

World Social Forum: Reflections on the Indian process

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The fourth World Social Forum was held in Mumbai in January 2004. Moving it from Porto Alegre to a different continent in which the social forum movement was less developed and much more disparate, and notably to the specific political situation in India, was a real challenge - successfully met. Pierre Rousset [1] followed the process from beginning to end and gives his assessment. There is much discussion within the Indian far left about the WSF but this addresses itself rather to activists from outside India and to comparison of Mumbai with the social forums of Porto Alegre or in Europe.

This article is a shortened version of a quite longer report. The full report is available (in French) on ESSF website: [Mumbai : Rien n'était joué d'avance !](#).

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All of us who had the chance to participate in the 4th World Social Forum (WSF) were struck by the breadth and the highly popular character of the participation. “It’s normal. It’s India...” some said, as if the immensity and the vast population of this country-continent were enough to explain everything. Indeed, organizing the Forum in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) meant that many sizeable obstacles had to be overcome: nothing was settled in advance.

Obviously it is not possible to analyze this process without reference to India and some of its more complex traits. According to a well-known dictum, only those who have spent either two days or 20 years in a country can claim to be experts on it. I can never, then, be an expert on India. How, in these conditions, is it possible to approach a question like that of caste without falling into vulgar errors? This is not a formal warning. India is not easy to understand. Nothing can replace the various analyses that the Indian protagonists involved in the WSF can put forward.

Some figures

More than 70,000 people registered at the Forum, to which we should add 40,000 who participated on a daily basis, the 4,000 participants in the youth camp, the many volunteers and the inhabitants of the enormous urban conurbation who participated in the open activities. More than 130,000 people, then, took part in the WSF. Among the delegates who registered, 60,000 were Indian and 14,000 were foreigners, coming from 117 countries. More than 1,600 organizations were represented, half of these from India. 1,200 events took place in the framework of the WSF (without counting the many street activities).

A few weeks before the holding of the forum, the organizers expected the participants to number 75,000. The figures grew incessantly as the event approached, the delegations from various Indian states turning out to be much bigger than anticipated. It was a sign that a genuine dynamic had been created.

A rational wager

To leave Porto Alegre in favour of India was to make a leap in the dark. A necessary leap, but without any guarantee of success. For the first time a massive forum was going to be organized in a country where it was impossible to rely on the financial and institutional support which the movement had enjoyed in Rio Grande do Sul (in the south of Brazil), Florence (Italy) or Paris-Saint Denis (France). Two decisions of principle had been taken in January 2002:

- to begin taking the WSF out of Porto Alegre to allow the process to acquire a real world dimension;
- that India should be the first destination for the movement.

The wager on India was a rational one. Some conditions are necessary so that a social forum, in the sense that we understand it here, can take place: a living “civil society”; varied and dynamic social movements; a capacity for political independence; unitary traditions. India possessed all these. However, most of the Indian organizations concerned only learned afterwards of the decision taken by the WSF’s International Council.

This in fact was one of the first obstacles that had to be overcome. Not many Indians were able to come to Porto Alegre or participate in the bodies of the WSF. The great majority of activists had only a very vague notion of what a social forum was. It was only in their lands of origin (Brazil and a part of Latin America; Europe, above all the South initially) that the social forums had become a recognized component of political life, a common reference point that was widely shared by numerous movements. Because of the prohibitive cost of travel, in a number of countries, notably Asian ones, only a thin layer of activists had been able to participate in the experience of the social forums.

The problem was aggravated in India by a kind of reciprocal ignorance. The international activity of the Indian movements was above all orientated towards their own sub-continent, South Asia, with, in the background, the regional power game involving Washington, Beijing and Moscow. In Europe, few networks had built durable links with India. Asia is the poor relative of European solidarity.

The Indian organizations had only a little time to assimilate a very specific reality - the international experience of the social forums and the nature of their "inclusive" approach. India's unitary traditions only partially relate to the specific dynamics of a social forum. Unity was above all practiced between organizations of the same type - between trade union federations, "popular movements" of Gandhian origin, NGOs, left parties. A WSF should include a broad spectrum of organizations of very diverse types, which, quite often, would not previously have collaborated with each other.

An initial regional Asian Social Forum was held in Hyderabad (the capital of Andhra Pradesh) in January 2003. This "dress rehearsal" would test the possibility of organizing the WSF in India. The test was positive.

The success of Hyderabad was all the more significant in that the unitive convergences had nothing obvious about them. The sharpness of the antagonisms between movements of different types constituted a second sizeable obstacle to overcome. Here are two examples.

The question of the NGOs

The relation between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and "popular" (socially rooted) organizations often presents problems, in particular in the Third World. The latter believe that the former use their control of solidarity funds to occupy a political place which is disproportionate to their capacities for recruitment and social representativity. Also, some international NGO networks have tended to replace rather than help local organizations and thus weaken national "civil society" in the name of world "civil society".

Of course, not all NGOs have the same orientation. But in India the cleavage is particularly marked between NGOs that receive "external" financing and the movements that explicitly reject it, considering that it is an essential guarantee of their independence. This question occupies an important political place. It is for example often touched on in the leaflets presented by an organization. An activist network can also exclude from its ranks any association having links with "communalism" (i.e. religious sectarianism) or receiving "foreign" financing.

"Traditional mass organizations"

Another cleavage takes on specific dimensions in India, opposing the "popular movements" to the "traditional mass organizations".

The “traditional mass organizations” are linked to the political parties. The link between trade unions and parties varies greatly according to periods and countries. In France, trade union independence is a matter of principle (even if, in reality, the leadership exercised by the parties is obvious). In Germany or in Britain, there is a recognized organic link between trade unions and social democratic parties - to the point that in Britain the Trade Union Congress finances the Labour Party.

In India (and more generally in South Asia), the link between parties and mass movements is particularly pronounced. All the parties have their own trade union federations, including the Congress Party [the main bourgeois party which governed the country for decades since independence and was identified with the independence movement] and the BJP [Hindu far-right party which is at the centre of the current government coalition]. Each party is surrounded by a spectrum of mass organizations. This is considered normal to the point that all the functions occupied by a person are indicated on a single visiting card. It is hard to explain to Indian trade unionist friends that if they come to France, it is better to have two different visiting cards, one for trade union and the other for party activities. Not indicating a political identity appears suspect, as if there was something to hide.

The traditional mass organizations are not for all that necessarily merely “transmission belts” in the hands of a political bureau. When they acquire real social roots, a very much more dialectical relationship is established between the movements belonging to a same current. Some among them have sufficient breadth to transcend, partially at least, their political affiliation.

However, more than ever, unity must be realized between organizations (for example between various trade union federations), and not inside the same movement.

There are no sectors which are “off limits” to the traditional mass organizations. There are for example many independent trade unions, with diverse orientations, at the scale of the urban conurbations or in a specific industrial sector. Some of them coordinate inside a kind of national platform of “left independent and democratic trade unions”, the NITU (New Trade Union Initiative). But most of the movements which go under the name of “All India” (which effectively means they are implanted in three or more states) and have a broad social surface belong to this category - trade union federations, women’s associations, poor peasants’ organizations and so on.

“Popular movements”

A whole range of “social movements” and “popular movements” have been set up more recently. Their common characteristic is not being linked to political parties and are thus often found in opposition to traditional mass organizations. They are not necessarily more (or less) radical than these latter. Their development often reflects upheavals brought about by the contemporary evolution of capitalism in India, like the construction of huge dams, the acceleration of deforestation or the formation of an agricultural market. These movements are often, en bloc, qualified as “new” (a positive adjective), rather than “old”, a term which takes on a negative connotation (“passé”) and is associated with the Communist left.

It is however often difficult to place all these “new” movements in the same category. The nature of their social base varies considerably. Resistance to deforestation is generally by the indigenous tribes, the adivasis, because the forest is their vital habitat. In the same way, the struggle against the big dams directly concerns the tribal and village communities condemned to the destruction of their homes and livelihoods. Here we are talking about particularly oppressed and exploited peoples. On the other hand, the independent peasant movements are often set up by new layers of middle

and rich peasants created by capitalist development in agriculture.

Around 150 organizations are involved in the National Alliance of Popular Movements, the NAPM.

This is notably the case with the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), the most well-known among them at the international level for its struggle against the construction of a series of giant dams. But this is not always the case. The KRRS in particular, an independent peasant organization primarily implanted in the state of Karnataka, is not a member of the NAPM (the KRRS is the Indian section of Via Campesina and has led actions in Europe against Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), together with the Peasant Confederation). The NAPM ensures a coordination between very different organizations. It is based on a radical rejection of globalization, communalism and casteism [2] and advocates recourse to methods of non-violent struggle for alternatives. Inside these movements you can find political currents with Gandhian references - social- Gandhian, anarcho-Gandhian, Marxist-Gandhian, former Maoists now Gandhians and so on. An important point to note is that these currents do not set themselves up as parties.

Two components

Each time that new types of movement are born, it has posed important problems in relations with traditional organizations. The question is not confined to India. Here, however, these tensions have taken on a particularly sharp dimension. Some “popular movements” have introduced a socio-ecological critique of the capitalist model of development whereas the Communist left was of the “scientist” tradition. The changing relations between identities of caste, class and community are particularly complex and the left parties fear that a dilution of class references will efface the strategic horizon of struggles and fragment them. On the other hand, the popular movements fear that control by the parties of mass organizations will devitalize them, or instrumentalize them. We do not make a judgement here, but we take into account a reality that is the product of a singular history. The process of social forum, in the sense that we understand it, should include a representative spectrum of the social and democratic forces of the country. Which in India should include both the traditional mass organizations and popular movements. The one does not replace the other.

Returning to the example of the “new peasant movements” reflecting the recent emergence of a layer of rich and middle peasants who cultivate the land (unlike the landed proprietors of yesteryear). They can occupy dominant positions in the village but are confronted, via the world market, with unequal competition from agro-industry and the effects of neoliberal globalization. On questions like GMOs, the price of input, the World Trade Organization (WTO), some of them can easily be found in a common international struggle with, for example, the Confédération paysanne in France. But they don’t organize and don’t represent the poor peasants and the landless (indeed they can employ them). These more exploited sectors remain in essence organized by the associations and trade unions linked to the parties.

Political vocabulary

As far as I know the preparation of the WSF in Mumbai has been the only time that the question of convergence between NGOs, traditional mass organizations and popular movements has been posed on a federal scale and in relation to such an ambitious project.

In Europe also the notion of “civil society” has been opposed to a class analysis of social polarities

and the “new” has been opposed to the “old”, incarnated by Marxism. But the use of political vocabulary has evolved, notably in response to unitary demands (and the entry into struggle of new generations which no longer have the same historic references as those of the 1960s and 1970s). In current usage, the terms of the social movement or social movements have become increasingly inclusive. When we are introducing a fundamental debate, words become concepts. But in everyday political life, we use them voluntarily in a broad sense, along undefined frontiers. Neither on the theoretical level (there are some decades of Marxist debates on “civil society”) nor on the political level, is there any common militant lexicon on an international scale. One of the first conditions of globalization of our links of solidarity is learning to understand how we speak to each other.

The desynchronized international evolution of the political vocabulary led to some misunderstandings in India. If we say “social movements”, some Indian comrades understand “new social movements” or “popular movements” and understand by this that we are seeking to efface class references or revolutionary parties. For sure, this example is a little caricatured, but nonetheless real enough. Many reciprocal mistrusts had to be surmounted for the Mumbai WSF to succeed. The political situation in India has, to some extent at least, pushed the movements towards unity.

The world market and the rise of the BJP

India, relatively protected from the world market, felt the hammer blows of neoliberal globalization later than many other countries. But the basics of the political-social framework created at independence (1948) are today progressively disintegrating. The implosion of the USSR has had profound consequences for the system of international alliances. The state plays increasingly less of a role in economic development. The Congress Party, long hegemonic, has decayed and lost its initial dynamism. Social entitlements are challenged, social and regional inequalities are growing again. In India, then, the effects of neoliberal capitalist globalization are being felt relatively late and insidiously. But they contribute (with other factors) towards a more general and more structural crisis in those countries that were previously integrated into the world market. The religious forces of the far right have been able to profit from the social disarray.

Hindu fundamentalism

The Bharatya Janata Party (BJP, Indian Party of the People) has led the federal government since 1998. It employs several levels of language and seeks to present a “responsible” face, but it is the political front of the fascistic Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, Association of National Volunteers) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (Universal Hindu Association). Together with the militias and a whole spectrum of mass organizations, they structure a vast Hindu fundamentalist movement that supports the concept of Hindutva, “Hinduity”. They make the Muslim and sometimes the Christian minorities scapegoats and challenge the secular (neutral attitude to religion) character of the Indian state.

Progressive movements face convergent attacks from neoliberal counter-reform and the rise in power of a far right fundamentalist Hinduism. This is the third obstacle that I want to mention and it was one of the main arguments used by those who wanted to engage a broad unitary dynamic during the WSF, transcending the usual cleavages between NGOs and movements or popular movements and traditional mass organizations. It would be irresponsible, it was argued, not to combine our forces when a fascistic movement has been carried to power!

The Indian political situation is bad, then. Yet the ambience inside the Mumbai forum was not defeatist, much the opposite. This relates to one of the most striking aspects of the process now underway, which does not only concern India.

Conjunctures and period

Each social forum is held in a specific conjuncture. The first European Social Forum in Florence, in November 2002, met in a situation of “buoyancy”, in reaction to the arrival in power of Berlusconi and Bush’s war drive; that explains to a large extent the significance of the million-strong demonstration that ended the forum. The situation in France, a year later, during the second ESF in Paris/Saint-Denis, was rather characterized by a “slack period” in social mobilization, after the big strike movements and struggles which had not forced the government to back down. However, if the Parisian demonstration was much smaller than that in Florence (although large enough, with 100,000 participants), the two forums were numerically comparable (around 50,000) and shared the same dynamic spirit.

All the social forums in which I have participated have been characterized by a positive spirit, even if they were generally held in times of difficult situations, with the pursuit of neoliberal policies, new war dynamics, electoral victories of the right and the rise of fundamentalism. This was particularly evident during the second WSF in Porto Alegre (Latin America after September 11, 2001) and the first two ESFs in Italy (after the victory of Berlusconi) then in France (after the election of a particularly reactionary national assembly). It was again the case in India (following the electoral victories of the BJP).

Certainly, profiting from the divisions between economic powers (as well as the tensions between imperialist bourgeoisies and third world bourgeois elites), the global justice movement managed to halt some neoliberal offensives (from the Multilateral Agreement on Investment negotiated inside the OECD to the Cancun conference of the WTO). That represented some real, concrete successes, which were politically very significant. We have not had successes like these for a number of years. However, neither the forums nor the many mobilizations have allowed us to reverse the relationship of forces and put an end to the anti-popular and repressive measures that accompany capitalist globalization. The period remains in this sense defensive.

Faced with the violence of the attacks launched on every front in the name of the commodification of the world, the vast movement around the forums affirms itself first as the place of convergence of multiple forms of resistance of a defensive kind (“The world is not for sale”). However, there is more. Capitalist globalization demands the implementation of a new mode of domination, different from the (varied) modes of domination that prevailed in the majority of countries in the preceding period. The international bourgeoisie has shown itself incapable of stabilizing itself in terms of ideological, social or democratic legitimacy. In these conditions, rejection of the neoliberal order takes on a dimension which is not solely defensive (“Another world is possible”). Some elements of a counteroffensive oppose the generalized offensive waged by the owners of wealth.

The forums are only one of the expressions of the global movement against capitalist, neoliberal and military globalization. They fulfil a specific function. They offer the necessary space and time to collectivize experience and reflection, to create a consensus around a common calendar of mobilizations. They progressively give form to a common alternative culture, constitute a place of convergence of multiple forms of resistance and give form to the desire for a counteroffensive. When they succeed, the forums present an image of the “people assembled”. And Mumbai was the most representative forum of all, in terms of composition and expression.

Mumbai, point of penetration of globalization

Holding the WSF in Mumbai in no way guaranteed popular participation. The conurbation of Bombay is governed by the Shiv Sena ("army of Shivaji"), a particularly reactionary Hindu fundamentalist regionalist movement. Mumbai is also the commercial capital of the country, the point of entry of globalization where the established powers have been won over to neoliberal ideology. Certainly, the forum was not organized in the financial and tourist centre, but in the working class suburbs. Nonetheless, the implantation of progressive forces here remains weaker than in the other regions of India.

Mumbai offered some advantages, but it was not chosen because the left was strong there but rather for the opposite reason, because no left force is in a hegemonic position there. It was a unitary choice. For example, the bastions (Calcutta, Kerala) of the main CP in India, the CPI-Marxist, were ruled out. In Mumbai, the small components (NGOs and so on) or the popular movements could more easily find their place besides the traditional mass organizations, dalits and so on. This unitary choice had a price. The WSF is in some way held in enemy-controlled territory. This was a fourth obstacle to overcome.

Finance and logistics

The problem was first and foremost financial. It was the first time that a "big" forum could not count on any aid from the municipality or the state. No money, no facilities, no services, no free housing. The problem was moreover bigger in that the Indian organizers of the WSF could not accept the financing traditionally accorded by the Ford Foundation for the WSFs in Porto Alegre. As noted above, there is in India a great mistrust relating to the political implications of financial aid (a problem very often underestimated elsewhere). No question then of receiving anything from a symbol of imperialist capital even if, to my knowledge, there were no political conditions attached to the donations of the Ford Foundation (which is not always the case for some aid of more "progressive" origin). The practical preparation of the WSF posed immense logistical problems. The forum was held in a disused industrial and commercial zone offering factory sheds, a vast covered space, the shade of numerous trees and verdant alleyways - a proletarian architecture surrounded by a touch of nature! This site allowed the organization of activities in a single place, which was very important for the creation of that feeling of being "among one's own" which is one of the trademarks of the forums. To a much greater extent than the campus of the Catholic University in Porto Alegre, it was able to take on a popular character. Delegations of activists took possession of the alleyways. The anonymous university cafeterias were replaced by a multitude of little stands offering cheap regional dishes - and, in a symbolic decision which was particularly remarked upon by the media, Coca-Cola and Pepsi were banned from being sold in the zone of the forum. Participants thus made the space created their own.

To achieve this, it was necessary to prepare the site so that it could host all the activities, deal with problems of translation, create space to house delegations from all over India, with tents and toilets, negotiate with the municipal transport service to provide temporary bus services between the lodgings and the forum. To welcome initially 75,000 people, then 100,000, then 120,000, with a budget that did not expand proportionally. There were a thousand and one things that could go wrong. Logistical failure seemed certain. It was a success and the key to this was the politics. If conflicts inside the preparatory teams and technical problems (which were not lacking) had no serious consequences, it is because the Indian WSF process initiated a real dynamic which then carried it along.

The nature of the participation in the forum offered one of the most striking expressions of this dynamic. The dimensions of India and the prevalent poverty constituted a fifth obstacle. It often takes two or three days train journey to get to Mumbai from other parts of India. . How can you leave your village and job for a week, pay for transport and the costs of your stay? How could the poor attend the WSF? And yet they were there. The travel costs of certain delegations were financially supported by western NGO networks, but many others got there by their own means.

The members of a women's association in Tamil Nadu saved for months to make the trip. In their hundreds and thousands, villagers from Bihar or coalminers from Madhya Pradesh occupied trains, imposed free transport and brought with them enough bread and spices to feed them during their stay. In Mumbai, "solidarity tents" were set up to welcome the delegations from each state, at minimum cost.

Even the biggest Indian organizations are implanted in a limited number of states. To ensure the presence in the forum of significant delegations coming from all India, it was necessary to integrate regional associations in the process.

India is not only very big (the equivalent of the whole of western Europe). It includes two geographic and historic entities (the North, the Deccan to the south) and numerous linguistic regions. A strong national sentiment is combined with very sharp regional realities. The WSF was prepared by the holding of forums in (nearly?) all of India's states, and by local or regional forums that were often organized down to the level of the panchayat, the rural municipalities, village or groups of villages. This allowed the local structures to be integrated.

The alleyways of the forum were taken over by demonstrations of every kind combined with dance, street theatre and mime. Artistic expression, political-cultural action, occupies an important place in India. It also helps to overcome linguistic barriers, as attested by a Tamil; " We cannot speak to each other, our languages are too different. But when I see them play, demonstrate, I understand the message, I recognize the common situations. We are happy to be here, together".

The political heart of the forum was in the alleyways, much more than in the lecture theatres. The most successful lectures and workshops were often those co-organized with the Indian organizations capable of expressing the condition of the people and the struggles underway. The experience of Mumbai contributed to a rethinking of the conception of the forums in terms of mode of preparation, organization of space, the role of self-organized activities, the importance accorded to the workshops and seminars, the articulation between "street" activities and meetings in rooms.

Castes and Dalits

In this process the movements of untouchables occupied a particularly visible place. Some of them organized marches for dignity, starting from the four corners of India from December 6, 2003 onwards. The various contingents covered 15,000 kilometres and organized some 250 meetings across the country, before participating very actively in the WSF. "Dalit" is the name given to these movements, meaning "the oppressed, the crushed, the broken" according to the various translations given to me.

The word "caste" (of Portuguese origin) in fact covers two different notions - varna (the four "stations" from which untouchables are excluded) and jati (there are some thousands of these, relating to professional activities, which include the dalits).

The traditional caste system in India reproduces social divisions while integrating them into a scale

of “purity”. There are three big divisions in caste, three “states” are pure. They represent the dominant classes. The Brahmins are the priests, those who know and who are represented in the human body by the mouth. Then there are the warriors (the shoulders and the arms) and the merchants (the thighs). A fourth state, already impure, is that of the servants, the people, the majority of the population - these correspond to the feet. The untouchables are situated lower still - they are the dust under the feet, so impure that they cannot be touched. .

The caste system appears immutable - everyone is born into a caste, as a function of their previous life, and cannot change before their death and subsequent reincarnation. But there is a certain collective mobility, as a caste (jati) can sometimes gain a superior status and thus achieve a change of station (varna).

Changes

In reality one obviously finds poor Brahmins and rich peasants or dalits who are university educated. Moreover, a system of positive discrimination has been set up in favour of tribals, dalits and “Other Backward Classes”, OBC - the term does not carry any negative connotations. Tribals and dalits officially benefit from reserved quotas in Parliament and the civil service. All political parties seek in consequence to present dalit candidates to the elections, in order to win reserved seats, and an untouchable could even be found one day at the head of a state government.

The worst forms of “untouchability” have disappeared in many regions. But the stigmata of exclusion have not for all that been eliminated. Even in urban areas, discrimination continues to work insidiously. In fighting for their rights, dalits too often face violent and sometimes bloody reprisals from the high castes, the Brahmins. Killings of untouchables continue.

A unity to build

The unification of the dalits’ struggle is not spontaneous. They are divided into multiple social-professional jati. The social framework of the dalits is itself structured by an internal hierarchical system of sub-castes. They speak different languages. The response to their situation of oppression has been diversified. Many have converted to religions that recognize their humanity, like Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. But others set themselves the goal of acquiring a higher status inside Hinduism by adopting modes of life proper to the higher castes (like vegetarianism). As to the political representation of dalits, via the parliamentary system, it is fragmented and often co-opted.

The demands raised by the march of dalits on Mumbai illustrate the interaction of political and social themes. The dalit movements demand protection from the physical aggression of “superior” castes, defence of their social rights in the face of capitalist globalization and neoliberal policies, recognition of the dignity of women, denied by patriarchy and the market, the right to a future for their children. They also denounce communalist sectarianism, religious fundamentalism, “casteism” and patriarchy, the chauvinist nationalism characteristic of the Brahmin caste.

A dalit is not only a victim of the system of castes inherited from Hinduism, but also a woman, a rural worker, a domestic, a precarious worker. The fight for emancipation should integrate all these dimensions. But caste and class relationships do not coincide exactly and class and caste identities are not constituted in the same way. How can they be articulated?

The traditional position of left forces in India is to build class organizations, on the basis that to build caste organizations is to submit to a “feudal” order (the caste system) that one is opposed to. But the

weakening of the parties of the left and their mass organizations has left the field free, in a good number of places, to the development of caste identities around specific demands. Taking account of the situation that prevails today, what functions should be given to movements of classes and castes, at what moment, in what place? To what extent can these modes of organization be complementary or competitive? These seem to be the fundamental questions that can explain some of the political cleavages in India.

Multiple identities

The question does not only concern relations between the struggle of oppressed castes and exploited classes. Indian society is organized around multiple identities of gender, class, caste, aboriginality, religious community, historic and linguistic regions, states, socio-political networks. The cleavages are multiple and complex. Linguistic cleavages, for example, do not operate only between those who speak Hindi, Tamil and so on. The Indian Constitution officially recognizes the existence of 18 languages, without counting some 1,600 other languages and dialects! A cleavage operates also in each linguistic region between those who speak (uniquely or primarily) the vernacular language and those who speak English.

If it is difficult to build pan-Indian organizations on the federal scale, it is then not only because of the dimensions of the country and the population (which is more than a billion). Diversity is wealth. But it is also an obstacle to overcome, the sixth we have mentioned in this report. To develop geographically and genuinely represent a social sector, every organization has to integrate members and cadres belonging to several linguistic regions and numerous castes (jati). Some “new” movements only exist in one region, around a linguistic identity and rooted in a caste (jati), or a group of “related” jati which can occupy a dominant position locally even if they belong to an inferior “station” (varna).

The period following independence favoured the expression of “unifying” identities (politics, class). The system of quotas for castes and tribals and the policy of positive discrimination for the OBCs was established at the beginning of the 1990s and as an (unforeseen) consequence caste and adivasi status became elements in the political game. With economic liberalization and deregulation, India began to suffer the impact of capitalist globalization. As elsewhere, this leads to identity-based tensions. The rise of far right Hindu fundamentalism challenges the secular state and plunges religious minorities into insecurity. The main threat is to the Muslim community which, despite partition in 1947 (with the independence of Pakistan), is some 120 million strong (around 12% of the population). It is subject to provocations (like the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya in 1992) and massacres (the worst being in Gujarat in March 2002).

In my view the Muslim community has only been marginally integrated into the process of the social forum. On the other hand, the Christian networks (Indian, Asian and international) were very much more present. The Christian minority is also subject to the threats of the fundamentalists who wish to reconvert by force Indians who opted for Christianity. Priests have been killed, women have had their hair shaved (patriarchal violence decidedly takes the same forms in the East as in the West!), and villages have been burnt. Historically, the Church has won political influence through its schools and universities. The churches have ensured the education of the elite, but also of dalits and adivasis who were traditionally deprived of it (without attacking the caste system which persists in the Christian milieu as in the rest of society).

The religious minorities are today transformed into scapegoats to facilitate the rise and maintenance of power of a Hindu far right. The lower castes question the caste system inherited from the past.

The adivasis (aborigines) defend their right to existence faced with the destruction of their natural and cultural environment. In the present context forms of resistance emerge in very varied forms and sectors. They can converge. But this movement of convergence is different from what happened during the rise of struggles in the 1960s and 1970s, with an initial centrality of the workers' movement or armed struggle. The forums offer a space where this convergence can take place. This function seems to take on a particular dimension in India.

Visibility of invisibles

The social forums present an image, it has been said, of the "people assembled". However, this people is not homogeneous. Inside it, visibility tends spontaneously to be monopolized by the wage earning layers and movements who have best mastered communication, who are more able to participate in preparatory meetings and travel, who benefit from a more favourable relationship of forces in society. It is one of the main criticisms that can be made of the WSFs in Porto Alegre. Despite a certain number of efforts and the presence, among the Brazilian organizers, of movements like that of the landless (the MST) the marginalized within society (black people and Indians, those in insecure employment and so on) have remained too marginal in the space of the forum. The composition of the forums has not always escaped the "star system", to the point of sometimes giving a very conformist image, amplified by the media; the personalities hog the cameras, the intellectuals and academics think, the sociologists and political analysts explain this new subject of study. And the activists? Well, they act and organize. But do they think for themselves? A serious question.

New measures have been taken in the European process of the social forum to give more visibility to the "invisibles", to movements which are geographically (Eastern Europe) or socially (the "voiceless") marginalized. During the second ESF, those in insecure employment imposed their visibility.

That also happened in Mumbai, on a much superior scale. The axis of the two first WSFs in Porto Alegre was the denunciation of the social consequences of neoliberal globalization. The axis of the third (also in Porto Alegre) became the fight against war and the Bush doctrine. The axis of the fourth (Bombay) was the struggle against oppression and insecure employment.

The Indian organizers of the WSF decided to give a predominant place to the themes of "casteism" ("racism" in the relations between castes), "communalism" (sectarian violence between religious communities) and patriarchy. That gave substance to the fight for equality and against the generalized social insecurity engendered by the neoliberal model. But the political success of these thematic choices stemmed in large part from the movement "from below" which gave them a genuinely popular content.

The informal sector and women

The trade unions played a very important role in political preparation, the practical organization of the forum and leading seminars and lectures. But the presence at the forum of dalits and adivasis ensured the participation of workers in the informal sector (the unions organize primarily the wage earners of the formal sector). It is not often that the workers of these two key sectors of the economy are involved in a major initiative. The informal sector is marked by a state of great poverty and by the heritage of castes. In the formal sector, the state has framed the development of private industry and has developed a public sector where employment was relatively protected. Today, the

deregulation of the private sector is virtually finished and attacks on the public sector multiply.

Women's associations and feminist movements were also very active in the WSF in Mumbai. Patriarchy weighs heavily in India, where social inequality at the birth between boy and girl accentuates until marriage. The dowry system weighs like a veritable curse (having only girl children can lead straight to bankruptcy!). This system is officially condemned, but contemporary capitalist ideology, for which profit is the measure of everything, favours its maintenance. Some women have been killed for defaulting on their payments.

Indian patriarchy does not however involve a state of generalized subordination. A woman can accede to the highest positions, like Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister. Her daughter in law, Sonia Gandhi, at the head of the Congress Party, imposed a statutory quota of 33% of leaders. Women appear very present, very active in the struggles. This is not only true of the educated elite. The local activist core is mainly female. As to the number of women leaders in the national process of preparation of the WSF, it was not lower than it is in Europe (the Indian organizing committee for the forum was nearly 40% female).

The first forums in Porto Alegre had shown that the voice of the marginalized sectors of society could be diluted to the point of becoming inaudible, in forums characterized by a massive participation. The ESF in Paris- Saint Denis then, above all, the WSF in Mumbai have on the other hand shown that, if a critical threshold of visibility was crossed, the forums could serve as amplifiers of the expression of these movements.

Limits and contradictions

There were of course limits to the spectrum of initiatives taken during the fourth WSF. The youth camp never knew the internal vitality of those in Porto Alegre. The final demonstration went through the centre of Bombay in a dispersed fashion. The international bodies of the WSF remained too distant during the preparation of the forum.

A certain number of movements which should have been able to participate in the process of the WSF were not able to or did not want to. Some alternative initiatives were taken, the most important being

"Mumbai Resistance 2004". A sort of counter-summit was held at Bombay, on the same dates as the WSF and in the same neighbourhood (on the other side of the road!). MR 2004 had a very radical profile, denouncing the WSF as an "NGO festival" cut off from the struggles. In reality, it assembled a fairly heterogeneous spectrum of organizations, not all of them particularly radical, including some of the much-maligned NGOs. Among the more representative organizations that participated in MR 2004 were some independent peasant movements. It was probably illusory to believe that unity could have been total as there are many cleavages to overcome. Some problems probably relate more to regional conflicts and to clashes of personality than to great political disagreements. "Mumbai Resistance 2004" was supported by a part of the Indian far left (which is mainly of Maoist tradition), in particular the "People's War" wing of the Communist Parties (Marxist-Leninist). These parties are not too concerned with details. To believe them, 130,000 agents of the CIA met in Mumbai, inside the WSF! But the Indian far left was often (very) critical without being totally hostile.

The Communist Party of the Philippines poses, here, a specific problem. It was the only force to have organized a very difficult struggle against the Marcos dictatorship and this is to its credit. But in a different political context, it underwent a crisis which ended, in the early 1990s, by expulsions and

splits. Since then it has undergone a very worrying evolution, which has led it to threaten (and sometimes assassinate) its former comrades. With the International League of People's Struggle, the "political bloc" linked to the PCP played an important role in the international organization of MR 2004. It contributed to giving it a very sectarian profile. Thus, the president-founder of this party, Jose Maria Sison, who lives in Holland, sent a message of solidarity to the opening of MR 2004, turned entirely against the WSF, which was presented as a "reformist and counterrevolutionary" enterprise whose objective was "to perpetuate the world capitalist system", an "imperialist project that seeks to channel critiques towards proposals for "reform" and cosmetic makeovers of imperialism". [3]

Pole of attraction

The Indian organizing committee of the WSF chose to take a very open attitude to MR 2004 and other parallel initiatives, judging that they all expressed opposition to the policies of war, imperialism and capitalist globalization. Some people participated in the debates of both gatherings. The Assembly of Social Movements invited the movements which were not in the WSF (without success). Unhappily, until the end, the most hostile wing of "Mumbai Resistance 2004" spoke alone in the name of all the varied components meeting in this initiative. One can however hope that some links of collaboration will be pursued or renewed in the coming period in India.

It is interesting to note that the critics of the WSF, from the most virulent to the most moderate, came to Mumbai in order to organize their own initiatives there. To come to Mumbai was, even on the part of the "opponents", a homage, perhaps involuntary, rendered to the success of the social forum. The pole of attraction was very much the WSF, which confirms the importance of the dynamic of mobilisation that it has initiated. The holding of parallel initiatives has never posed a problem during the forums of Porto Alegre or Paris, inasmuch as they participate in the same movement of global resistance to neoliberal globalization and the policy of war. The danger in Mumbai was that this would take a turn towards sharp confrontation. Finally, the success of the WSF was such that things went rather well.

Pluralism and open processes

The process of social forums is very "integratory". In India, beyond political factors (reduced sectarianism on the left, a sense of urgency in the face of the Hinduist far right), it probably reflects the pluralism specific to Indian society. If my reference books are to be believed, [4] Hinduism is a representation of the world which encompasses differences without denying them. There is a tradition of tolerance that contrasts with the violence of sectarian confrontation (partition, the Pakistan-India confrontation, the rise to power of the BJP and so on). Such a tradition of tolerance is a democratic ingredient, but it does not necessarily impel the unification of struggles. Difference is legitimate, but its recognition could lead to a sense of "everybody for themselves". The pluralism of Indian society appears here both as a gain to be preserved and an obstacle to be surmounted in order to build resistance and common alternatives.

An "open" framework of preparation

The process of preparation of the Indian WSF took forms closer to those that exist in Europe than in Brazil. The "Brazilian model" is very specific. The Brazilian organizing committee of the WSF (now the international secretariat) includes eight components only. It takes its authority from the

equilibrium constituted inside it between diverse movements. But there is more. The MST and the CUT trade union federation are not the only forces involved but they benefit from a barely contested authority. It goes without saying that in the political background there is the Workers' Party (PT) which, without being the only left formation, occupies a particular place. This model cannot be exported to countries like France where no trade union can represent the trade union movement as a whole in this way. A problem which is exacerbated by the number and unprecedented variety of organizations involved in the process. One understands also the role played in Europe or India by the big preparatory assemblies and the open character of the organizing committees.

Of course in India, as in Europe and Brazil, there is no perfect equality between organizations, in terms of implantation or finance. One must criticize the persisting inequalities that manifest themselves inside our movement but keeping a sense of proportion. I have been active since 1965 and I have never before seen a process which succeeded in associating so many and such diverse organizations as that we have today.

Dynamics

Some on the Indian far left see the forums as places where people are content to speak (at great cost!) without acting. According to the rhetoric of the most critical wing, there is on the one hand the real anti-imperialists who built Seattle and the anti-war demonstrations and on the other the pallid reformists who hold seminars. Here we can make two comments. The first is that many of the organizations that have ensured the success of the forums also play a very significant role in the militant mobilizations; there is no separation between those who "chatter" and those who struggle. The second is that the forums are not merely an irreplaceable site for collective exchange, but also a formidable catalyst for action.

Since 2001, one of the elements of continuity in the international process of the forums has been the dynamic link created between forums, the networks of militant campaigns and the assemblies of movements (social, then women and anti-war). The forum ensures an open framework of convergence that allows any organization to participate on the sole condition that it respects the charter of principles (a charter, remember, that contains a firm opposition to capitalist globalization); which makes the forum a real space of liberty and initiative. The forums also offer a framework inside of which activist organizations working on the same terrain can get to know each other and meet to discuss their campaigns and where the assemblies of the movements can prepare a common calendar of international actions. The most striking example in this area remains the extraordinary world day of mobilization against the war of February 15, 2003, responding to an appeal launched in Europe at the Florence forum and then, on the world scale, at the forum in Porto Alegre.

The social forums adopt no declaration and no declaration is adopted in their names, or in the name of all the participants. The appeals, decisions and resolutions adopted by the networks of campaigns, by the assembly of women or by the movements commit only the organizations that sign them. But if the forums no longer helped to continentalize and globalize struggles, they would lose much of their meaning. So as to facilitate this link between space of freedom and action, in the framework of the WSF at Mumbai, some "activist tents" were placed at the disposal of the networks so they could meet. The women's organizations met, as well as the Global Assembly of the anti-war movement (preparation of the action on March 20, 2004). The Assembly of Movements was, as before, the occasion for a synthesis of common activities.

The Charter and the political parties

The political parties that supported the WSF in India respected its charter of principles but the latter was not exempt from debate. The nature of the document has not always been understood. Some have seen it as a programme of which they sought (in vain) the leadership. But, with the rise of the resistance to capitalist globalization, a movement of movements was born, with each having its own orientation and terrains of action; it was not a new current, specific and homogeneous.

The Charter excluded the participation of armed organizations in the forums. It did not deny the right to self-defence of populations affected by repression. It did not exclude the movements that believed that an armed liberation struggle could be legitimate. It did not reduce the political spectrum of the forces that could be found in a forum. In excluding military organizations properly so-called, it protects the democratic space of the forums from state repression. It is not a question to be taken lightly today.

The Charter also excludes political parties, whereas it accepts members of governments (a real internal contradiction). This point has opened a more substantial debate. The basis of the affair seems to me political and it is normal that the question is posed in different way according to countries and periods. France, for example, is one of the countries where the relations between movements and parties is the most problematic. There are old reasons (Stalinist practices...) and recent ones (the betrayals of left parties in government). Seen from France, the exclusion of parties is rather a theme of the left (defiance of social democracy), supported by the most radical movements. Seen from India, it appears as a right wing measure, aimed at the various Communist parties.

To debate this question, we need to recognize the variability of the situations and discuss on the basis of realities, not myths. It has, for example, been said that the Italians had "introduced" parties in the process at the first ESF in November 2002. The reality is that one party, the PT, was very much present in the Brazilian process from 2001, much more than other parties in Italy.

The Indian experience does not seem to me unequivocal. The fact that the political parties were not co-organizers of the WSF in the same way as other organizations seems to me to have facilitated unity between the traditional mass organizations and popular movements. There are two distinct questions.

The first concerns the presence of parties. If the forums were the equivalent of an inter-trade union conference, the question would not be posed. The parties would be absent. But the forums are open to all "civil society" and the whole range of struggles. The parties (in particular activist parties) are, then, naturally present. It is then better to define spaces inside the forums where they can be represented, debates in which they can participate as such, without challenging the overall dynamic. The practice of the forums has already evolved in this area, in Porto Alegre, Europe and India.

The second concerns the status of the parties - should they be co-organizers of the forums like the other organizations? In the current context, would that help or complicate the construction of unitary convergences? The question is concrete. Maybe because I come from France, I tend to think that this would rather complicate things, at least at the international level. And the "leftist" critics should not forget that it is first and foremost social democracy who would benefit from this new status, quite simply because it has unparalleled organizational and institutional means at the international level.

Here again, things look different in India. Indian social democracy is divided. Several socialist or socialistic parties participated in the World Parliamentary Forum in Mumbai. However, the only

current systematically involved in the preparation of the social Forum was that of the social-Gandhians, inside the NAPM, who are not a party. Nonetheless, the socialist trade union federation, Hind Mazdoor Sangh (HMS), was effectively integrated in the process of the WSF.

The Indian left is primarily Communist, including at the electoral level. The Communist Party of India (CPI, formerly pro-Moscow) is in decline although its trade union confederation, the AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress), remains important. The Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M, which split from the CPI in 1964 with a line of “neither Moscow nor Peking”) occupies a key position. At the federal level, it has the biggest parliamentary left group. The trade union confederation to which it is linked is the CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions). The various mass organizations of these two parties were involved in the WSF process.

Around 90% of the revolutionary left in India is of Maoist origin. The Communist Party of India-Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML) emerged from a split in the CPI-M. It has since then divided. To simplify, the ML parties which belong to the “People’s War” wing are opposed to the WSF and that those who identify with the “Mass Line” wing are linked to it, more or less actively. Trade union federations belonging to these currents have contributed to the organization of the WSF, like the AIFTU (All India Federation of Trade Unions) and the AICCTU (All India Central Council of Trade Unions).

Who leads then?

Who has led the Indian process of the WSF? The NGOs, some say. The CPI-M, say others. Or an NGO/CPIM alliance? These replies are not very convincing. Far from being a simple “NGO festival”, the WSF in Mumbai was a great popular rally. And Bombay was chosen particularly because the CPI-M was weak there.

The question seems to me badly posed. A social forum of great breadth is not prepared under a single leadership, but by a combination of movements, with each leaving its imprint on the overall process. In the Indian case, the main actors included the “popular movements” of the NAPM, the traditional mass organizations (of the CPI-M, but others also), the NGOs, the dalit (and to a lesser extent adivasi) movements, the women’s movements (with a specific dynamic), Christian networks and the regional associations.

Asian dynamics

To Western eyes, Asia seems to form a whole. Seen from inside, the region fragments between South Asia, the Southeast, the Northeast and so on. No bloc of countries constitutes the “centre ” of the Asian whole. Important delegations came to Mumbai from South Korea (400 delegates) and Japan (450, plus the hundreds of passengers on the Peace Boat which anchored in Bombay at the beginning of the forum) in particular. The Philippines were also well represented, as well as the Tibetans in exile.

But for the WSF to genuinely root itself in Asia as a whole, it must also meet in Southeast and Northeast Asia.

Pakistan

For the WSF in Mumbai, the key question was Pakistan. For a half-century, Pakistan and India have

endured a cold war punctuated by military confrontations. The conflict has taken on a new dimension with each protagonist possessing operational nuclear weapons. So it was very important that Pakistanis could participate in the Forum, but far from obvious it would happen in a country governed by the BJP and in a conurbation led by the Shiv Sena, where the danger of provocation is constant. Indian-Pakistani tensions were a seventh obstacle to overcome, and not the least.

The WSF finally met in a favourable political conjuncture, with the resumption of preliminary talks between New Delhi and Islamabad. But the frontier would not have been open without an impressive mobilization in Pakistan, with the holding of a Pakistani Social Forum (5,000 participants, 3,000 among them saying they wanted to go to Bombay, 1,200 to 1,500 actually demanding visas to go to Bombay, around 450 to 650 getting them). A large delegation of parliamentarians also came to meet their Indian colleagues.

East-West Perspectives

With Mumbai, a new step was made in the internationalization of social forums. A step which should allow the rooting of the process in Asia, but also the integration of Asian realities in the WSF. There was a renewal of themes like poverty, precarity and oppression, as well as the introduction of the nuclear question in the antiwar problematic.

There was not the "Latin" proximity that in Europe, facilitates identification with Porto Alegre but in India we encountered a very rich political tradition. During the seminars and the various meetings activist contacts were considerably broadened between organizations of West and East. Unions made links, working together on questions like privatization and the defence of public services. Women's networks were consolidated or enlarged. The anti-war movements of several continents met. All this gives life to a new internationalism.

The ball is now in the court of the Europeans, Latin Americans and WSF bodies. It is up to them to ensure that the West- East meeting which took place in Mumbai is prolonged and that the themes raised and the Asian organizations can find their place in the international process of the WSF, in the coordination of resistance to capitalist globalization.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Rousset, active from the start in the social forums, was involved in the preparation of the Mumbai WSF and in this context visited India six times between the Regional Social Forum in Hyderabad in January 2003 and the WSF in Mumbai in January 2004. This article is a shortened version of a longer report. There is much discussion within the Indian far left about the WSF but this addresses itself rather to activists from outside India and to comparison of Mumbai with the social forums of Porto Alegre or in Europe. The full report is available (in French) on ESSF website: [Mumbai : Rien n'était joué d'avance !](#).

[2] See later in the article for the meaning attached to these words.

[3] Reported in *Le Monde*, February 20, 2004.

[4] I base myself mainly on two books, Max-Jean Zins, "Inde, Un destin démocratique", "Asie plurielle", La documentation française, Paris 1999 (a short general introduction, 200 pages) and the collective work edited by Christophe Jaffrelot, "L'Inde contemporaine, De 1950 à nos jours", Fayard, Paris 1997 (generally of great interest, although with a sizeable blind spot on the Communist movement. 742 pages).

P.S.

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* Pierre Rousset is a member of Europe Solidaire Sans Frontiers (ESSF). He has been involved for many years in Asian solidarity movements. He is also member of the International Council of the WSF.