
THE LONG MARCH TO ANOTHER WORLD

REFLECTIONS OF A MEMBER OF THE WSF INDIA COMMITTEE
IN 2002 ON THE FIRST YEAR OF THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM
PROCESS IN INDIA

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I write this essay as an Indian and international activist and a member of the WSF India Committee during its first year (2002), in the hope that it can contribute to deeper and more critical interrogation of this important initiative, in India and internationally.¹

The first version of this essay appeared in January 2003. WSF India had been formed exactly one year earlier, and especially given the rich but also turbulent and troubling experience of the year, I felt it was time to critically reflect on what we had achieved in that period.²

I also felt that because of the crucial juncture that the Forum was then going through, of deciding on how to most strategically globalise itself, and because of the volatile juncture that that moment represented in terms of larger world politics — in which the Forum is of course attempting to intervene — it was important for all of us involved in the Forum to take a step back, to try and see the larger picture.³

In my understanding, such an exercise was especially important given the Forum's then still tentative decision to hold its next world meeting in India in January 2004. I saw this significant proposal as not being mere coincidence but a product of specific geopolitical possibilities and compulsions and where Brazil and India are key players in the world, not only at the level of the state but also the civil.

It has not been easy to write this paper, which at places is very critical of WSF India and the International Council and of an effort I put a year of my life into. I can only hope that I have managed to find a balance in this essay that challenges us to reflect.⁴

The memorable and meaningful motto that the World Social Forum adopted

in 2002 is “Another World is Possible !” It is clear to me from this experience of our first years in India however, that at the very minimum, it is going to be a long and hard march to another world.

The World Social Forum in India

This essay is organised in three parts : first, a brief overview of the history of the WSF in India; second, an overview of the experience of the WSF in India; and third, a more detailed reflection on the experience, focussing on certain specific issues.

The WSF process in India was initiated in December 2001 at the initiative not of Indians but of the Brazil Organising Committee (BOC) and some members of the International Council (IC).⁵ An early decision of the BOC was that the Forum should be internationalised and globalised. Based on its analysis of possible alternative locations in the world, the BOC decided that ideally, the third WSF, in January 2003, should be held in India.

The Brazilians seem to have chosen India because it is, like Brazil, a large country with strong and vibrant traditions of civil and political movement. It is also strategically located in Asia, the most populous continent in the world — and which had, till then, been poorly represented at the WSF. To this, Samir Amin of the Third World Forum and IC member later added, at the IC meeting in Porto Alegre in January 2002, that it was clear that Asia was the arena of the next strike of the US imperium, and so it was essential for the Forum to now be held there; and that if so, India was really the only choice, especially given the role it has historically played in South-South solidarity, and especially in terms of Afro-Asian politics.⁶

Based on this thinking, the then-still forming International Council decided at its second meeting in November 2001 to send a delegation of members of the BOC and IC to India, to explore possibilities. A first meeting took place in the city of Bangalore, in southern India, in mid December 2001, with a handful of Indians from different civil formations.⁷

There was strong disagreement at this meeting regarding the modalities of holding the Forum in India however, with one participant representing a major formation led by the organised Left even staging walkouts, and the meeting decided that another larger meeting should be called to consider the possibility.

This second meeting, in effect the first national consultation on the WSF in India, was held in New Delhi on January 9–10, 2002.⁸ After debating the matter at length, the conclusion was that the world meeting could and *should* be organised in India but in January 2004 and not in 2003 as had been proposed by the WSF delegation. This was primarily because 2003 was considered too close, and also, looking ahead to the general elections in India in 2004, with the idea that the Forum could be an important arena for building a broader civil process in support of democratic secular values. This perspective was generated within the understanding that is widely shared by progressive civil and political actors in India, that the rampant religious nationalism and communalism we now face in the country is *as* dangerous as capitalist globalisation, and that the two in fact intertwine.

The meeting also urged the International Council to look at the World Social

Forum more as a process than as only an event; and towards this, it offered to also help organise a *regional* Social Forum somewhere in South Asia either in late 2002 or early 2003.⁹ After initial discussions with Nepali groups regarding their calling the meeting there, the upshot of this was the Asian Social Forum, held in the city of Hyderabad, in south-central India, in January 2003.

The IC at its meeting in Porto Alegre in late January 2002 agreed in principle to the proposal from India to host the world meeting in 2004 and not in 2003, and also issued a call for regional and thematic Social Fora to be held during the year. Deciding to hold the Forum in India only in 2004 also had the strategic advantage of calming those in the BOC and other Latin American delegates who were worried about the WSF being so suddenly 'taken away' from Brazil, and yet developing a definite plan for it to be held somewhere else in the world, in due course.

WSF India was established in April 2002, at a second national consultation held in the city of Bhopal, in north-central India. This meeting established an organisational structure and framework for the Forum in India, creating a Working Committee, Programme Committee, Mobilisation Committee and Coordination Team. It decided to call a regional, Asia-level meeting in January 2003; agreed that the WSF India *process* of communication and mobilisation was more important than the event, and that the event should be seen as a high point within a much broader *process* of building consciousness within the country about neoliberalism and communalism and about struggles for other worlds;¹⁰ defined certain basic working principles for the initiative; and set in motion a process that led to the formulation and adoption in July 2002 of a modified Charter of Principles, titled the 'WSF India Policy Statement', which also addressed Indian concerns about communalism (religious sectarianism and fundamentalism), casteism, and patriarchy.¹¹

The Bhopal Consultation underlined the idea that the WSF as an 'open space' is an unusually important opportunity for the mingling of different streams of civil and political thought and action, and also specifically provided space within the WSF India Working Committee for the participation of small organisations and individuals.¹² Given that the WSF Charter of Principles and the International Council provide no space for individuals, this broke important new ground for the Forum as a whole, though we were not conscious of this at that time.¹³ The idea was also articulated that we needed to develop a more specifically *internationalist* perspective to our work.

The First Year

The actual experience of the Forum in India over the subsequent year was however very mixed. Ultimately, the main activity of the WSF in India was the organisation of the Asian Social Forum. Many observers, including the BOC and IC delegations, regarded the ASF as being almost an unqualified success. But they seem to have paid little attention to either the serious criticisms of the WSF during the event and its boycott by some formations and the holding of a parallel event; or to the fact that the preparatory WSF 'process' had in reality been much weaker than projected, except for one or two states; or to the serious organisational problems and breakdowns that took place during the Forum.¹⁴

While undoubtedly a vibrant and colourful event, the glowing position taken

by the IC delegates would seem to have had a lot to do with their enthusiasm for India's candidacy for the world meeting in 2004 and with their desire to succeed in terms of the larger strategic project and vision of holding the Forum outside Brazil and in Asia, since the IC was going to judge WSF India on the basis of its performance with the ASF. But this somewhat uncritical attitude does not help much in building the culture of critical internationalist solidarity that an initiative like the Forum so badly needs. Nor did it even attempt to examine the problems that are so evidently there within the civil and political community, within India and internationally.

This attitude and approach, as well as the power that the WSF has come to represent internationally if not yet in India, and the manner in which the WSF India has addressed many of the criticisms it has faced (often by ignoring them), have arguably contributed in their own ways to the crystallisation of further criticism and opposition to the WSF in India, and most recently to the announcement in September 2003 by a new coalition of groups across the world of the 'Mumbai Resistance' — a parallel event in Mumbai during the same days as the WSF world meeting in January 2004, that specifically challenges the legitimacy of the WSF.¹⁵

The 'political' experience of the first year of the Forum in India was fairly wide but not anything as broad-based and syncretic an experiment as had been projected. It came to be strongly dominated by formations within the organised Left. Some argued that this was the case only because these formations were willing to make available their networks and cadres to the Forum and do the dog work required in organising such a process and event. Many outside the Left however, felt that the Forum was highly exclusive and unwelcoming and / or not addressing key issues, and kept away from it, as did some who are normally sympathetic to the Left. The Forum committees in India also made little effort to reach out beyond the standard minimum mix of social movements, trade unions, and NGOs and then too, largely only through known networks. The Forum hardly got to be known *outside* these communities, which after all is said and done, constitute only a small proportion of people and organisations in a very big country.

This raises an important strategic issue. In many senses, the WSF is said to take shape not on the basis of a culture of 'inviting' people to participate in the Forum, but rather one of creating conditions where "all those interested in promoting their activities [are] able to do so". This is fundamental to the idea of the 'open space' that the Forum says it is.¹⁶ But this has not been the practice in India. The manner in which the Forum in India has been developed, in reality, has privileged some over others and thereby contradicted the basic idea of the Forum. And beyond this, by virtue of this emphasis on 'network politics', WSF India has given little attention to developing the robust systems of open communication that are so essential for reaching out to much wider circles.

This has not happened by chance. It has taken shape as a function of a *specific culture of politics* — of keeping the Forum a fairly private matter. Equally, when looking back over the first year, it is clear that the idea of building a broad 'process' within the country was undermined at an early stage, by virtue of WSF India focussing all its attention on the *event*. This has only been all the more the case in the second year, leading up to the world meeting in Mumbai. The consequence has been that the Forum is hardly known

in India. There has been an almost total absence of public debate in the country on what this significant world experiment might have to offer. In a country that has a long tradition of vigorous political and international interest, and especially given the present juncture of history in India and globally, this is deeply unfortunate and the loss of a huge opportunity.¹⁷ In a sense, WSF India has missed the wood for the trees.

Beyond this, while there is no doubt that many individuals and organisations have worked hard and with much hope, the reality is that the experience of the first years has been deeply marked by ad hoc behaviour and a lack of respect for collective process, and in general, an unwillingness to accept and adopt organisational norms and principles. There has often been a strong intolerance of different opinions, and a strong resurgence of sectarianism and of conventional struggle for power, dominance, and control over the affairs of the Forum. I discuss these assertions in the last part of this essay.

Since WSF process in India so far is primarily associated with the Asian Social Forum, we need to briefly look at this in particular. The ASF was a pan-Asian meeting only to a very limited degree, with only a few hundred out of the total 20,000 participants coming from other parts of Asia. This was partly due to a series of misunderstandings, and partly to a lack of conviction and consequent preparation. When the initial invitation was extended to Indians to host the world meeting, it was a fledgling WSF *India* that responded in January 2002. But because the idea of holding 'regional' meetings came to be articulated at the meeting of the International Council later that month in Porto Alegre, and WSF India elected to offer to host the world meeting only in 2004, WSF India came by default — and by mistake — to be initially referred to by the International Secretariat as the 'Asia Organising Committee' and the event in January 2003 as an 'Asian' meeting, even though WSF India had till then offered only to help organise a *South* Asian meeting.¹⁸ These are simple mistakes, but with major implications.

The decision to make the meeting an *Asian* meeting was also taken not by WSF India but by the IC.¹⁹ This 'expectation' of the Council was then communicated to WSF India, and largely in order to demonstrate a spirit of solidarity of purpose, the idea was approved at the WSF India Consultation at Bhopal in April 2002, though only after considerable debate. In many ways, WSF India thereby became the implementing agency.

This 'decision' to make it an Asian meeting however ultimately remained unexplored let alone fulfilled, perhaps primarily because of this — that WSF India was merely implementing someone else's vision. The systems required for managing such an event properly were never developed. Plans were nevertheless prepared within WSF India to at least organise an 'Asian Solidarity Group' that could help build mobilisation for the Asian Social Forum within Asia, but these too were ultimately abandoned.²⁰

Given the significance of this proposal for an initiative such as the WSF, this curious outcome merits discussion. The WSF India plans for Asianising the process were presented to and approved at an 'Asian Social Movements Meeting' held in Bangkok in August 2002, immediately preceding the WSF International Council meeting held there that month. Based on the prevailing misunderstandings about the Asian meeting and their concern when they saw it was WSF *India* that was presenting plans for the ASF, some IC members displayed considerable anxiety about the fact that an *Asian*

Organising Committee' had not been formed till then. But for reasons that were not made clear, the plans for Asianising the process were aborted in Bangkok, the Asian Solidarity Group was never formed, and WSF India did not push any further for this; and nor did the International Council.

Aside from the fact that it paid no respect to whatever little preparations we had made in India and to the deliberations of the Asian Social Movements meeting, this odd outcome bears further research in terms of the dynamics of the WSF process.

Notwithstanding all this, based on the reports that it received from its own representatives and also the report on the ASF presented by representatives of WSF India, the International Council at its meeting in Porto Alegre in January 2003 decided to go ahead with holding the world meeting in India in 2004, though — and as has been documented by other authors — this was not an easy decision, or a unanimous decision, but for other reasons.²¹

Some Deeper Reflections on the WSF India Process

In this last section, I reflect in more detail on my experience and understanding of the WSF process in India, especially during 2002.²²

In principle, and occasionally in practice and experience, WSF India has been a celebration of differentness and hope. Some important things are being achieved through it. But much of the experience has been problematic, some of it severely so. I however believe that it is important to surface questions that arise in the course of struggle, and to try and learn from them.

Questions of Power

The WSF India experiment is drawing both on political and civil streams — and where by 'political' I am referring to organisations that are directly and strongly affiliated with political parties.²³ But, although both streams are represented on the WSF India committees during 2002, political entities clearly dominated the Forum and its organisational structure. There has been some change in this pattern during 2003, but it still largely holds true, and the Forum is clearly an arena of contest. The most important ones are those affiliated with the CPI(M), the Socialists, the CPI, and the CPI(ML).

More importantly, WSF India was riven by sectarian tendencies during 2002. This was so despite participants at most WSF India consultations — coming from different streams, some known for this tendency — agreeing that we needed to avoid this in the Forum and that this should be its hallmark.

The 'group' that is the most dominant in WSF India is the one affiliated to the CPI(M), and it is this group that exhibited this behaviour most strongly during the first year. It made its first attempt in this direction by making an offer at the first preparatory meeting in Bangalore in December 2001 to coordinate the Forum in India — but in such a heavy-handed manner that it was immediately seen by others as a clear attempt to take over the Forum, and rejected.

Learning from this experience, the group then took a far more apparently 'open' stance at the subsequent first national consultation and in the preparatory process that followed — and surprising just about everybody else on the committee. But this stance

then progressively and rapidly changed, as the Forum process developed. Over the next year, some of its representatives used a variety of tactics to get their way, and even though some of its members tried to be more open and sometimes even spoke out or dissented, this — while important and welcome — only underlined the reality of its sectarian behaviour. During 2002, the dominant group at ‘the centre’ (then in New Delhi) also spread its influence in the country by authorising local people and organisations known or affiliated to them to call state-level meetings.

In short, during 2002, the Forum in India tended to be limited to those the ‘central leadership’ was comfortable with. This control was not absolute however, and as pointed out by others, the strong presence of independent Dalit formations at the ASF made this clear.²⁴ During 2003, the major independent Dalit mobilisation process that is taking place in the country towards the Mumbai Forum,²⁵ and also initiatives by autonomous women’s organisations and some others, continue to challenge the dominance.

The dominance in the WSF is also not only of or by one party but also more generally of discourse. This made a strong imprint on, for instance, the choice and the definition of themes for the ASF in January 2003, and has again played a strong role in the definition of themes for the world meeting in January 2004. The fact that many or most of the convenors of the key committees and / or members of drafting committees belong to the organised Left is not by chance.

The result of this influence is that the world meeting of the WSF in Mumbai — the first one to be held outside Brazil, and in this sense marking a new phase of the Forum process — has been defined purely in terms of *opposition* and *resistance* to forces impacting on us and not in terms of *alternatives*, of building other worlds. Since it is widely agreed that there has been a progression in the Forum from 2001 to 2003 (from opposition and resistance in 2001, to the call for alternatives in 2002, to the articulation of strategies in 2003), in one sense this takes the Forum back to where it started. The actual content and character of the Mumbai Forum may be different — as the Brazilians never fail to say, the self-organised events always overwhelm the centrally organised — but in terms of conceptualisation, this is a regression.

This dominance is not the same as active sectarianism as it is normally understood, but plays a similar role. The insistence on the superiority of a *particular* discourse — more commonly, the use of language, the choice of terms, the approach to analysis — also plays its role in alienating others, and even those who may feel sympathetic to Left opinion and positions but do not feel themselves as *being* of the Left and do not want to have to fit within orthodox Left discourse.

Taken as a whole, the experience in this area is responsible for the WSF being widely seen in India — among the limited circles that know of it — as having been captured. This is all the more the case since those who are a little familiar with the situation in Brazil also strongly associate the Forum there with the Workers’ Party.

The Forum as an Arena for Alternatives

Indeed, although ‘alternatives’ is notionally everything that the WSF is ultimately about, there has, in fact, been no in-depth discussion in WSF India about this question,

and in general about other ways of doing things. The dominant character of the process has been entrepreneurial and managerial, and it has been taken for granted that because the WSF is taking formal positions against — for instance — economic globalisation it is, by definition, talking about and working for ‘alternatives’.

The questions, obviously, are whether this is the only point on which alternatives are required, or sufficient for building other worlds.

The only sense in which the question of ‘alternatives’ has arisen has been implicitly — either the political vision of socialism *as* the only possible other world or that of those who work in different streams of social activism more generally, of a world without oppression and injustice. There has been no effort to explore the plural ‘other worlds’ that the WSF is trying to signal and explore with its slogan ‘Another World Is Possible !’²⁶

The situation in WSF India goes beyond a lack of discussion. As mentioned, during the first year there was often marked impatience by the dominant group/s with ideas and proposals that did not fit *their* given world — expressing itself in hostile language or by whole ideas being marginalised by simply being left off the agenda by meeting organisers, accompanied by extensive editing of document drafts. If questioned, the dominant group/s resorted at times to tactics of browbeating, such as by questioning the (democratic, secular, whatever) credentials of those voicing inconvenient opinions.

On the other hand however, many in the WSF India process also widely accepted this situation — some openly, others sullenly — on the logic that “After all, they’re doing all the work, aren’t they ?”

In this situation, it was no surprise that intolerance was the main concern voiced at an informal reflection session on the Forum that took place in New Delhi in August 2002,²⁷ or — on the other hand — that one of the first steps taken by the dominant group once the IC finalised its decision to hold the world meeting in India in January 2003 was to ensure that the only way in which WSF India was doing things differently — by including individuals within its committees — was cancelled.²⁸ By doing this, in the name of conformity with the Brazilian process, they attempted the silencing of independent voices, and bringing WSF India back into safer organisational politics.

Can Old Politics Alone Build New Politics ?

This above issues point to a fundamental underlying contradiction in the Forum as a process : that organisations with *old* vocabularies of politics, and old ways of organising and relating to others, are leading the process of forging what are said by some to be *new* politics.

This is especially the case in India, where the ‘old Left’ has seriously taken up the task of building the Forum, seeing it as a natural expression of its own earlier work, an opportunity to build common cause with civil movement, and also a major opportunity for influencing civil politics within India and at a world scale. But as a consequence, WSF India at present has all the potentials but also the limitations of traditional Left organisations in the country.

The only hopeful possibility is that the WSF world meeting in Mumbai will, by virtue of the sheer multiplicity of things and the sheer energy of self-organised activities, be able to break through these limitations by throwing up a spontaneous magic and life

all its own. As happened to a degree with the ASF. Without doubt, this will be wonderful if it happens. But, even if this happens, will this spontaneity be allowed to exist and flower, or will there be a rapid and reflexive move to control and guide what is emerging? And even if this happens for those six days, how should one see this in terms of the struggle throughout the rest of the year, to build another world, and another politics? Are brief appearances of spontaneity enough to build new politics? Or does this also require the reconstitution of old politics? If so, how is this to be done?

Complacency

Directly related is a tendency towards intellectual and political complacency — a sense that we (some of us, anyway) *already* have all the answers. This is based on an undeclared assumption that ‘our’ analysis is by definition correct.

As Susan George pointed out a few years ago in a brilliant essay on the situation in the USA as it has evolved over the past 3–4 decades, the Right has either penetrated and taken over important civil and political institutions or has assiduously built new ones, such as think tanks that have become influential by learning from the Left, while the Left sat complacently on its imagined laurels.²⁹ In many ways, our situation in India sounds similar.

By definition, the Forum is a porous process and institution, always open to influence. On the other hand, with the Right — and its allies — presently on a triumphant ascendant so widely, it is actively seeking to infiltrate and penetrate institutions. But how do you prevent such influences from coming in? By censorship? By closing doors and windows? Which on the other hand, would nullify the very meaning of the Forum?

The Forum in India has not even *begun* to ask these questions, let alone answer them *strategically*. Unlike the European Social Forum, where there have been a series of meetings to develop strategic perspectives and which explicitly conceives the Forum as politics, WSF India with its management approach is living on borrowed time, always just hoping that the evil winds will not reach it. The politics so far is limited to gaining and retaining dominance within the process. We need to think not merely of ‘holding our ground’ at the Forum, but of actively penetrating and influencing other institutions and initiatives with the ideas and culture of the Forum. And in doing so, we need to consider learning from the Gramscian Right.

Questions of Norms and Principles

During 2002, there was also a marked impatience and intolerance towards discussing norms and principles for the WSF India process. Proposals for norms and principles — such as organisational principles for WSF India, membership norms for the Co-ordination Team, or ways of working in the Co-ordination Team — were routinely ignored, derided, and / or otherwise marginalised.

The sheer pressure of activities however, has led over time to the definition of some minimal norms in WSF India (such as giving adequate notice for meetings), though even these are not always followed. But the attitude towards norms went beyond simply resisting the discussion — and therefore possible introduction — of norms. To

the contrary, the norms most commonly practised in the WSF India Secretariat during 2002 were ad hoc decision-making, lack of accountability, and a lack of respect for collective process by the leadership.

Examples of more serious ad hoc behaviour ranged from the refusal to have norms discussed, to the manner in which some members of the Secretariat and Coordination Team were in effect parachuted in, to individual members privately lobbying with members of the Brazil Organising Committee for particular issues — including for the WSF global meeting, if held in India, to be held in a particular city.

Another instance was the ‘privatising’ of a request by the International Secretariat for advice on people it proposed to invite (and pay for) from India to the world meeting in Porto Alegre in January 2003, where a few members of WSF India took it upon themselves to keep the request secret and to respond without sharing the request with other members of the Organising Committee.

Even after extensive debate about the need to end such behaviour, this behaviour continued through into 2003, where some never-identified people called something as major as an Asia-level consultation without consulting the Committee, let alone a decision being made to this effect. (The meeting was cancelled, but only after strong protest.)

The consequence of this combination of ad hoc, individualistic, subjective, and often arrogant behaviour is a culture of nepotism and opportunism. It is only the adoption of norms and principles, as well as a culture of openness and tolerance, that can curb these tendencies. In the case of WSF India however, even the possibility of this is vitiated by the weight of sectarianism that is holding the present order in place.

The WSF was originally dreamt up with the idea of opposing the juggernaut of capitalist globalisation. What its founders seem not to have anticipated is the emergence of a juggernaut within.

Event or Process

Our original idea of organising the World Social Forum in India was that the emphasis would be as much — if not more — on the *process* of organising the Forum as on the events that we agreed to organise in January 2003 and then in January 2004. There was exhaustive discussion of this proposal at the second consultation in Bhopal in April 2002, and a specific document was commissioned and prepared to launch and guide the process. Titled *Building Another World*, this was a broad framework of activities that could be taken up at local and state levels and would provide space for a range of different approaches towards alternatives, and in the process help build a greater consciousness of local, national, and global processes and their interlinkages.³⁰

The idea was that the ASF should be only one event among a much wider series of activities that would be held all over the country, as widely as possible, so that as many people as possible could take part in the ‘World Social Forum’ *process*, and that it was not restricted only to those who could actually attend the meeting. This consideration was particularly important since at that time, the idea was to emphasise a smaller meeting and not to go for a big meeting that could rival the 50,000–100,000 that attend the Porto Alegre event. It was also felt that the meeting

would only really have meaning if it were a high point within a larger process of awareness building across the country.

In reality, while there was a certain amount of process-oriented activity in the approach taken by WSF India during 2002, such as in calling state-level meetings, this was quickly overwhelmed by a focus on organising The Big Meeting — the ASF. During 2003, as WSF India organises for the world meeting, the idea of a process has disappeared from the ‘official’ screen but has been taken up by some participant networks.

This lack of public process and awareness has arguably led to a much more limited meetings than possible. Much of the apparatus that has been set up for the ASF and the Mumbai Forum has come from the experience of the Left parties in gearing up for their national conventions, in which they are well practised but which are by definition closed events. The approach to mobilisation by each network has also tended to be limited to its own constituency, thereby only reinforcing sectarian tendencies rather than combating them. The other networks, and the few mostly smaller NGOs that take part in the WSF process have all too little experience in this field, and have had little to offer as suggestions for *alternatives* to the conventional proposals and practices. Those from the formal Left are also far more practised and skilful, in getting their agenda through. In short, conventional political organisational practice has, along with discourse, tended to overwhelm the WSF in India.

Other Ways

Along with the marginalisation of a WSF India *process*, there has also been little attempt to realise two important and interrelated organising principles that had been agreed upon right from the early days of Forum activities in India : Local and ‘national’ self-reliance, and mass mobilisation of resources. To the contrary, these principles have been killed.

Importantly, the arguments for making the Forum process an ‘Indian’ process came from ideologically different sources, that converged :

- From the concerns of members of the organised Left and its long-standing concerns about the distortions that it believes ‘foreign funding’ — to voluntary organisations — brings into the national polity;³¹
- From the concerns of socialists and Gandhians about the political, economic, social, and cultural significance of local self-reliance; and
- From the concerns of more centrist and liberal voluntary organisations who profess a belief in local traditions and ‘building from the bottom up’.

As a consequence of this convergence, these two principles were strongly reflected in related resolutions taken at the Consultation where WSF India was established, in April 2002, and at the first meeting of the new Working Committee that was established there.³²

The actual practice of the WSF India process in these areas has however been very different from the ideals so resonantly expressed at the outset. There has, first, been no attention paid to mass mobilisation of funds. This potential financial base —

which is also one of the most powerful means of mass outreach and awareness building — was sidelined and buried in the first year itself. In a country of the scale of India, this had enormous possibilities.

On the other hand, the history of mobilising funds for WSF India and the ASF from foreign funding organisations — which a cynic might say is much easier than the hard slog work of the mass mobilisation of small donations — stands in sharp contrast. This task was started in earnest from within two months of WSF India being founded; negotiations were substantially completed by mid-August 2002; and significant flow of funds started from September. The pace was impressive, the funds quick.

What needs further examination and reflection since it has deep political implications, has been the willingness of Left organisations to take part in this process; and indeed, to lead this process. This is not only a question of the Left being supposedly opposed to foreign funding, as mentioned above, but more of the reality that the Left parties have, along with parties of the Right, been strongly instrumental in bringing about and implementing tighter legal restrictions on the flow of foreign funds into the country.³³ It has only been certain sections of the independent voluntary sector — who stood to lose — that have been resisting this tightening of restrictions in India.

The CPI(M), in particular, has denounced foreign-funded voluntary organisations as being ‘lackeys of imperialism’.³⁴ The CPI(M)-led state government in West Bengal, in power for the past twenty-six years, has periodically victimised such organisations and their work. On the other hand, the West Bengal government has been among the most active in the country in terms of negotiating World Bank loans and attempting to attract foreign capital, and has openly embraced the paradigm of neoliberal globalisation.

Given this background, the position of the Left in the Forum, and especially the CPI(M), may be consistent with its broader practice in power but is also deeply contradictory and opportunistic. It is important to note that the situation in India is very different from that prevailing in, say, Brazil or the Philippines, where the flow of foreign funds is not restricted or regulated and where the Left has, to my knowledge, has no objections to this.

This situation has remained as something of an iceberg in the WSF India process. There are vague mutterings of protest and concern in the corridors and passages, but the Titanic continues on its way. The responsibility for this situation also lies with independent members of the WSF India committees. They have made no attempt to look at the larger picture and to demand that the Left, and in particular the CPI(M), must — if their groups are to be a part of the WSF process — retract their general position on foreign funds and on organisations that receive such funds. The general approach has been equally opportunistic — that “the show must go on” — and to portray the hypocrisy on the part of the Left on this issue as being a sign of its ‘willingness to be more open than before’ and therefore of ‘healthy co-operation’ with more liberal elements.

Not surprisingly, given that this is such a long-standing debate within India, bitter denunciation of this cynical and opportunistic approach is now beginning to emerge from those on the Left who have stayed outside the Forum process, but targeting not only the Left within but also the WSF as a whole.³⁵

The only proposal that came forward in this area — not to resolve this contradiction but towards forging a broader and more ideologically informed perspective on the issue —, made by this writer, was again, along with various other such efforts, strenuously sidelined by the WSF India leadership, especially from the Left.³⁶

As I see it, this issue is of fundamental importance even in world civil politics, and the Forum offered — and still offers — a unique and unmissable opportunity to explore it. As I asked in my Note in 2002, “Can the WSF be a process, both in itself and also symbolically, of the crystallisation and practice of a more conscious, strategic ideology of resource mobilisation as an integral — and not optional — part of the struggle against imperialism and for another world ?”³⁷

But this effort was sidelined, and the reality is that we are no further in understanding this terrain than where we were when we started into the Forum in early 2002 — and in some ways, by framing the issue in short-term, opportunistic ways, WSF India has only gone further into a swamp. The most recent ‘policy formulations’ by WSF India in this area for the world meeting being held in January 2004, are a vivid illustration : first, that ‘Since WSF meetings are international, international funds obviously have to be there’, but then — to avoid the messy and arduous situation of having to do this themselves — ‘We are dividing the responsibilities for fund raising. The International Secretariat will raise the international funds, and WSF India the domestic’.

The impact of this opportunism is not only on WSF India but also on the credibility of the Forum process as a whole. By ignoring this question, the WSF International Secretariat and the IC come to be hand in hand with WSF India. It is for this reason among others that the WSF as a whole is now facing increasingly strong criticism and opposition within India, and now also internationally.

I tried raising precisely this kind of point when the WSF process was initiated in India, in January 2002, and urged caution about organising the world meeting here.³⁸ On the one hand, there is tremendous opportunity in India for the world process to flower, and indeed, it cannot be a genuinely world process unless India is also part of it. But on the other, the prevailing culture of politics in the country, and the complexity of the particular conditions that exist here, necessarily meant that the world process was likely to get drawn into this vortex — and especially if the world meeting was to be held here. We now seem to be seeing this happening.

The Question of Political Parties

An obvious question that arises from all of the above is that of the role of political parties in the WSF in India, and that of compliance with the provision in the WSF Charter of Principles that explicitly excludes political parties from the Forum.

Quite aside from how they are or are not involved in other contexts, there is obviously no question that political parties are involved in the Forum process in India in several ways :

- Providing broad ideological frames of reference and authority for the participation of civil organisations that are affiliated to them, leading to the reproduction of conventional state- and power-centred political culture in the Forum

- Giving authority to affiliated civil organisations to participate in the Forum — but thereby also retaining the power to withdraw them
- Providing dense networks of social and political capital within countries and internationally, which provide the legitimacy, strength, and power that civil organisations affiliated to them can (and do) exercise in the Forum, nationally and internationally
- More generally, exercising a strong influence on the Forum in terms of the fact that much of the intellectual resource (organisational delegates and, significantly, given that it otherwise marginalises them, individuals) that the Forum relies on — mostly of the Left — have current or past links with political parties; and through this, framing the discourse of the Forum process
- Making available human capital to the Forum in the form of paid activists working through civil networks at local, state, and national levels, and also through international networks.

Beyond this, and especially as the Forum grows and is ascribed power, the Forum is also widely perceived as an arena of struggle for ideological dominance; and because we are accustomed to thinking of ideologies in terms of parties, that it is seen as an arena where parties are manipulating things from behind the scenes.

Virtually the only way in which political parties are *not* involved in the Forum therefore, is by direct participation in the Forum in their formal capacities, with their office-bearers as representatives. But even this is changing, in the WSF as a whole. In the first and second European Social Forums, one or more political parties organised events *as parties*; in early January 2003, senior leaders of political parties — as distinct from their various affiliated organisations — addressed major plenaries at the Asian Social Forum; and there was a roundtable discussion at the 2003 world Forum between representatives of select civil organisations and representatives of select political parties, to discuss the specific question of the relationship between the Forum and political parties. There is a second such roundtable scheduled for the Mumbai Forum, and there are calls in Europe for, if necessary, a separate Charter of Principles that allows parties to take part.

This is an area, and a direction, that we all need to discuss more openly, in India and globally. It is far more healthy to have an open relationship than the shadowy, 'green room' politics that today prevails. This is also far too important a question to be left to the leadership of the Forum alone. (It is interesting how the International Council has so far decided that those who will participate in discussions with parties shall be chosen *only* from among members of the Council.)

In the early days of the Forum in India, the India WSF Working Group took the step of opening this question with the Brazil Organising Committee, but the Brazilians ruled us out of order — saying that this was against the Charter of Principles. Clearly however, the matter is now much past this, and openly out on the global table.

Questions of Perspective

During the life of WSF India, we have witnessed the Gujarat pogrom in March 2002; the invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq, and thereby all of west and central

Asia (and thereby indeed, all of Asia and Africa), by the US and its allies; and a relentless tightening of surveillance and security measures by the state across the world. There is also a clear and relentless rise of the fundamentalist Right taking place widely — across India, and across much of the world — in large part preying on the insecurities created by economic and cultural globalisation.

WSF India has paid little attention to these and related developments, not by taking positions on them — which, by the WSF Charter of Principles, it is proscribed from doing — but by taking into account what they imply for the political culture and context within which we are working and building the Forum, and by developing an explicit strategic perspective on its role within India, internationally, and globally.

The only steps that the Forum in India has taken has been to frame the themes of its meetings around these issues, in terms of opposition, and to invite prominent individuals and organisational representatives to speak out against these tendencies at the meetings. But while useful, this makes the meetings the WSF organises — as distinct from the self-organised events that take place within the Forum — no different from conventional political conventions, and leaves it located firmly within highly traditional politics and not in the work of forging alternative politics.

Even within the short span of three years, the processes the WSF mounts and the events it organises already have palpable meaning and symbolism in a larger context. But the WSF leadership — certainly in India — is tending to fall far short of this, and increasingly allowing the Forum to get reduced to a political event and itself to becoming merely a manager of political events.

A specific dimension of this is the question of internationalism. Merely the fact that the meetings that the WSF organises are international does not make them internationalist.

In January 2003, notwithstanding the fact that WSF India was organising an *Asian* Social Forum, or the resolution it had taken in this area, it had little *internationalist* perspective beyond having an email list that included addresses in other parts of the world and inviting speakers from some other parts of Asia to articulate their points of view. Exchange on WSF India e-mailing lists suggests that this remains largely the case, even though it is now organising a *world* meeting in January 2004. The internationalism is almost incidental.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of a genuinely *World* Social Forum must surely be a permanently internationalist viewpoint and stance — which even the Forum's Charter of Principles makes clear. This requires a specific commitment both to the principle and to the practice. In the case of the ASF for instance, there was very little prior information on the Forum that was broadcast in the Asian region (and no attempt at open systems of communication), and therefore in this sense little *strategic mobilisation* of participants from different parts of Asia. There was also little perspective developed on Asia as a whole. The limited participation that consequently took place largely came from and through predictable organisations and networks and that too, mostly from the more predictable regions of South Asia and South-east Asia. North Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia, and also China and East Asia — vast areas of our neighbouring world — were virtually left out.

WSF India has so far had at least three proposals or opportunities for building an internationalist programme that it has not grasped : one, a proposal to build an Afro-Asian alliance; two, actually mobilising and mounting the Asian Solidarity Group (as already mentioned); and three, building a strong and *strategic* relationship with WSF Brazil, and therefore bridges between India and Brazil.

The first opportunity came out of discussions in Porto Alegre in January 2002, in part to resolve a kind of ‘competition’ that briefly arose there between our agreement from WSF India to hold the global WSF meeting in India but only in 2004 and the Africa Social Forum’s interest in doing this in the same year. Specifically, it came out of a proposal put forward there by Samir Amin, of the Third World Forum, that in historical terms, we needed to look towards building an alliance between the peoples of the two great continents. The specific idea that emerged was that we in WSF India would organise a limited seminar between Africans and Asians at the regional social forum that we had till then committed ourselves to. There was however, no interest in WSF India in even exploring this idea, and no opportunity given to discuss it. The question is whether we again missed the wood for the trees.

The same applies in terms of not taking the opportunity provided by organising the world meeting in India, of exploring the possibilities of building a strategic relationship between WSF India and WSF Brazil — not simply as two teams organising similar large meetings in different parts of the world but in specific recognition of the strategic importance of Brazil and India on the world stage and of the synergy that is possible. This despite the fact that the governments of the two countries seem to have realised the value of this, in this current historical period.

In short, this experience suggests we still have a long way to go in understanding the Forum as an internationalist project and in forging a balance between a national (and nationalist) perspective and an internationalist outlook. The two are not mutually contradictory. The WSF process and the regional and world meetings of the process, offer important opportunities to take up this question.

A Personal Experience of WSF India

Finally, it remains for me to draw out what has evidently been my more personal experience of working in WSF India. Starting very positively, it progressively became less and less convivial, and more and more an abrasive and bruising experience. So much so that after my personal tragedy in September 2002, the last thing I wanted to do was to return to working actively in the Coordination Team and the Working Committee. I did not think I would be able to stomach the turbulent politics that had become the daily stuff of the process, which I judged might become only sharper as we came closer to the ASF. But for me, this was a deeply sad reflection on an effort being carried out in the name of building other worlds.

Many of the currents I have described above started relentlessly rising from soon after we started, and by April 2002, when the second consultation was held in Bhopal where WSF India was properly constituted, it was clear to me — and I think also to others, because several others dropped out of the WSF India process about then — that

it was going to be a rough journey. On the other hand, for those who wanted power in the Forum, it was obviously a case of good pacing, and of peaking at the right time.

The subsequent experience became progressively rougher, and ultimately included my being excommunicated from WSF India organisational committees by its self-appointed high priests in February 2003, along with others, for the sin of being there as an individual and of voicing independent opinions; through their moving the proposal mentioned earlier, revoking the WSF India provision allowing individuals to be on committees.³⁹

Now that I look back, all this was perhaps only to be expected, given that the thrust for power was expressed early in the process and where power soon became the name of the game. The more some of us resisted and questioned, the firmer the hold became, and the more extensive the manoeuvring. Those manoeuvring drew on long experience of doing so in the course of party politics. The fact that those representing old formations primarily expressed the thrust also meant that the seeds of what the Forum was going to become in India were being planted; old seeds. The outcomes speak clearly : the orthodox organisational structure, the equally orthodox framing of the themes for the Mumbai Forum, and the highly conventional, power-based culture of politics in the initiative.

We need to move beyond the experience of particular personalities however, and ask the more general question of whether this is the way that we think we can build other worlds — beyond the rhetoric of slogans — and how what we are creating and living out is any different from the conventional world that we are declaring our differentness from. My sense is that we cannot even *begin* to do this unless we first confront the kinds of issues that I have tried raising above.

Of all the many lessons of these first years, one is clear : it is going to be a long and hard march to another world.

NOVEMBER 2003

Jai Sen — See 'Editors' (this volume).

NOTES

¹ Co-convenor of the WSF India Working Group (a preparatory committee) January-April 2002, and then member of the WSF India Working Committee and of its Co-ordination Team. This present essay is a merger of the core of a much longer paper written in January 2003 of this same main title (Sen, January 2003a) with a part of a second companion essay written in some months later in mid 2003, looking more deeply at trends I then saw emerging at that stage in the World Social Forum process as a whole (Sen, August 2003). The two therefore complemented each other. See this present volume for a revised and retitled version of the second essay.

² I presented the main conclusions of this paper at two meetings during the Asian Social Forum, Hyderabad, India, in January 2003 (Sen, January 2003b), and also at the WSFI itself workshop at the WSF world meeting later on in January, on 'Getting over issues of rivalry and power : A challenge for the FSM ?'

³ January 2003 was a time of the continuing 'war against terrorism' and of the accompanying tightening of 'security' measures across North and South, and of the war that the US and its allies were then threatening on Iraq. Equally, the reality that elections in Brazil had just brought Lula (Luiz

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Inácio Lula da Silva, the leader of the Workers' Party), to the presidency, and — on the other hand — the continued and seemingly relentless rise of the fundamentalists and fascists in India, all seemed to me to have a direct relevance to the functioning of the World Social Forum, in India and globally.

⁴ While I have written this essay as an individual, I have benefited greatly from the many discussions I have had the privilege of having on the Forum, in India and abroad. I especially acknowledge my exchanges at various times — and even if we have not always agreed — with Razia Ismail Abbasi, Samir Amin, Dinesh Abrol, Prashant Bhushan, Jeremy Brecher, Bernard Cassen, Sundar Chaterji, François Houtart, Gustavo Marin, Thomas Ponniah, Vijay Pratap, Prabir Purkayastha, Usha Ramanathan, Dave Ranney, Átila Roque, Leo Saldanha, Amit Sen Gupta, Siddhartha, Srilata Swaminathan, David Szanton, Teivo Teivainen, Kalpana Viswanath, and Peter Waterman. (My apologies to anyone I have inadvertently left off this list.) I want to specially thank Jeremy, Sundar, Dave, and David for their searching comments on an early draft of the original paper, and Sundar for suggesting the title of the booklet that it then became, and then of this paper. I have also learned a lot from Chico Whitaker, and from Cândido Grzybowski's brilliant paper on the Forum (Grzybowski, 2002), and have in general been inspired by the example of the Brazil Organising Committee. Notwithstanding all this however, I of course take responsibility for all the opinions that I express here. No one else is to blame !

I want also to express my special appreciation to all those in India who took part during the second half of 2002 in a process of informal reflection on the Forum in a small group, when we began to see that the larger reflection process agreed upon within WSF India was getting sidelined, and to Srilata and Usha who encouraged me to keep pushing for this, and to all the participants of a meeting that Sundar, Leo, Siddhartha, and I organised in Bangalore, India, in April 2003, to explore the Forum not as an event but as a potential 'meeting of minds'.

⁵ Anon, nd c. December 2001; Marin 2003.

⁶ For an elaboration of Samir Amin's arguments, see Amin, January 2003. Also in this volume.

⁷ Anon, nd c. December 2001.

⁸ Pratap, January 2002.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of this history, see Sen, March-April 2002, and January 2003.

¹⁰ WSF India, June 2002.

¹¹ World Social Forum India, July 2002a.

¹² See World Social Forum India, April 2002.

¹³ But this decision has since then been revoked. See further on in this essay, and for a discussion of this issue, see my companion essay in this volume.

¹⁴ For a positive assessment of the Forum see Muralidharan 2003, and for expressions of critique and opposition, see : James, January 2003, and Revolutionary Writers' Association, December 2002. All in this volume.

¹⁵ International League for Peoples' Struggles (ILPS), World Peoples' Resistance Movement (WPRM), South Asia, Anti-Imperialist Camp (Austria), Bayan (Philippines), Confederation of Turkish Workers in Europe (ATIK), and others, September 2003. More recently, two of the largest independent farmers' organisations in India have also announced a 'Global Peasants' Forum', as a part of the Mumbai Resistance.

¹⁶ WSF Brazil Organising Committee, March 2002.

¹⁷ It is towards addressing this gap, and to stimulate public interest, that three of us (Mukul Mangalik, Madhuresh Kumar, and I) organised a sustained series of twelve seminars spread over two semesters at the University of Delhi, from August–December 2003, on the subject of the World Social Forum and cultures of politics. Titled the 'Open Space Seminar Series', and conducted under the auspices of The History Society of Ramjas College, the sessions attracted 100–150 people at most sessions and generated intense debate. For details, see Sen, October 2003.

- ¹⁸ Personal correspondence with WSF International Secretariat, during 2002.
- ¹⁹ See the Report of the International Council meeting in Barcelona in March 2002, where it says “This WSF will seek to expand to become Asiatic”.
- ²⁰ WSF India, July 2002c.
- ²¹ Teivainen 2003. See this volume.
- ²² For the full original discussion, see Sen, January 2003a.
- ²³ According to the WSF Charter of Principles, political parties cannot belong to the WSF (ABONG and ors, April 2001, and also WSF Organising Committee, June 2001). Although this formulation is still under debate, and although it is clear from Brazil and also from Europe that political groups and parties directly play key roles in the life of the Forum, this remains the rule and during 2002, WSF India decided to abide by it. In Europe however, there is now (end 2003) a call for a separate Charter that will allow this. See also discussion of this point further on.
- ²⁴ Jain, January 2003. See also this volume.
- ²⁵ NCDHR (National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights), nd.
- ²⁶ I, of course, acknowledge that the singularity is there in this slogan itself, and it is precisely for this reason that I raised this point as my concluding point in my first essay on the political culture of the WSF, in early 2002. Sen, March-April 2002.
- ²⁷ Sen and Ramanathan, September 2002.
- ²⁸ Put forward at the WSF India National Consultation in New Delhi in February 2003 and seconded by someone from the same group, this proposal was not discussed and received no support (and an objection only from this writer), but was nevertheless put into immediate effect by the Secretariat.
- ²⁹ George, Summer 1997. I am of course indebted to Susan George both for the title of this subsection and for the argument, which seems to parallel so closely what is happening here in India.
- ³⁰ WSF India, June 2002.
- ³¹ The best-known exposition of this position is Karat, September 1988. Karat is today one of the most senior members of the Politburo of the CPI(M), and some see him to be a leading candidate for the party’s next General Secretary.
- ³² World Social Forum India, April 2002; text drawn from Sen, September 2002.
- ³³ This flow has been regulated by the Foreign Contributions (Regulation) *Act* since 1976, and the provisions of this Act have been only made tighter recently after years of pressure from the Left and the Right in Parliament.
- ³⁴ Karat, September 1988.
- ³⁵ For details, see RUPE (Research Unit for Political Economy), September 2003.
- ³⁶ Sen, April 2002. In particular, I proposed that we needed to examine the issue holistically, by looking at the linked issues of resource mobilisation, self-reliance, and internationalism, and formulated and put forward a Discussion Note on this specific question.
- ³⁷ From Sen, March-April 2002, p 16.
- ³⁸ Sen, January 2002a, Point 3, ‘Deeper currents’.
- ³⁹ I continue however to be independently active in relation to the Forum, such as in terms of the seminar series mentioned above — and this present book. As it happened, this excommunication coincided with my personal decision to not continue to work within the organisational framework of the Forum, given the culture of the process. But it is as well that it happened this way, and not by my stepping aside, because it revealed the nature and culture of the politics of the process.