

The Asian Social Forum: a new public space

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The first Asian Social Forum, held in Hyderabad in January 2003, anticipated the World Social Forum at Porto Alegre, Brazil later that month. But it was a pioneering event in its own right.

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“For the last fifteen years I have been working in the field of plastic arts. My personal experience as a downtrodden painter is that there are few appreciators of art in the Brahminical intellectual society. I am creating my own grammar which will add a new dimension to pictorial language....”

These are the words of Savi Savarkar, Dalit artist who depicts the wretchedness of the caste system and ‘untouchability’ through his paintings. Savi was just one of the thousands of people who came to the Asian Social Forum as part of a new rainbow coalition of social movements that is gradually emerging in India and elsewhere in Asia.

Voices of resistance

The Asian Social Forum (ASF) is part of the global justice movement that came together in the World Social Forum (WSF), famous for its regular meetings in Porto Alegre in Brazil in the last few years. Known primarily as a gathering dedicated to building an alternative to the process of globalisation, the WSF has combined social movements and civil society groups that oppose neo-liberal policies in their own countries and internationally, and peace and peoples’ movements across the world.

The ASF was the first attempt to initiate the process in Asia. Hyderabad, capital of India’s eastern state of Andhra Pradesh, was the site of the gathering on 2-7 January 2003.

“The ASF is not just a meeting, but a process and an open space for peoples’ movements and non-governmental organisations,” activist Vijay Pratap stated. It was with this in mind that meetings to mobilise for the ASF were held in many different regions and towns of India. The result was evident in the colour and diversity of groups present, from women, Dalits and trade unionists to environmentalists and peasant movements. They ranged across the ideological and political spectrum and debated and assessed contending positions during and between events.

“The anti-globalisation movement is primarily about peace and sustainable and equitable development.” This has long been the argument of Walden Bello who chaired the Peace and Security Conference of the ASF. Bello, from the Philippines, known as a vibrant critic of neo-liberal economic policies, spoke of the unilateralist approach of the United States that had the effect of escalating military tension throughout the world.

Abdel Saleh, former minister from the PLO, evocatively showed how public memory about the plight and daily struggles of the Palestinian people had been erased by images of terrorism and violence. He advocated a mass, non-violent Palestinian movement for a Palestinian state that needed the urgent support of the international community in the face of the genocide of Palestinian people.

"It is the American urge to control Iraqi oil and hegemonise the Middle East that is behind their threat to Iraq," was the analysis of Noori Abdul Razzak, Iraqi member of the Afro-Asian Peace and Solidarity Organisation.

The practice of democracy

Over 15,000 participants from different non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and peoples' movements listened, discussed and had formal and informal meetings in 300 seminars, workshops and conferences. The strategy and impact of globalisation in creating severe economic inequalities and causing new social conflicts were discussed in conferences that engaged with issues of debt, privatisation and the condition of the social sectors.

Issues that are generally confined to the solemn tables of mighty institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and government economic ministries and commissions, were discussed by activists on dusty tables in local city colleges. How serious was such a debate? Was it merely a shouting brigade as some would like to dismiss it?

The presence both of social activists and academics and former bureaucrats such as S.P. Shukla, who had represented the Indian government during the WTO negotiations, is one indication of its innovative nature. Fact sheets on debt and trade figures were made available. Discussions earlier restricted to official agencies were being held at the grassroots level by people who are affected by these decisions in their everyday lives.

A number of sessions organised by student groups addressed the issue of communalisation of education in India. The attempt by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the right-wing head of the ruling coalition in India, to change the school curriculum was discussed by students who argued for a new scientific method of teaching.

The issues of exclusion, nation states and citizenship were heard in a large conference. Urgent questions such as terrorism, the possibility of a war in Iraq, the impact of anti-terrorism laws and other international topics were debated.

The participants were confronted not only by hard intellectual choices, but by organisational difficulties. These included the breakdown of the sound system, when over 2,000 participants and speakers from nine different countries had to wait for over an hour for a replacement to be put in place. Many NGOs found that the venues that they had booked for meetings were changed or inadequate. There was a lack of information, since just a few of the organisers knew about the changes.

More seriously, an invaluable painting by one of India's leading painters, M.F. Husain, was stolen. Asian participants felt that the participation and discussion tended to be India-centric. The denial of visas to prominent Pakistani participants accentuated this problem. All these incidents point to the need for wider discussions on, and participation in, all aspects of such conferences.

In time, these troubles may come to be seen as part of a broader learning process. The ASF was the

first such event in India. It was an invaluable learning experience for a very large number of grassroots activists from a wide spectrum of movements, who would otherwise never have such an opportunity.

Such conferences highlight peoples' struggles for an alternative to the neo-liberal model of globalisation encapsulated in the movement's key slogan: 'another world is possible'.