
GLOBALISING RESISTANCE

sukumar muralidharan

For individuals and groups working in relative isolation, fighting against overwhelming and unseen forces girdling the globe and eroding the autonomy of communities and nations, the city of Hyderabad provided a much needed tonic in the first week of January. Globalisation has for long been characterised as an irresistible force that only the primitive or foolhardy would choose to oppose. Often confined in isolated pockets, the groups holding out against this authoritarian logic faced severe odds and frequent setbacks.

In Hyderabad, between January 2–7, 2003, several of these groups came together to forge a unified platform for resistance that could both end their relative isolation and lend greater strength to their individual struggles.

The first session of the Asian Social Forum (ASF) was by every criterion, a significant moment in the mobilisation of people's power to turn back the tide of globalisation. Whatever the reckoning, whether by the scale of the assembly, the range of issues considered, or the scope of the dialogue, the ASF was a momentous gathering. Conceived as a part of the international consultations that have been going on for the past two years under the umbrella of the World Social Forum, the ASF could now become an annual event, and each successive gathering could be a progressive milestone towards establishing a true politics of alternatives.

Early in the nineties, developing countries — termed the 'global South' in the official discourse of the time — were just beginning to awaken to the catastrophe that had visited them subtly and surreptitiously over the preceding decade. It became almost the common sense understanding then, that the eighties had been the 'lost decade', which had enormously set back all aspirations for a better life among the poor and the disadvantaged.

Most countries then suffered a crushing burden of external debt and a fiscal crisis that effectively crippled the possibilities of fair governance. To fulfil the basic promise of these countries' struggle for political autonomy — that of meeting basic human needs and providing for an improvement in standards of living — it seemed that they needed to chart an entirely new course. Ironically though, most of these

countries were stamped into a new phase of integration with the global economy that was, with a few cosmetic changes, merely more of the same.

The new consensus was forged on the partly coercive logic that there was really no alternative to a closer integration of the global economy under the stewardship of the United States. The rapid eclipse of the socialist model that the Soviet Union embodied seemed to lend new strength to this logic. As the decade wore on, the resistance began to crystallise around a number of platforms.

Traditional political parties of the Left, momentarily disoriented by the Soviet collapse, soon managed to reorganise and mount a challenge, even if in narrow pockets. A potent new force was added in the course of the decade in the form of non-party social movements, each advocating its own specific cause, but often impelled by underlying realities to seek broader coalitions with other, often very disparate, groups.

When the first major shakeout of the nineties occurred with the crises in Russia and various Latin American countries, 'globalisation' was not yet a term to conjure with. But by the time of the Asian economic meltdown of 1997, the western powers and institutions that worked under their command had become active proselytisers in the cause of globalisation. The term, representing a process supposedly rich with possibilities of social and economic advancement, now became an inescapable part of the ideological tutelage that the developing countries were subjected to.

If the resistance until then had been sporadic and relatively unorganised, the following years witnessed a rapid change in fortunes. It was convenient in the initial years, for the champions of globalisation to maintain a facade of liberalism. Voices of dissent, as articulated notably by non-party social movements — variously termed civil society organisations or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) — came to be accepted as a part of the discourse on globalisation as the nineties wore on. During the tenure of the Clinton administration in the US, an active effort was made to embrace this element of dissent, at least at the rhetorical level. This enterprise proceeded on the lofty pretence that the critique of globalisation was founded on little else than the fear of uncertainty. In this rather patronising reading, the coalescence of forces against globalisation was the consequence of a failure of communication. Once the authentic picture was provided and appreciated, the resistance would simply melt away.

This pretence was decisively punctured by the events on the streets of Seattle in December 1999. In flagrant disregard of the widespread apprehensions that had been aroused by the Uruguay Round of global trade negotiations, the Clinton administration had embarked on the project of commencing a new round at Seattle. The venue had been chosen with the specific purpose of showcasing the rich promise of the digital age and urging the general acknowledgment of the need for new and appropriate trade rules for the new age. The ferocity of the street demonstrations shattered the complacency of the negotiators who had gathered with seemingly nothing to do but sort out a few residual disagreements before launching a new trade round.

All subsequent conclaves of the missionaries of globalisation became venues of bitter contention — Washington and Prague in 2000, Davos, Quebec, Gothenburg and Genoa in 2001. And from the chaotic and often conflicting play of special interest

groups in Seattle, the anti-globalisation protests gradually began to acquire a coherent and clear political core.

Concurrently, there was under way, an effort to organise the voices of dissent against globalisation on a common platform. The initiative began in continental Europe, with a small nucleus of social activists and scholars banding together to advocate the cause of a tax on speculative financial transactions that held the markets of several developing countries in their thrall, invariably with destabilising effects.

A base in the Global South was imperative, since the resistance was principally expected to emanate from the regions that most intimately felt the ravages of globalisation. With a rich diversity of social movements and a bewildering complexity of problems, Brazil seemed a natural choice as a venue for instituting a regular event that would serve as a platform for pooling experiences and learning from one another. Porto Alegre in the south of the country, seemed an appropriate choice of venue for several reasons. It had won worldwide notice with its experiments in democratic municipal budgeting which seemed to embody new principles of participation and transparency that other units of administration could conceivably emulate.

The Porto Alegre gathering was conceived as a frontal challenge to the orthodoxy of neoliberalism, which then seemed best represented by the annual conclave of corporate and political leaders at the Swiss ski resort of Davos. Though a feature of the annual social calendar for top business executives since the seventies, the World Economic Forum at Davos began to acquire the status of a citadel of economic wisdom only in the decade of globalisation. Conceived in the spirit of 'Anti-Davos', Porto Alegre chose the name of the World Social Forum, to reflect its belief that the economy and the markets should serve society rather than the converse.

The location obviously dictated to a large extent which groups would have most access to the WSF platform. After the two Porto Alegre gatherings, in 2001 and 2002, the international committee overseeing the organisational aspects began to urge the dispersal of the effort to other corners. India was considered an appropriate venue for a future gathering both because of its size and its relatively well-established democratic traditions and in recognition of the fact that it had managed to take the debate on alternatives to globalisation to a fairly high plane.

The ASF in Hyderabad was conceived as a way station towards India hosting the WSF at some early future date. It was convened in full conformity with the WSF principle of 'offering space for free discourse, debate, interaction and discovery, of inviting the participation of a rich diversity of mass organisations, peoples' movements, citizens' bodies and groups to join in the process of mutual learning, informed debate and participatory formulation of alternative models with the worth and viability to address the challenges of development with justice'.

From the time the delegates began arriving in Hyderabad, ASF hosts were expecting a deluge of participants and possible organisational chaos. These expectations were in large measure fulfilled, though disruptions of the first day were rapidly overcome to bring the events back on track. The final reckoning showed that about 20,000 delegates had registered to participate in the ASF, of which 789 were from overseas. No

fewer than 840 organisations were represented at the event, which had apart from 10 conferences structured around broad themes and an equal number of panel discussions, no fewer than 160 seminars and 164 workshops.

The subjects discussed in Hyderabad ranged over a vast canvas — from the global peace and security environment to environmental concerns, the rights of traditional communities, the problems of marginal and excluded groups, the rise of identity politics, the global disarmament dialogue, alternative energy sources, the deepening of democracy, and the politics of natural resources.

Yet, with all these diverse subjects being discussed, the common themes were relatively easy to identify. There was virtually unanimous consensus that the globalisation that was being advocated and pursued by the world powers, and especially by the US, was little else than the new manifestation of imperialism. The imperialist project had been pursued for over a decade through the subtle coercion of finance capital and the markets. But the crisis of Pax Americana was now evident in the increasingly overt recourse to the force of arms to sustain the coercive global order.

At a number of its conferences, panel discussions and seminars, the ASF put itself firmly on the side of the beleaguered people of Palestine and Iraq. It deprecated the new salience of nuclear weapons in the military doctrines of the US after a brief period when they seemed to be a receding menace.

WSF principles — which the ASF adhered scrupulously to — do not call for any kind of agreed final statement representing the entirety of deliberations. But the necessity of non-violent struggle was underlined by so many of the speakers and participants as to make it virtually a representative posture of the Forum. Speakers from Japan and the Philippines spoke about the growing strength of movements that favour the eviction of the US military presence in the countries of East and South-East Asia. They also underlined that the task of combating the aggressive new posture of imperialism would be enormously facilitated, if countries were to exercise their sovereignty and check the use of their territory by US forces.

Other speakers pointed out that developing countries' sovereignty would be more illusory than real as long as they remained in thrall to their dollar-denominated debts. "Don't owe, won't pay", was a common refrain at the ASF, with several of the delegates insisting that the debt incurred by developing countries had been more than repaid and was only being sustained at immensely bloated levels by the sleight-of-hand of western governments and financial institutions.

Delegates from Japan shed the prevailing taboos over the use of the word, by characterising the current drive for global dominance by the US as 'fascist' in its scope and methods. Neoliberal globalisation, does not in theory, endorse the sustenance of a strong state. But if the state is to play a role supportive of capitalism, then it is allowed to assume powers to the appropriate degree. The 'welfare state' has no legitimacy in the globalisation paradigm, though the 'warfare state' does have. Another focus of the deliberations was the rising prevalence of civil strife in societies caught up in the currents of globalisation. The incidence of wars as conventionally understood — conflicts between states — had diminished. But levels of social violence had spiralled upwards, mostly in the form of conflicts within states.

The ASF, again showing remarkable unanimity, affirmed the right of marginalised and excluded communities to an equal share of the resources that they have been traditionally dependent on. It considered various forms and variants of institutional arrangements that could secure these communities their rightful share in resources. It heard the testimonies of communities that have seen livelihoods crumble under the onslaught of neoliberal economic policies. And it resolved that the only credible response to the situation would be to restore the autonomy of individuals and communities that had been eroded by globalisation.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the ASF was its open and participatory character. Not all the groups that chose to participate came convinced of the utility of the gathering. But they all invariably left with positive perceptions and with the resolve to make the gathering a more significant forum for evolving practical political strategies. The future of the ASF still remains indeterminate. A decision is expected by March on the venue that will host next year's gathering, as also on India's prospects of hosting the WSF. These two fora would in future be propelled in the main by the enthusiasm of its diverse participants.

Uniquely, for an event of this scale, the central organisation wields little financial clout in mounting it. Each organisation brings its own resources and pays its way, including for each seminar or workshop that it may put up. This should allay the concerns of some that the WSF — as also the ASF — has been overly dependent on semi-official donor agencies in the West, which could pull the plug on it if it becomes too strident a challenge to western dominance. But there is no question that each individual organisation that brings its talents to the WSF platform may have its own ties of dependence to western donor agencies. The foremost priority for these groups today is not to contemplate a danger that is yet to manifest itself, but to use the available space and time to push the frontiers of the global debate on alternatives.

JANUARY 2003

Edited version of cover story in *Frontline*, Volume 20, Issue 2, January 18–31, 2003.

Sukumar Muralidharan is Deputy Editor in the Delhi bureau of *Frontline* magazine. He has been a close observer and analyst of the process of economic liberalisation in India since the early nineties, and works on understanding the evolving conjuncture of globalisation in its political, economic and military dimensions.
