

# India Social Forum 2006: The ruling classes and social movements

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As far as organizing the event such as the proposed India Social Forum goes, the Indian organizations involved in the process have already demonstrated their capabilities with the Asian Social Forum 2003 held in Hyderabad and the World Social Forum 2004 held in Mumbai. Logistics were well managed and orchestration of the program well done, with remarkable improvement from the Asian to the World Forum. Attendance was more than expected with over 130 000 participants in Mumbai 2004. Financially too the India Working Committee managed to collect more funds than were spent in the Mumbai Forum.

On these two counts there seem to be no worries for the upcoming India Social Forum to be held in Delhi from 9 to 13 November 2006. As far as the WSF process is concerned, the timing is good as it intends to mobilize the participants for the next World Social Forum to be held in Nairobi in January 2007. As a consequence, the ISF is also being announced as the Afro-Asian Solidarity Process.

There is though a different political environment than what existed in January 2004 when the WSF was held in the financial capital of India, Mumbai.

## Background to WSF 2004

In the federal elections of March 1998, the extreme right wing party called the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) won the largest number of seats and formed a government with its provincial coalition partners. The Congress was the second largest party in the parliament. In its 5 years of rule the BJP made many enemies: working class and peasants, social movements from the liberal and Left and religious minorities especially the Muslims, just to name some sections of the population. It started harassing leaders of the social movements and progressive NGOs and channeling funds for its fascistic activities from NGOs abroad. In its stronghold province of Gujarat it introduced chapters in the secondary school textbooks idolating Hitler and Mussolini. In the same province it engineered a massacre of Muslims which saw over 2000 men, women and children brutally killed. On top of that the then prime minister Vajpayee made this bone chilling speech "Wherever Muslims are they do not want to live with others peacefully".

In its drive for privatization and jumping on the bandwagon of neo-liberal economic policies the BJP government starved the peasantry and as a result thousands of indebted peasants committed suicides in the period of their governance. Soon after coming to power the BJP demonstrated its nuclear might by test exploding the atomic bombs thus getting cheers from the nationalist middle class. The same class benefited from its neo-liberal market reforms which brought goodies in the

market. Convinced of the results of its economic growth and uninformed international admiration, the BJP launched its “Shining India” campaign for the elections of year 2004.

It is at this juncture that we announced the holding of the fourth World Social Forum in Mumbai. Elections to the federal parliament were to take place in March/April 2004, the WSF was scheduled for January 2004. Obviously, the Indian social movements and Left formations’ important agenda for discussion, usually in the corridors and informal gatherings around the WSF activities, was on possible Left-Liberal alliance in order to defeat the BJP.

### **Political environment today**

What happened in the elections of May 2004 is known to all. The Congress emerged as the largest single party in the parliament and along with its allies it formed the government in a coalition United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Even with support from all its provincial and liberal allies the Congress did not have the magic number of seats to claim a government. It needed the support of the Left which it got from the support of 60 Communist party parliamentarians. The reason for the defeat of the BJP led government wrote Siddharth Varadarajan “...there can be no denying the fact that the verdict reflected, at least in part, the growing public uneasiness over the economic policies followed by the Vajpayee Government. The election saw the electorate in virtually every major urban centre voting in favour of parties that either openly criticized privatization and fiscal cutbacks or promised reforms “with a human face.” In rural areas, the fact that inequality has either not fallen as dramatically in the reform years as the BJP claimed or has even increased is now fairly well established”.

Half way through the mandate of the ruling UPA, we have announced the India Social Forum (ISF) in November 2006 in the political capital of India, New Delhi. The gathering at the ISF will have to address the same issues of neo-liberal globalization in a different political setup. The Congress led UPA has not abandoned the neo-liberal policies. What has changed? To quote a political observer from India, “ the communist parties support to the ruling coalition is atleast acting as a good opposition party in that it has shifted the parliamentary debates (thus media attention) from religious-sectarian issues towards economic ones”. The question which the progressive social movements during the ISF have to address is that whether this opposition to the structural adjustment policy is limited to debates alone.

Another important debate would be around the degree of involvement and engagement of the social movements with the ruling class and parties. The Communist Party of India (Marxist), known as CPM, has been ruling the province of West Bengal since the past 30 years. It got an additional mandate of 5 years in the elections held last month. There are a significant number of critics from the Left who are questioning the increasing foreign investment and its effect on the people in West Bengal. What credibility the CPM opposition to the Congress policy retains if it does the opposite in its fortress? Another important debate will be around the question of Left supporting the Congress government at all costs in order to keep the BJP at bay. At what price? Probably the upcoming Social Forum in India, which expects over 60 000 participants, has more crucial questions to address than just strategize the ouster of a government as was the case during the WSF 2004 in India.