
STRIKING BACK AT THE EMPIRE

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Brinda Karat, general secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), speaking on a panel discussion on TV, and referring to the gathering at the recent Asian Social Forum in Hyderabad, India, said they were resisting the "Empire".

The gathering of 14,000 persons in Hyderabad — almost half were Dalits, a good proportion women, and those working with the rights of the most oppressed and excluded — could be seen as a defining moment for social and popular movements to 'strike back at the Empire', on many counts. As an expression of the widespread understanding of the international order, revealing that information on the 'big picture' has reached the remote, thus justifying and affirming the value of forums and networks that have worked hard to carry the message of where and how the increasing pressures on dignity and survival are coming from. And as a quest for alternatives to current political and economic regimes and the theories that back them. Finally and importantly, evidence that civil society has developed the mode and skills to hold international or world conferences *outside* the UN's initiative; an important step forward when UN world conferences are looking counterproductive as the conservative forces and the unipolar world debases them.

It could be said that the themes, formations and presentations at the panels and workshops were not providing new knowledge. The agonising over this over-generalised programme called globalisation has not only been on for some time, but its impact, experience, hearings, theatre and *naras* (slogans) are now almost a catechism. Expressions on the criminality of war, on the ugly state and the uglier politicians that run it, and the voices on TV and other media who are 'quoted' on this package, are also a known scenario. For those who have witnessed these journeys and forums for some time, it was nothing especially new.

But for the first-timers — and given the visibility and voice in large tents holding thousands of people, sprinkled with delegates from other countries — it was a resounding moment of self-empowerment, of celebrating their particular experience, whether as victims, or part of collectivities like Dalits or displaced persons. It was also

an eye-opener to them that they were part of diverse struggles — one ocean into which several streams flowed.

A young man, who is part of an electoral reform and accountability campaign in Mumbai, was so overwhelmed by the throbbing procession and drums, and the loudspeaker-filled campus of the Nizam College, that he was transformed for life. For him, it was all so peaceful, with no violence at all, and with no garbage thrown all around like at a political party congress, no hierarchies and no cars. Just space, space and space, and crowds, crowds and crowds milling together, finding their way around. He realised there that what he was doing was just a small corner, compared to where other campaigns had reached.

Beginning as an offshoot of the World Social Forum, which also had its beginning as an alternative to the World Economic Forum, with 'globalisation' and the Bretton Woods Institutions as the whipping boys, the ASF took a shape of its own. It expanded the space; almost encroaching on the primacy of space usually occupied by not only government representatives, but also UN agencies and bilateral donors looking for potentials for funding and for their legitimacy as upholders of human rights and supporters of poverty removal efforts. There was a shift in the character of those present — from NGO types usually engaged in 'development' to people's movements. And there was evidence of learning from earlier experiences of participating in NGO Forums of the UN — for which the UN system and the bilateral donors have to be given credit. From Durban for Dalit groups, from the People's Health Assembly of the health for all movement, and from the various women's conferences.

At the ASF, there were a mixed group of activists. Medha Patkar of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), Thomas Kocherry of the fisher people's struggles, Aruna Roy of the MKSS (Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan), Ravivarma Kumar, Dalit advocate, Ruth Manorama representing Dalit struggles, Thelma and Ravi Narayan arguing for the primacy of health over other services for the poor; Jean Drèze for food, and Samy of the National Centre for Labour for protecting the dignity of work. They were recharging their batteries and were undeterred — by the falling sky, by the overpowering march of that great exterminator, the new political face of economic power — Bush and his allies. Undeterred by the impending war against Iraq, the overpowering of the UN as an international arbiter and protector of the sovereignty of nations, the hot pursuit into Pakistan, the many domestic laws, in the US as well as in all other countries promulgated as anti-terrorist laws, which violate human rights. Undeterred by the hate language built around religion, which has given new pugnacity to domestic fundamentalist forces. All this may have been in their consciousness, but there was also a resolve to get on with their work on the ground.

There were murmurings that 'leftists' dominated the Forum, and there was the phenomenon of some Left groups publicly dissociating themselves from the Forum. Alliances such as the NAPM (National Alliance of People's Movements) and the NCL (National Centre for Labour), apart from many others such as the movement spearheaded by Vandana Shiva, bear shades of the Gandhian inspiration. The progressives today in India are increasingly referring to Gandhi's political and economic ideas and methods

as inspirational. So the alliances of Left and Gandhi were not on a collision path or even demeaning or demonising each other as was wont some time ago. Yet the reference to Gandhi had to be muted, as the Dalits would dissociate from the explicitly Gandhian presence. But ideological premises and controversial icons did not impede the 'soul' of the space, the sense of oneness of the gatherings.

One of the most vivid mass formations at the Forum was the contingent belonging to the All India Democratic Women's Association. They were there in numbers, but also in important sub-identities such as Muslim women marching together in their black *burqas* under the AIDWA banner, giving voice to their concerns. Similarly, at the Dalit gathering, the gathering on women, they were a conscious, well-informed mass. Their presence and the nature of their leadership stimulated a thought — whether the rejuvenation of the formal Left was now to come from the women's formation. The other faces of the Left have been seen as tired old men, no new faces of leadership emerging.

To the criticism that all these alternatives do not add up to a unity, and that a mere celebration of identities in such diverse contexts and approaches cannot provide the basis for a challenge to the exterminator, a feminist, once a member of the CPML retorted that it was good to be free of a unifying political theory. Belonging to such formal ideologies had been suffocating, as it quelled difference of opinion, debate and transformation. Confusion was good, as it gave the space to form new alliances, shape new formulations, design new approaches, and maybe even new theories to underpin all the alternatives. Unity can be forged, but not forced as was happening before the diverse groups got a shared space to understand their differences and shape their commonality.

Was there sufficient attention to the post-September 11 re-assembled world? Since some of the language was from the old categories of 'capitalist', 'imperialist', the analysis also came from the classical mode, which divided the global landscape on those lines. For example, the re-configuration of the world powers and the new hegemony — where location and religion superseded the ownership of capital. Where political leaders were unselfconscious in using the language of hate, where the sovereignty of nations was crumbling; and where citizens were supporting conservatism in political leadership — all this did not challenge the intellectual speakers to redefine globalisation. It was not moved from its simplistic characteristics of privatisation and liberalisation to its new face of militarisation and unipolarity.

Not enough attention was paid to the design of a response, the importance of a comity of sovereign, independent (even in economic terms) nations who could challenge this new monolith; thus the importance of building strong states, but with a political leadership which was different from what was in existence. Politicians were denigrated, but the strategy for political alternatives not developed. Within people's movements, the potential for movements to enter campaigns for electoral reform, strengthening grassroots democracy, releasing new energies into formal politics — through campaigns to fill the elected bodies with women, excluded groups, leaders of movements for social justice, what Gandhi called constructive workers — was not central to the agenda. The mood was anti-state and therefore anti-politics.

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It would seem essential that the ASF and other gatherings address certain questions. For example, the need for strong — neither majoritarian nor soft — sovereign states; for configurations like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) which had a political stance and distanced itself from former colonisers; the need to rebuild the state, and to address politics. And, the difficult negotiations within the diverse groups and locales to find 'political' consensus to first deal with the big rogue state, the father of all rogue states, and then their own rogue states. Only then can the enormous street confrontations, the valiant successes of people's movements on the ground, push back this new hegemony, the Bush power.

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