estimated

participation of 10,000. Mumbai attracted 130,000 delegates and featured some 1,400 conferences and seminars.

The ISF in the Indian capital was organised at three levels: issues specific to India, themes shared with neighbouring countries, and international issues.

Among the India-specific conferences and seminars, some issues figured prominently, including India's experience of jobless growth under the so-called "8 percent miracle"; new forms of labour servitude; dispossession under capitalist accumulation; displacement of vast numbers from city centres, villages and forests; growing failure of the justice delivery system with its pro-rich bias; continuing exploitation of women, the fight against casteism and defence of the rights of the Dalits (former Untouchables) and Adivasis (indigenous people).

The international themes that attracted large numbers of activists were: heightened exploitation of the Global South by multinational capital backed by international financial institutions; WTO vs. fair trade; rising Southern debt; the coercive prying open of Southern economies; increasing loss of democratic control over economic life in both the North and the South; privatisation of water, electricity and forests; global warming and the responsibility of states to reverse it; growing movements for rights and entitlements in healthcare, education and women's empowerment in the face of stiff opposition from corporates and governments.

"If I were to highlight the big new issues that attracted the most attention and energy, I would make a relatively short list", says Prafulla Samantara, an Orissa-based activist who works for the Lok Shakti Abhiyan (people's power campaign). "On top comes the issue of land, or its grabbing by powerful and predatory interests, aided by governments and the courts, to set up Special Economic Zones for export production and to 'beautify' city centres and make them hospitable to global capital. Next come labour issues, especially the growing unorganised sector and new methods of struggle.""And only slightly less important," adds Samantara, are "questions like militarisation and nuclearisation of South Asia, the need for global nuclear disarmament, the fight for justice in trade, food security, opposition to privatisation, especially in water and power."

One distinctive feature of the ISF was the prominence given to climate change and carbon trading, in which India has emerged as an unrivalled Third World leader. Indian companies are trying to make billions by offering projects under the so-called Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol. They can sell carbon credits to large Northern corporations, which buy them to evade their own responsibility to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

"The whole business is totally fraudulent," said Larry Lohmann, author of a new volume, "Carbon Trading: A Critical Conversation on

Climate Change, Privatisation and Power" in the Development Dialogue journal. Lohmann interacted with a number of grassroots activists at the ISF and said that the forces that are dispossessing the tribals of India today are the same ones which uprooted the small farmers in Europe through "enclosures" 250 years ago.

"Carbon trading evades the central issue of drastically cutting greenhouse gas emissions to arrest global warming", holds Lohmann. "It will seriously aggravate the climate crisis while further enriching corporate interests."

The ISF also further advanced interaction between India's organised Left parties and civil society that began in 2003. Many Left leaders participated in the Forum and shared their experiences and views. "Their interaction accorded recognition to the importance of relating to several movements which the Left did not start, but which it supports," says D. Thankappan of the New Trade Union Initiative, based in Mumbai.

"These include the campaign for a rural employment guarantee scheme for 100 days of work for every poor family in one-third of the country, initiatives to organise informal sector workers, and mobilisation against the expulsion and dispossession of poor people from many cities. It is a healthy sign that the Left now relates positively to such movements and to civil society. "However, many activists are critical of the ISF. "It is too flaky and unstructured," says Ashok Choudhury of the National Forum of Forest Workers. "So it doesn't really lead to adequate action-oriented dialogue between activists. Sometimes, it doesn't make even a clear diagnosis of problems and there is very little attempt to build solidarity groups."

Many others also say that the Forum is so open a space that anything can fall through it without leading to real coordination on strategy, planning, or action. "Most of the issues that the ISF took up already exist in the space of real activism on the ground," says Roy. "The ISF didn't add anything really new to their analysis."

There are other questions too. Should activists be spending so much time and energy in organising such events at the expense of grassroots work? How do genuine people's movements and Left-wing groups guard against "NGO-isation"? "There are no clear answers yet," says Choudhury. "But at least these issues are being raised within a generally constructive approach that sees the (limited) worth of the Social Forum process."