

A carnival of rights

The recent World Social Forum 2004 was an occasion for strengthening alliances and exposing injustices

Held for the first time outside Latin America since its inception in 2001, the World Social Forum (WSF) met at the NESCO Grounds, Goregaon, Mumbai, India from 16 to 21 January 2004.

The meeting brought together many movements with localized perspectives in a forum that sought to strengthen issues of concern that cut across geographical and national boundaries. It was a space for strengthening alliances. The atmosphere at the venue was almost carnival-like, but also fiercely political.

WSF 2004 was marked by spontaneous marches against many social injustices by disadvantaged and marginalized groups: landless labourers, eunuchs demanding gender equality, occupied peoples, child labourers, migrant workers from Korea, Tibetan yak dancers, those affected by the Bhopal gas tragedy, people living with HIV/AIDS, free thinkers, feminists, sexual rights activists, sex workers, homosexual performance artists, and so on.

The sustainable tourism debate focused on the impact of tourism on marginalized communities and resources, and community involvement in decision-making mechanisms. The Pakistani Fisherfolk Forum (PFF) organized an event on South Asia fisherfolk and workers' solidarity.

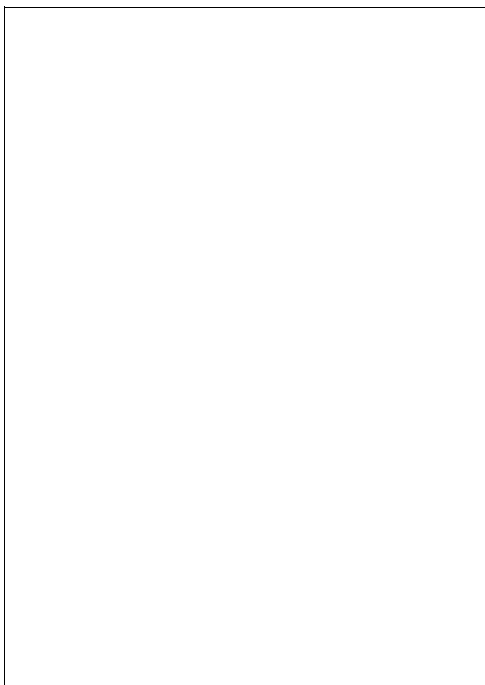
The Fishermen Movements' Coordination of Tamil Nadu discussed issues related to fishing rights in international waters. Many fishermen leaders from Rameswaram participated in the discussion. The Tamil Nadu Meenavar Munnetra Sangam organized a discussion on effluents degrading the sea. Fishers' livelihood options were discussed under the session on Development Induced

Displacement: Perspectives and Strategies. The event was organized by the National Alliance of People's Movements, India; the Brazilian Movement of Dam Affected People (MAB), Brazil; the Anti-Privatization Forum, South Africa; Focus on the Global South, the Philippine; and a number of other organizations. One of the speakers, Harekrishna Debnath, Chairperson of the National Fishworkers Forum, India, highlighted the fact that during the last two decades, tourism in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and India has displaced thousands and thousands of fishermen from their lands, which have been given to big industry. Others who spoke during the discussion also pointed out that this type of development constitutes a major threat to numerous communities throughout the world.

The message was clear: there is a need to prioritize the development needs of marginalized communities against the background of liberalization, water privatization and dumping of genetically modified seeds by multinational companies. Many questioned the liberalization methodology.

Powerful governments

The Bolivian indigenous people's leader Evo Morales talked about the need to protect the rights of local communities. Economist Joseph Stiglitz urged people to protest wrongs and celebrate opportunities. Participating in a discussion, Mary Robinson, former Irish President and UN Commissioner for Human Rights, pointed out that the world's most powerful governments were also the world's biggest arms suppliers. Iranian peace activist and Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi said that the reform process needed to be continuously recharged with new orientations. She said




that this was the lesson learnt from the Iranian Revolution.

Underlying the plurality, however, was a shared vision embodied by the WSF slogan “Another world is possible”. Despite the broad agreements of the delegates on many issues, an alternative forum was set up opposite the WSF venue by leftwing groups. The “Mumbai Resistance 2004”, as it was called, opposed the WSF and argued that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have grown most in those States where the government has rapidly withdrawn from education and health services.

A film produced by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), *Under the Sun: the Transient Fisherfolk of Jambudwip*, directed by Rita Banerji was screened in the session “Other Worlds are Breathing: WSF Film Festival 2004”. Rita Banerji participated in the panel discussion that followed. Some of the other important films shown in the festival were *Choropampa, El Precio del Oro (Choropampa, The Price of Gold)* from Peru by Ernesto Cabellos and Stephanie Boyd, about how a quiet Peruvian village turned into a hotbed of civil resistance when 151 kilograms of liquid mercury spilled along the main road passing through Choropampa and two other villages. Despite claims by the mining company that the situation was resolved, this documentary reveals a starkly

different reality—the health of the villagers is worsening and medical treatment is not available.

The film *Words on Water* by Sanjay Kak of India contrasted urban excess in the form of refrigerators, televisions, microwaves and water parks with images of impoverished rural people pumping groundwater from a dried river bank. Kak used several pictorial contrasts to illustrate how those who have been displaced have had their rights violated without any regard.

Inheritance: A Fisherman’s Story by Peter Hegedus, an Australian/Hungarian co-production, portrayed how the Hungarian river Tisza was flooded with tons of cyanide from an Australian-Romanian gold mine in 2000. Fishermen like Balazs Meszaros struggled to survive. In an effort to save his people and their way of life, Balazs travelled to Australia to confront the mining company responsible for destroying his livelihood. *An Evergreen Island* by Amanda King and Fabio Cavadini from Australia was also shown. 

This report has been filed by N. Venugopalan (icsf@vsnl.com) of ICSF’s Documentation Centre