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About the Paper

In this paper, Mayur Chetia examines how the specific culture and configuration of the Indian organised left shaped the World Social Forum process in India. The advent of the World Social Forum produced an unprecedented upheaval within the progressive circles of India and the history of the World Social Forum's relation to the Left in India has been a history of paradoxes and ironies. For or Against World Social Forum? On the one hand the WSF brought hope, optimism and energy to a large section of the progressive forces; on the other, it raised doubts, anxiety and confusion within another segment of the organised left of the Indian political society.

This paper examines different conceptions of the World Social Forum, as an open space organisation, as an event, as a process. It looks deeply into different positions within the organised left, the arguments provided for and against it, and the modes of participation by the left parties in this debate, and key controversies for the Left: question of violence, a determinist view of history and the funding and the 'Non Governmental Organisations question' as well as the relation of the organised left with ideologies assimilated with the World Social Forum, like Post-Modernism, Revisionism, Trotskyism. This research seeks to unearth the ways the activists understood the World Social Forum and its associate processes and looks for theoretical engagement on these issues.

The World Social Forum and Reactions from the Indian Left

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The Coming of the WSF

The history of the WSF's relation to the Left in India has been a history of paradoxes and ironies. The advent of the WSF produced an unprecedented upheaval within the progressive circles of India. For or Against WSF? This was the most common question, being asked and discussed in almost all political debates around 2004. I have called it a history of paradoxes because this was perhaps the last question that the WSF organisers were expecting from the Indians. Rather than looking at the WSF as a process or an open space, debates within the leftist circles considered it either as an event or as an already finalised 'thing' or organisation.

In this paper I will try to examine the contours of the debates around the WSF; the arguments provided for and against it, and the modes of participation by the left parties in this debate. I will also try to examine how the specific culture and configuration of the Indian Left shaped the WSF process in India and how the WSF in return affected the former.

Before we move ahead, a few points about the methodology and scope of this paper. In my research, I have used printed materials published in the form of books, articles and pamphlets. I have also used materials found on the internet as well as some articles from individual collections. I interviewed around 12 people who are activists in different left parties and organisations. Though it seemed awkward in many instances, I have also tried to incorporate certain aspects from my own experiences as an leftist political activist and research student. One should also keep in mind that, in this paper, the term 'Left' indicates the organised Communist Left. Moreover, I may say that this paper is not a comprehensive analysis of all left parties and groups in India. For instance, many Trotskyite groups are not analysed here. Similarly, not all parties of the 'Left Front' have been touched here. Nor I have sought to analyse the responses from the different left intellectuals of varying tendencies. This is more due to the limited scope of this paper than to any subjective prioritisations. What I

have sought to analyse are some broad tendencies within the Indian Left. One could certainly claim that I already had some broad classification of the Indian Left in mind while writing this paper.

Some words must be said about the interview process as well. I have avoided interviewing the top brass (for instance, the general secretaries and so on) of the left groups. The rationale was that I was seeking to unearth the ways the activists understood the WSF and its associate processes. At the same time, it was not possible to target the lowest 'grassroots' activists, because I was also looking for some theoretical engagement on these issues. So I chose the 'middle level' cadres for my interviews. There was another problem with interviews. I am writing this paper at a time when the WSF is already a *fait accompli*. It's nearly four years now after the WSF 'happened' in Mumbai. Naturally people's positions and ideas about the WSF must have undergone a sea change since then. For instance, P K Sahi of CPI(ML) was not in the party when the WSF was convened in Mumbai. He was very much present in the activities of Mumbai WSF. But it seemed to me that over time, he has changed his positions to a considerable extent. Today he is harsher on the WSF than before. This may be due to his present association with the CPI(ML) which had opposed the WSF during the Mumbai session. I have tried to keep a careful view of such changes and modifications of views. But these were the difficulties that I couldn't get away from altogether. So the reader is invited to keep these limitations in mind.

The Asian Social Forum and the Forum Against Imperialist Globalisation

The ASF was the precursor of the WSF process in India. It took place from 2 to 7 January 2003 in Hyderabad. Many of the organisations which later became opponents of WSF 2004 participated in its sessions. Thus PK Sahi of CPI(ML) informs us that "many of the trade union activists of our party actively participated in its proceedings. We were new to this process in those times".¹ Similarly, parties like CPI(Maoist) or CPI(ML) Liberation had taken stalls within the ASF venue to sell their literatures.² Only towards a later period did these parties begin to clearly distance themselves from the WSF process. However, the discontents had started from the ASF itself. Various radical organisations came together under a

¹ Personal interview.

² Interview with Rohit Prakash, CPI (ML) Liberation member.

banner called 'Forum against Imperialist Globalisation'³ and held a rally against the increasing assault of imperialism on the people of the earth as well as against the ambiguities of the ASF. CPI(ML) Peoples War, CPI(ML) New Democracy, CPI(ML) Red Flag all these parties were present united in this rally. However, differences were to emerge very soon.⁴

Different Conceptions of the Forum

Different conceptions of the WSF emerged in the discussions within the Indian Left circles. For convenience, we are broadly categorising them into three tendencies: (a) The WSF as an open space organisation (a contradiction in terms?); (b) The WSF as an event; (c) The WSF as a process. However, it is evident that these three notions are interconnected. Most of the harsh criticisms of the WSF came from those who conceptualised it into the first two categories. Thus Arjun Singh (of erstwhile All India Peoples Resistance Forum, henceforth AIPRF) says, "how can WSF take any concrete decisions when it itself says that it is just an open space where anyone can come and say their own things? There were no provisions within the WSF to go towards a definite plan of action".⁵ Similarly, after citing the charter of the WSF⁶, a booklet published by New Vistas Publication, associated with CPI(Maoist) comments:

Such facts point towards the ineffectiveness of the *WSF as an organisation* since it cannot take any decisions which can be applicable to everyone. So in this way, it has just become a club for discussions, which will only debate things but will not do anything in practice.⁷

Similarly, in a pamphlet, 'Knowing the Enemy', CPI(ML) New Democracy says

³ Officially, FAIG was formed in October 2001. It is generally believed that CPI(ML) New Democracy had taken the initiative to form it. Around 62 organisations participated in its first meeting in Delhi.

⁴ For a long time, ND complained that AIPRF (ie the mass organisation of the Maoists) betrayed ND by flouting MR during the WSF and thus making FAIG dysfunctional.

⁵ Personal Interview.

⁶ "The WSF meetings do not deliberate on behalf of the WSF as a body. No one, therefore, will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. The participants in the forum shall not be called to on to take decisions as a body, whether by vote or acclamation, on declarations or proposals for action that would commit all, or the majority, of them and that propose to be taken as establishing positions of the forum as a body."

⁷ Translation and emphasis mine.

We find that the WSF – as it is structured only for ‘reflective thinking’ without conclusions and plans for action – does not allow for the development of a clear anti-Imperialist perspective.

Similarly, many of the discussions were about the utility of having an event like the WSF at all. Sunil, an activist of Peoples Democratic Front of India (PDFI) says,

The WSF holds its grand session every two years. People discuss and debate things, and then return to their homes. After two years, they go again. Nothing concrete is decided. It will only do harm to the movements.⁸

Amit Sengupta, on the other hand, comes up with an interesting article which tries to grasp the three aspects of the Forum as an organic whole.⁹ Given the immense importance of the article, it deserves to be quoted extensively. He writes,

It [the WSF] is an open space. What does this mean? Is it a space that is entirely open, that is, is it not circumvented by any boundary conditions? Clearly that is not the case. ... Thus, it is an open space that is circumvented by the boundary condition that the space is open to all who stand in opposition to neo-liberal economic policies and imperialism. Moreover, in India, we have further circumvented this open space saying that it stands in opposition to: patriarchy, war, casteism and racism, and communalism (religious sectarian exclusions). ...

Yes, it is possible that this broadening of the canvas has also drawn into the WSF, as a part of its heterogeneous character, groups and organisations whose primary focus is not the struggle against imperialist globalisation. But it is preferable to have such groups come in and preserve the current heterogeneity than try and build a monolithic movement with a common agenda, which may immediately lead into competing agendas. ...

Does this mean that the WSF is a non-ideological space? No, what it means is that the space is not circumscribed by a specific ideological position, other than what is laid down in the Charter.

The WSF is, at times, accused of being a ‘talking shop’ from which no concrete ‘actions’ emerge. ...

⁸ Personal interview. Translation mine.

⁹ Article by Amit Sengupta published in parts in *Peoples Democracy*, December 2003 issue.

This premise is flawed because it is attempting to assess the WSF with the presumption that the WSF is designed to take positions and 'lead' the struggles all over the globe against imperialist globalisation and its myriad ramifications.

This premise is also flawed because, while the WSF itself is not doing any of the things above, the open space provided by it is doing precisely that. Not as a single output, but as a number of outputs. ...

If the WSF were an organisation, such diversity of positions would make it dysfunctional. But then, this is precisely why the WSF should not be an organisation. The very large and increasing participation that every successive editions of the WSF and more recently the regional forums have seen since 2001, has been possible because of the diversity that the WSF allows. This does not mean that organisations with clear positions and ideologies are not required. It only means that the role that the WSF plays is different from what organisations are supposed to play.

Much of the criticism of the WSF from the Left was, I feel, due to the wrong expectations and misconceptions about the scope, character and nature of the WSF itself. At one level, the extract above seems to answer a number of queries put forward by the critiques from the Indian organised Left. Pieces like these could have been widely circulated and discussed to reduce the extent of confusions among the general activists.

The Left within the WSF

The left organisations which went into the WSF were basically the 'mainstream' Left or the 'parliamentary' Left, led by the CPI(Marxist) (henceforth CPM). Sitaram Yechury's article, published in *Peoples Democracy*¹⁰ (CPM's political organ) provides some hint of the rationale behind the party's decision to go for the WSF. While conceding that WSF provides "an open space – open to all who stands in opposition to neo-liberal economic policies", he nevertheless maintains that "it is merely an open space platform where the contending forces are provided the opportunity to thrash out their differences if any". He further says, "we shall join the ideological debates, we shall oppose the efforts to obfuscate the only alternative to imperialist globalisation being socialism and we shall thus strengthen this struggle against imperialism. It is with this outlook that the CPM is participating in the WSF".

¹⁰ Also available on CPM's official website.

Peoples Democracy regularly reported the activities of the left organisations in the WSF. Thus, it informs us that “four seminars were planned by all the central trade unions together” in the WSF between 17 and 20 January.¹¹ It is now empirically impossible to discuss the issues raised in these seminars. But interestingly, *Peoples Democracy* comes up with another news.

Some foreign funded NGOs from India however tried to organise separate programmes to criticise the central trade unions, which according to them, represent only the organised section of the workers. Some of them even supported the steps taken by the government of India on the unorganised workers to create illusions among the working class. Though their programmes were well financed, they could not get much response from the participants in the WSF.

As we have said, now it is empirically not possible to trace the ‘reality’ of such claims. However, one cannot avoid the fact that most of the major trade unions do not have much access to the unorganised labour in India. But *Peoples Democracy* chose to camouflage this reality in the form of a counter-allegation, which is a comment on the reflective thinking and the culture of critical dialogue, or the lack thereof, within the CPM with respect to the WSF.

Prakash Karat in his speech to a seminar on ‘Political Parties and Social Movements’ on 18 January at the WSF made some interesting points. He said

A phenomenon of imperialist globalisation is that its impact produces uneven effects and is socially fragmentative. It promotes identities which atomise rather than fostering collective identities. In such a situation the left parties with their primacy for political goals are not equipped nor necessarily the best vehicles to take up the social and cultural struggles in a sustained manner. The left or the Marxist parties would be weakening themselves by embracing identity politics. ...

¹¹ On 17 January, a seminar was organised on ‘International Working Class Unity Against Imperialist Globalisation’ moderated by the Chittabrata Majumdar, the general secretary of CITU. The keynote address was by Umraomal Purohit, the HMS general secretary. On 19 January, another seminar was organised on ‘Communalism, Religious Fanaticism and Sectarian Violence— Labour Rights and Trade Union Movement’, where the president of INTUC was the keynote speaker. They discussed how the fundamentalist forces have been trying to threaten the unity and integrity of the country. Similarly on 18 and 20 January, these trade unions organised another two seminars.

This can be attempted by radical social movements who have the vision of linking up the issue, the local to a wider democratic and political movement.

Here we can see an honest acknowledgement of the vulnerability of the CPM to identity politics. We do not know if such a recognition led to a subsequent growth of ties between the CPM and some social movements. The wording is quite ambiguous and Karat as such did not name any particular social group or movements.¹²

In my interview with Robert Rehman, a Secretary of the Students Federation of India (henceforth SFI) and a CPM member, I asked if in recent years the CPM has been attempting such an endeavour. His answer was in the negative.¹³ I also asked him if the CPM had tried to work out some broad coalitions on some questions. He said that on the issue of communalism the CPM has always been stressing on joint struggles. In the WSF, CPM tried to organise some programmes along with other communist parties like those from Greece, Pakistan etc. These are quite old left groups and their relationship with the CPM goes back quite a long way. I wondered what the CPM had gained from the WSF after all? Robert told me that he was active in the mobilisation of students at Jamia Milia University for the WSF 2004. It appeared to me as if these drives were rather attempts at recruiting cadres for the SFI itself. I asked him how he felt at the WSF and if he participated in some seminars. He answered that the atmosphere in the WSF was rather chaotic since a lot of programmes were arranged at the same time. He said that he had to literally run from one seminar to the next to reach in time.¹⁴ I asked him how far, in his opinion, the CPM had been able to hegemonise the WSF 2004. To this question, he didn't provide any direct answer. He said, "Our aim was to take our ideology and thinking clearly to the WSF, and that's

¹² One wonders why Karat did not think of reconfiguring the strategies of the CPM itself to 'accommodate' the 'identity politics'? In fact a growing concern among the 'new' Marxist circles has been to attempt at reconciling the categories of class, gender, caste, race etc.

¹³ When I asked more directly if he knows which groups/social movements Karat was pointing towards, he mentioned the movements for cases like Jessica Lal, the Priyadarshini case etc. However, his answer did not seem convincing.

¹⁴ It reminded me of similar situations that I had to face at that time. In fact, it happened to most of the people I knew. However, during the Indian Social Forum, due to the relatively limited scope of the event, I could participate in more seminars and discussions with a greater level of satisfaction because of the reduced (and perhaps viable) choices! I feel that there is need for reflection on this paradoxical situation.

what we did.” It became clear for me that Robert doesn’t think that his party could hegemonise it.¹⁵

To sum up, it is far from clear at what level the CPM was able to forge broad coalitions during the WSF 2004. Specific studies are needed to get a clear answer to this question. As far as the question of dialogue and reflective thinking within the WSF is concerned, it is probable that such things happened at individual levels. But as far as the party (CPM) as a whole is concerned, I could not decipher any change in its policy post 2004. In fact, after the Nandigram and Singur episodes, the party has been increasingly sidelined within the broader left-democratic circles in India.

But that’s another story. As far as dominating or hegemonising the WSF is concerned, it is clear from the Sitaram Yechury’s article that the CPM approached the WSF with such a motive. They already ‘knew’ that “the only alternative to imperialist globalisation is socialism” and so their goal was just to “oppose the efforts to obfuscate” this ‘truth’ by the anarchists, social democrats and NGOs. That socialism also can be (and should be) re-articulated given the experiences from the past struggles and present situations – didn’t occur to them. This author remembers the large hoardings and wall paintings put up by the CPM and CPI at the gates of the WSF, proclaiming “Communism is the only Alternative”. However, it is unclear how far they succeeded in this project beyond such symbolic gestures.¹⁶

The Left against the WSF

In many ways the evaluation of WSF by the other Indian communist parties was done on similar lines. Thus the CPM and CPI(ML) Peoples War both considered that only they knew the ‘correct’ alternative to imperialism; they also shared the view that the Social Democrats and NGOs are major impediments who divert people from the ‘correct path’. This list of shared perceptions can go on. The only major difference perhaps was the fact that while the CPM, being a large party, could think of controlling the WSF, the other left organisations considered it impossible given their limited strengths.

¹⁵ Incidentally, he claimed that it was because of the pressure from left parties that the WSF was forced to declare a clear policy on funding.

¹⁶ A debate may be developed as to how to accommodate forces like the CPM, which have clear designs to hegemonise the WSF process.

Now we shall look at the criticisms and controversies generated around the WSF, which culminated in the formation of rival forums by a number of 'radical' Left formations.

On the Question of Violence

Much of the controversy around the question of violence arose partly due to some confusion in the charter of principles. In fact, as Jai Sen¹⁷ pointed out, there were actually two versions of the WSF Charter of Principles. The April 2001 charter states

The meetings of the World Social Forum are open to all those who wish to take part in them, except organisations that seek to take people's lives as a method of political action.

In the June 2001 version, this was modified as, "neither party representations nor military organisations shall participate in the forum". In the Indian WSF, the June Charter was supposed to be used. But mistakenly, the April version continued to be used. Many Indian Left organisations – CPI(ML) Peoples War, Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI), CPI (ML) Janasakti, CPI(ML)New Democracy etc – are involved, in some form or other, in violent movements in different parts of the country. So they naturally regarded this clause as a direct attack on their politics.

In my interviews, when I pointed out this aspect to the ML groups, many of them expressed their ignorance of the changed clause. However, Mrigank CPI(ML)(New Democracy), Abhinav (Communist League, Rahul Foundaion faction), Arjun Revolutionary Democratic Front (RDF) and many others opined that opposition to violence by WSF was only one (and not all) of the indicators of the true character of the WSF¹⁸. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the confusion produced an unnecessary controversy.

However, it does need to be discussed how far groups should be debarred from participating in the WSF due to their 'military characters'. For instance the EZNL of Mexico in some sense has become the symbol of the struggles of indigenous communities against neoliberalism. If such groups are debarred due their 'military characters', and on the other hand groups like the CPM are allowed to join just because they fight in a 'parliamentary' or 'legal' way, no matter what their record vis-à-vis neoliberal policies,

¹⁷ 'A Tale of Two Charters'; Jai Sen in *World Social Forum : Challenging Empires*.

¹⁸ Personal interviews with each of these people mentioned.

then it should become a point of concern for everyone who cares for the future of the WSF.

The Determinist View of History

Another point of controversy was clause 10 of the WSF Charter of Principles, which says

The WSF is opposed to all totalitarian and reductionist views of economy, development and history and to the use of violence as a means of social control by the state.

The left parties of India took this as an attack on Marxism.¹⁹ While quoting it, one of the pamphlets of AIPRF says, "it's a clear indication towards socialist states". In fact such accusations against Marxism, as being deterministic or reductionist, are quite old, and often with justified reasons. How far the official Marxisms of the erstwhile socialist states can be defended from the charges of being heavily informed by determinism and reductionism – I have serious doubts about it. Moreover, how far it is desirable to defend the erstwhile 'socialist' countries in Marxist terms is an open question to ponder over by all Marxists.

This clause produced particular controversy in India perhaps because of the specific nature and history of the Indian Left. The question of reductionism becomes particularly pertinent in relation to the Soviet or Chinese forms of Marxism. Since the Indian parties still owe their allegiance to these schools of Marxism, they feel particularly vulnerable to such accusations. It is interesting to note a declaration by the PT of Brazil that "the Berlin Wall didn't fall on us". The Left outside of India, to a large extent, has immunised itself against attacks on the Soviet or Chinese forms of Marxism. They also seem to be well aware of the limitations of these varieties of Marxism. So it is no wonder that while for others the inclusion of such clauses was thought to be providing a better guarantee of democracy and diversity within the WSF, for the Indian Left it became a symbol of the machinations of 'reactionaries' and NGOs.

Funding and the NGO Question

The question of funding and 'NGO-isation' constituted yet another important debate around the WSF. The general consensus among the Indian ML parties was that the WSF is a foreign/imperialist funded programme, spearheaded by NGOs. When asked if they knew about the

¹⁹ See AIPRF pamphlet in *WSF: Samrejabad Ka Naya Trojan Horse*

decision of the Mumbai WSF (in contrast to the Brazilian committee which had arranged earlier forums) not to accept funding from agencies like the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Britain's Department of International Development (DFID), they expressed their ignorance.²⁰ Interestingly Robert, a member of the CPM, claims that it was only because of the consistent pressure from the Left that the WSF India Committee was forced to take this decision. Amit Sengupta in one of his articles echoes a similar line of thought:

Here it may be noted that the Indian committee has departed from the practice of the previous editions of the WSF, where funding from Ford was accepted. This reflects the Indian committee's acceptance of misgiving within the country about the past role of Ford in aligning with imperialism and doubts about its present sincerity in supporting a forum that stands against imperialist globalisation.²¹

My personal feeling is that one needs to go beyond the debates of funding and the NGO factor for a number of reasons. While accepting the points made by these parties about NGOs and funding, nonetheless it is important to keep certain other aspects in mind.

First, it may be interesting to note that the coming of NGOs to India opened up certain spaces for dialogues and discussions. Due to the Stalinist traditions of the Indian Left it was not possible for the dissenting party cadres and intellectuals to take their concerns to the larger society. NGOs provided an institutional space and support base for these otherwise left or left leaning intellectuals to explore their fields of interests. The growth of many subaltern movements (like gay and lesbian movements, movements around the question of development, movements for the right of indigenous communities, etc) have a lot to do with the entry of NGOs in India. Most of these movements were hitherto neglected by the Indian Left. So, ironical though it may seem, the NGOs in many ways helped in a certain democratisation of the Indian society.²²

Secondly, there is a tendency within the Indian left parties to think that the ruthlessness and oppression of capitalism will make the people so

²⁰ An additional problem I encountered was over the question of authorship of the tracts on the WSF produced by these different parties. Since the authors were not mentioned in these pamphlets and booklets, it was hard to cross-question them.

²¹ Article by Amit Sengupta in *Peoples Democracy*, December 2003.

²² It has put a massive challenge to the mainstream Indian Left, which in my opinion is doomed to fail unless it addresses these issues in a creative manner.

destitute and helpless that they will *automatically* turn towards socialism as an alternative. The coming of the NGOs has put a dent in this expectation. While they do not address the core reasons for destitution, the NGOs do bring some temporary reliefs and remedies to the destitute. The distribution of free blankets by the Delhi Government (with the help of many NGOs) to the footpath dwellers during winter days is a clear example of this process. In other words, NGOs have tended to frustrate this fatalistic expectation of the Indian communists.

Third, the mode of left struggles in India has been in the form of demand for rights, such as the right to education, free medical services, transportation, and so on. Here, very often, the NGOs come up with temporary provisions (like the establishment of free medical camps for three months in an area where people under the left leadership were demanding a government hospital) and dilute these struggles.²³ So it has become necessary for the Left to seriously review their strategies of struggle and come up with more creative ideas which can counter these effects of the NGOs.

Tragically, this the Indian Left has been unable to do. They have continued in their old vein and are witnessing a shrinking support base among the people. The only method that they have come up with to counter the NGOs is ideological propaganda! Needless to say, this has not produced satisfactory results, given the lack of enthusiasm of the part of common people to sacrifice their immediate interests (provided for by NGOs) for the sake of some abstract ideas or a distant and non-secure dream of a workers' state.

The inability of the Indian left parties to cope with new challenges explains perhaps their paranoid perspective on the NGOs (which, needless to say, yields nothing!).

Post-Modernism, Revisionism, Trotskyism...

The left parties of India have been historically accustomed to a particular language, modes of representation, symbols and meanings. That tradition is clearly Stalinist and Maoist in character. On the other hand, the European and Latin American Left have traversed a different trajectory. Looking for reasons for these differences is perhaps outside the scope of this study. Nonetheless, we can briefly point out certain potential reasons for these

²³ In fact this example itself was cited by Mrigank, an ND activist, while explaining the dangers from the NGOs. Personal interview.

differences. First, India did not have a history of communist movement prior to the Russian revolution. The Indian Communist Party was formed under the shadow of the growing ascendancy of Stalinism within Soviet Russia. So except some rare cases (like MN Roy), whole communist cadres of the Indian Left were trained in the Stalinist doctrines. In contrast, Europe already had a well established tradition of left movement, before October 1917. The World Social Forum, perhaps for the first time, brought these other trends to India. The language used by these groups was certainly different from those of the Indian Left. The Left in India looked at these forces, who frequently deploy words like Stalinism or Maoism to mean authoritarian practices, with extreme scepticism.

However, beneath these apparent differences and hostilities, there is a possibility that these groups may come together if approached in a somewhat different fashion. For instance, during my interviews I asked Sunil (PDFI), Vijay (Majdur Ekta Manch) and Mrigank (IFTU) about what they understand by Socialism. In their answers, they said, it's all about the public ownership of the means of production. Their answer was archaic and had deep flaws. After all, the experiences of the erstwhile 'socialist' societies have shown us that just public ownership of means of production does not guarantee a just socialist society. Problems like bureaucratization still exists which very often generate the whole socialist models. However I felt that it would be unfair to expect them to dwell on the intricacies of these problems. In a situation, where very often, the necessities of day-to-day activism absorbs all the energies of an average party worker; and who hardly gets extra time to study and reflect; I as an 'student-intellectual' who has the luxury and facility to read 'all the great theoretical texts' should not try to prove my 'intellectual superiority' before them. After all, it seemed to me, socialism was a 'popular dream of a just system' for them; and though very vague and archaic, it was very 'real' and very desirable at the same time. I then decided to ask some more concrete questions. I asked, if they knew that in the USSR as well as in China big dams were built which dispossessed lots of people like those in the Narmada valley in India. Avoiding a definite answer, they insisted that there might have been some mistakes in those periods, but they were not intentional. This answer was still incomplete; but nonetheless a long way forward from the previous orthodoxies, which looked at the 'great leaders' (Lenin, Mao, or Stalin for instance) as infallible figures. I asked them if they could make sure that after the 'revolution' no further big dams would be built. They said, they would, if the things I am saying

about big dams is true; after all socialism is built through the consensus of the people. I also probed if they knew that the 'post-modernists' were the first people who raised their voices against such issues as big dams, demonstrating that certain models of development (beyond the binaries of capitalism and socialism) are harmful for human life and environment. This produced uneasiness and uncertainty in their faces. They said, may be, it's true. They were still reluctant to give credit to the 'heretics'(the post modernists, the Trotskyites etc), but they were ready to listen and know more about these things.

I was certainly doing caricature and oversimplification of facts and concepts here. But in the course of these interviews, I realized that beneath all the outcries against revisionism, post-modernism, Trotskyism and so on, there is a real dearth of knowledge about these concepts with the Left circles in India. And this is precisely where that I see a silver line of hope. Arundhati Roy, in one of her recent articles, has expressed hopes from the Indian Maoists precisely because many of them do not know who Mao really was or what he actually did in China!²⁴ For many in India, Mao and Stalin are the embodiments of all virtues, the symbols of struggle and sacrifice. They are not necessarily the symbols of authoritarianism or dictatorship. Rather they may the evoke the same kind of emotion which a T-shirt of Bakunin may do for an anarchist. So in other words, we can even expect from these revolutionaries to carry out many 'post-modernist' or 'anarchist' (e.g. movements against many harmful developmental models etc.) agendas. But for that matter, our approach towards these revolutionaries, needs to be a little different.

In other words, if approached in a different manner and with caution (without attacking the 'sacred' symbols of their Maoist doctrine), we may see the coming together of these sceptical 'radical leftists' with the other forces within the World Social Forum.

Alternatives to the WSF

The dissenting left formations came up with at least three different platforms as alternatives to the WSF. CPI(ML) New Democracy and State Organisation Committee, Tamil Nadu (henceforth SOC) came up with a programme called 'People Against Imperialism' on 19 and 20 January in Mumbai itself.

Another programme was organised by CPI(ML) Red Flag (now

²⁴ Arundhati Roy's article in *Samayantar*, April 2008.

reconstituted as CPI (ML)) on 14 and 15 January called 'Convention Against Imperialist Globalisation and War' which also happened in Mumbai.

The third and the biggest one was organised under the leadership of the Indian Maoists (particularly CPI(ML) Peoples War) called 'Mumbai Resistance 2004' which happened just in front of the World Social Forum venue.

One wonders what differences could have prompted so many 'platforms for joint actions'! We will discuss these programmes one by one.

People Against imperialism

As we have said, this programme was organised by CPI(ML)New Democracy (henceforth ND), CLI (Rahul Foundation faction) and State Organizing Committee (henceforth SOC). However, they organised it on behalf of their mass organisations and not as parties. Thus IFTU, New Democratic Literary Front (henceforth NDLF), Peoples Art and Literary Association (henceforth PALA) etc were given as the names of organisers. They published a document called 'Knowing the Enemy' against the WSF and the MR's inappropriate position vis-à-vis the former. To understand the nature and logic of this convention, we need to quote certain extracts from this document.²⁵ It says

WSF is a formation designed by the imperialists to divert and blunt the spontaneous anti-imperialist struggles and to nip the Communist politics that threatens to sprout up again. ... WSF is nothing but a puppet of Imperialism.

The document then takes stock of the position of the MR and wonders

While the strings as well as the hands that pull the puppet [ie, the WSF] are clearly visible and sufficiently exposed, the MR document worries about the ideology and practice of the puppet. ... Thus the 'criticisms' put forth by MR 2004 against WSF are not in fact criticisms. They sound more like an apology or explanation of an unfortunate situation in which they were forced to cause a divide in a great anti-imperialist people's movement. No wonder that the WSF constituents are invited to participate in MR 2004.

Talking about participants of the WSF, the document says

²⁵ This document was also published in the magazine, 'FRONTIER', Dec 21-27 2003

The ideological orientations of the constituents were so fragile that they could effortlessly be institutionalised by the imperialists. ... We cannot bestow the whole credit to the imperialists, lest we forget the role played by the anarchists and postmodernists, and their ideological influence over the masses. Militancy apart, these are also facts, which constitute the 'Seattle tradition'.

It continues

The advancement towards Communism through Socialism under the dictatorship of the proletariat is not just a theoretical formulation, but historically established truth. ...

Unable to project any credible political or ideological alternative, the imperialists are scared at the possibility of communism gaining influence as the alternative. This apprehension of the enemy is true despite the fact that the International Communist Movement is splintered and weak. Hence, the time-tested tactics of promoting social democrats, anarchists, Trotskyites and pseudo-communists is on the play now. The vanguard role of PT in the WSF and the active role of CPI, CPI (M), CPI M-L (Liberation) in India are part of this conspiracy. ...

Hence, the immediate task of the Communist Revolutionaries is to build a national as well as international front that projects Communism as the alternative to Imperialism and Capitalism. ...

Our alternative could be dishearteningly small in the beginning, lagging very much behind the fanfare and the media attention associated with WSF carnivals. ...

But we emphasise the importance of a co-ordination amongst the Communist Revolutionaries and the significance of building an independent anti-Imperialist movement before venturing into the formation of any broader front. ...

The NGOs are not just safety valves; they are the power centers of imperialism studded in the grass root to monitor the project of Recolonisation.

What appears broadly from these extracts and the document as a whole is as following:

1. Since the WSF is itself the conscious tool of imperialism, there can be no question of its ability or inability to fight imperialism. MR is wrong in trying to ideologically engage the WSF. In fact, MR is confused.

2. It is wrong for MR to claim the Seattle struggles for itself since they were not stable or guided by communists.
3. Anarchists, Trotskyites, Post-modernists etc are actively allying with imperialism against communism and the working class.
4. MR doesn't clearly claim to be a Marxist organisation. Such an organisation, with an ambiguous ideology, cannot fight and lead anti-imperialist struggles.
5. Before venturing into the formation of any broader front, it is important for the communist revolutionaries to co-ordinate among themselves and build an 'independent' anti-imperialist movement, a national as well as international front, even if at a small level.

These points (particularly the last) are helpful in analysing the ND-SOC sponsored programme. In my interview, I asked Mrigank (leader of IFTU and ND member) if some non-Marxist elements were present in their programme. His answer was in the negative. So this attempt at 'co-ordinating the communist revolutionaries' had no other groups except the ones organising it. I did not ask him about the number of people who participated in the convention. It was evident that it could not be more than two thousand.

Interestingly, as far as I personally remember, the assault of this forum was mainly against the Mumbai Resistance. Activists of ND were seen in the MR venue distributing booklets against MR! Mrigank also told me that ND was not presently interested in forming coalitions. This is perhaps due to the danger of being taken over by the Maoists forces. And perhaps this also explains (beyond the minute details of ideological differences) their lack of enthusiasm in participating in MR. In a way, the Maoists were accurate when they later criticised ND for being insufficiently critical of the WSF themselves, even while berating the MR for the same thing! During the interview, I noticed Mrigank's uneasiness due to lack of clarity over these details. I asked him how far he thought the 'People against Imperialism' convention could counter the WSF. In reply, he said, "Our duty was to show the correct way of struggle. And that's what we did."²⁶ A sense of isolation, confusion (and perhaps also guilt?), however, seemed to be there.

²⁶ Mrigank is in the top second rung leadership of ND. His lack of clarity over his party's position made me wonder how far the grassroots cadres really understand the differences of their party's positions with others.

Convention against Imperialist Globalisation and War

The CPI (ML) Red Flag and CPI (ML) organised this convention. Later on these two parties merged and came to be known as CPI (ML) Red Flag. The organisations participated in this convention as parties, since they believed that "it is the vanguard party which will lead the masses against imperialism and towards revolution".²⁷ These two parties also came up with a document²⁸ similar to that of ND. A few quotations from it will be germane, while avoiding points similar to those in the ND document.

The proletariat of the world as of India is in disarray; in the ideological sphere proletarian ideology has a very weak influence and bourgeois ideology is dominating. In such a situation it is natural that a mass movement, specially one whose constituent forces are predominantly bourgeois or petty bourgeois, will have a bourgeois character and will be led by bourgeois reformist aims. This is precisely what is happening in the case of the anti-Globalisation protests like the one in Seattle. These movements are not real anti-imperialist struggles. Real anti-imperialist struggles will grow up on a different basis and a different character of constituents as compared to these. ...

So the revolutionary proletariat will never contain within its struggle Seattle type anti-Globalisation movements or their continuations. ...

In this situation, the task of utilising such an anti-imperialist forum or establishing leadership over it is not objectively placed before the CRs. Those CRs who are thinking of using these forums or establishing leadership over them, ignoring the main features of the present day situation, are actually neglecting the main task of revolutionary communists and are tailing bourgeois liberal politics.

But the (Communist Revolutionaries) CRs convening MR 2004 have compromised on some such questions while building this organisation that amounts to virtually opposing the politics of class struggle. As a result the work of educating and organising the proletariat has been hampered.

Here Red Flag is making at least one interesting point. It argues that given the setback to the communist forces, it is not possible for them as of now to provide leadership to the present ongoing struggles and they are bound to be under the hands of the bourgeoisie! The document then

²⁷ Interview with PK Sahi, leader CPI(ML).

²⁸ Published in 'For a Proletarian Party', organ of the erstwhile CPI(ML) Red Flag.

says that the ambiguities coming out of the MR declarations was the product of precisely this: the limitations of the working class in asserting itself and its modes of struggle (class struggle, scientific socialism etc).

The contradictions in the document are easily discernible. Even if, for the sake of argument, we accept that due to the lack of a proletarian ideology the ongoing movements are bound to have some limitations, the question still remains. Why the proletarian ideology and working class struggle got weakened, after all? Was it due to imperialist conspiracy? Or due to the revisionist leadership of the communist movement? Or due to rigidity within the communist movement and the lack of creative responses in a changing situation?

Any honest attempt at reviving the communist movement must encounter these questions seriously. Unfortunately, we have yet to see any such endeavour on the part of the 'radical left'. (In fact, I feel that, the whole notion of being 'radical' must be reconceptualised today.)

One wonders, despite differences in language, how far this document is different from the ND one cited previously. Perhaps the only difference is that the latter tried to unite the communist parties, whereas the former tried to unite their mass organisations!

In his interview with me, PK Sahi stated that the party could not gain anything by convening a separate programme. His description of the convention was also grim:

Though participated in by some foreign delegates (Maoist parties of Philippines and Turkey), the convention was at best a de facto programme of our own party. ... Many party members individually participated in the WSF programme, but since hegemonising or using the forum (the WSF) was structurally not possible, we did not participate in it.

However, Sahi also commented that a joint forum is needed today to discuss the issues concerning the left movement, though non-left elements should not be welcome there.

Debates within the Maoists

Contrary to the general perceptions, the international Maoist camp was not united in their approach to the WSF. The committee of the Revolutionary International Movement (henceforth coRIM) was in favour of joining the WSF. It also had a different perspective on the origin and

nature of the WSF. In one of its letters addressed to the Indian Maoists, coRIM had this to say

The World Social Forum grew out of a conference first held in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 2001. ... It also involved a wide variety of social movements and NGOs in Brazil... Outside of Brazil the WSF was initially promoted by a section of the European left ... and is associated with the anti-globalisation mass mobilisations. In particular, the organisers of the WSF have tried to identify with and attract those forces that have emerged to oppose 'globalisation'.²⁹

This was clearly in contrast to the understanding of the Indian Maoists. While pointing out many of the 'limitations' of the initiators of the WSF, coRIM nevertheless refrains from dubbing it a 'imperialist conspiracy'

There were a lot of confusions and vacillations within the Indian Maoists. Thus while in its initial call on 9 November the MR declaration said that it is *not an anti-WSF programme*, towards a later period, *as coRIM pointed out* MR took a de facto anti-WSF stand. The letter says

Furthermore we were informed that a position had been taken that no participant in MR-2004 should take part in any WSF activity without 'denouncing' the WSF. Our feeling is that if representatives of the genuine anti-imperialist pole are able to participate in WSF activities they should do so. ...

The MR-2004 text one-sidedly denounces the slogan, 'Another world is possible'. This slogan of the WSF has been widely adopted and popularised around the world. This is because it addresses the deep desires of the masses for an end to the injustices of the present imperialist dominated world.

The letter then seems to take a U-turn. It says that while working in this manner, "we should be careful not to see these organisations³⁰ as substituting for our independent communist work". The letter, subsequently, makes an interesting observation:

Similarly, it is not correct for an organisation such as MR-2004 to polemicise against 'post-modernism'. Waging struggle on the philosophical front is indeed important and it is a weakness of the genuine MLM (Marxist Leninist Maoist) forces that far too little has been done to this point. But if we make rejection of 'post-modernism'

²⁹ Letter of the CoRIM, Dec 8 2003.

³⁰ Reference to allied organisations.

a requirement for joint action as the MR-2004 text seems to imply we will be unnecessarily cutting ourselves off from many progressive people who define themselves as 'post-modernists'. Groups such as ...MR-2004 are not effective vehicles for carrying out the struggle on the philosophical front, but they should be a vehicle for enabling the communists forces to interact with and influence broad sections of progressive minded people and in sense opening the way for us to carry out our independent communist work, especially the propagation of the stand, viewpoint and method of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism.

If we look carefully, we can discern certain interesting motifs in this letter. It reflects the specific situation of, and the contradictions faced by, the American Maoists.³¹ They were well aware of the emerging forces within the anti-capitalist movement the world over. Dubbing them as mere reactionaries or safety valves was difficult for these Maoists who, unlike the Maoists in India, do not have a remarkable support base and thus have to depend on solidarities and coalitions. About post-modernism also, the American Maoists seemed to be aware of the recent and serious ideological polemics around it. It was not possible for them to make a direct connection between post-modernism and imperialism.³² The international magazine of CoRIM reported on the MR in this fashion:

In a separate initiative, a number of political groups including the All-Indian Peoples Resistance Forum, the World People's Resistance Movement (South Asia), Bayan, the International League of People's Struggle, the Anti-Imperialist Camp and others are sponsoring a parallel event called 'Mumbai Resistance 2004' from 17 to 20 January. It is not in opposition to the WSF, but intends to build on the militant battles launched in Seattle and since then in order to develop "a solid anti-imperialist movement beyond reflective thinking and debate towards organised resistance against globalisation and imperialist war".³³

This letter should make those of us think again, who believe that the Maoists did not take part in the WSF due to their inherent authoritarian structures and practices, or that there is something inherently sectarian within the Maoist and Stalinist traditions.³⁴ To really understand why the

³¹ CoRIM is dominated by American members.

³² This was in clear contrast to the Indian left parties. In fact, CPI (Maoist) published a book on Postmodernism where it explains how it acts as a tool of Imperialism.

³³ A World To Win.

³⁴ It should be noted that even representatives of Maoist parties of countries like Turkey, the Philippines etc, though part of MR, also participated in WSF, albeit in their individual capacities.

Indian ML parties did not take part in the WSF, we need to understand the specificities of the Indian situation.

The Mumbai Resistance

The Mumbai Resistance 2004 was the biggest programme among those convened by the ML parties. It took place from 17 to 20 January right in front of the WSF programme. There are differences of opinion about the genesis of the Mumbai Resistance. The most common understanding is that it was the handiwork of the Indian Maoists. Another stream of thought says that this was a united response from all the Maoist parties of the world. However, the picture is more complex than it may first appear.

The idea to have a forum to sharpen the overall vision of the struggling people and movements came about for the first time after the Thessaloniki edition of the European Social Forum. However, the idea was confused in its inception. Though the International League of Peoples Struggles (ILPS, an international forum of different anti-imperialist people and organisations, which is generally believed to be under the leadership of the Maoists) came up with it initially, the exact form of it was not decided. Many constituents (including the Revolutionary Communist Party, the party of American Maoists) believed that the alternative (ie the subsequent Mumbai Resistance-2004) would not be against the WSF as such, but to sharpen the direction of anti-imperialist struggles. (I have discussed elsewhere the chasm between the American and Indian Maoists.) On the other hand, as it turned out, the Indian Maoists decided to clearly separate themselves from the WSF.

The confusions continued subsequently. Although the official line was that "it is wrong to either participate in or avoid the WSF", many a times this line was not followed. In fact, a large number of activists thought that MR was constituted to *oppose and expose* the WSF. The MR documents express the view that - the MR has created a power centre which will properly guide people against the directionless and open space culture of WSF.

As already pointed out, MR ended up becoming a sort of a de facto anti-WSF camp. Most of the groundwork was done by AIPRF, the mass organisation of the erstwhile CPI(ML)Peoples War. Meanwhile, some other groups like Yuva Bharat, Progressive Students Union (associated with the Sandhan faction of CLI), Bigul (a communist newspaper associated with CLI Rahul Foundation faction), CPI(ML) New Proletariat, CLI (Gargi

faction), Bharat Jan Andolan etc, along with many other individuals, came together and decided to hold a programme parallel to the WSF. I was present in a number of these meetings. The CLI(Rahul Foundation) faction felt that the proposed event/forum was not sufficiently against the WSF, and so at last they decided to quit the proposed (Mumbai Resistance-2004) programme, and joined the ND initiated programme instead. Other parties of the Left were also approached.

However, differences appeared between parties like CPI(ML) New Democracy and CPI(ML) Red Flag, and they later decided to hold their own forums. Letters were sent to other fraternal Maoist parties (like the Maoist parties of Nepal, Turkey, the Phillippines, the US etc). A significant number of non-Marxist parties such as Chattishgarh Mukti Morcha or Bharat Jan Andolan (BD Sharma), also joined in the initiative. In addition to them, human rights groups like PUCL, APCLC, Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS) were also invited. Nationality groups like JKLF, representatives from Baluchistan and Kurds were also present. In its reception committee, MR was successful in pulling together a significant number of 'big' personalities, like Habib Tanvir, Shireen Ratnagar, Om Prakash Valmiki, Anil Chamadiya, VR Krishna Iyer, Randhir Singh, Hiren Gohain, and Uma Chakravarty. Similarly, its cultural festival was opened by Nandita Das and Rakesh Sharma.

The Maoists from the very beginning were clear that the leadership should be in their hands. They have explicitly written this in their review book.³⁵ In fact it was visually in evidence everywhere. Huge banners of the Maoist parties of other countries (since technically, the Indian Maoists could not publicise themselves) were put up everywhere. In the programmes and seminars organised by MR, the shadow of the Maoists could be easily discerned. Thus, in the seminar on imperialism, it was discussed how the semi-feudal, semi-colonial countries of the third world (including India) can resist the increasing assault of imperialism. 'Semi-feudal and semi colonial' this is the exact term used by the Maoists to define the mode of production in India and in almost all third world countries. Similarly, in a characteristic Leninist-Maoist fashion, the nature of imperialism was described almost exactly in the same way that Lenin described it. An interesting event happened during this said session (on imperialism). A representative of Krantikari Lok Adhikar Sangathan (a mass organisation of one of the CLI factions) was supposed to present

³⁵ *WSF/MR ke prati Dristikon ka sawal*. New Vistas Publications.

a paper. But ultimately, he was not called to the dice by the convenors. It was felt that he was not invited to talk, precise because –his party believes that India is a capitalist country, though less developed than their western counterparts. The said party also believes that the nature of imperialism has changed heavily from the days of Lenin. Now inviting this person would run the risk of initiating a debate on these questions, which perhaps the Maoists felt unnecessary! So he was not invited!

Some people, like Shashikant Sonawane, resigned from the organising committee of MR because they felt that it was trying to reduce everything to the effects of imperialist influence. Similarly, in my interview with Subhash Gatade, editor of *Sandhan* (and member of the faction of CLI to which I politically belong), he said that there was almost no scope in the MR process to seriously debate the form of imperialism today. They are also not particularly enthusiastic about debating the mode of production in India.

In retrospect it seems to me that while the Maoists can be very liberal with their non-Marxist allies, they do not really want to bring into debate the 'basic principles' of Marxism. For instance, on the question of caste and dalit identity, papers were sought from dalit intellectuals by the MR committee, but the scope of the papers were already circumscribed to the impact of globalisation on dalits.³⁶ This was a clever attempt at subsuming the category of caste behind the universal and comfortable category of class. While attempts towards diffusion of different identities should certainly be made, they become problematic when they are performed in a prioritisation basis. In this sense, MR had nothing to say about caste as an independent category. Similarly, on the question of women, patriarchy and capitalism were shown to be natural allies under all conditions. There was not a single paper on patriarchy as such. The danger with such an approach is that it often ignores the subtle operative mechanisms of patriarchy. It refuses to recognise that patriarchy is *not* the product of capitalism, though both develop complex and manifold relationships with time. But these relationships are not always harmonious. On the other hand, patriarchy has remained very much alive in Russia and China even after the 1917 and 1949 revolutions. But the MR didn't seem to be bothered about these questions.

What I have been trying to show is that in all the seminars which happened during MR-2004, the shadow of the Maoist approach loomed large. The

³⁶ MR documents.

forum didn't really allow a diversification of thoughts and discussions, despite the presence of a considerably heterogeneous mass. All discussions were leading towards particular conclusions. The presence of a 'power centre' was felt by many. Anjali of Stree Adhikar Sangathan told me that precisely because they felt that 'free' discussions would not be possible in MR, they decided to join the WSF instead, notwithstanding their many doubts about the latter.

The Mumbai Resistance attracted a huge number of Muslim organisations,³⁷ both secular and liberal. The logic for inviting even the socially regressive organisations (like Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Hind) was that political unity across different people is necessary in the struggle against Hindu fascism. To me this seems like a direct inspiration from Dimitrov,³⁸ who understood Fascism basically in politico-economic terms.³⁹ Thus the theme paper on Fascism says

Democratic, progressive and secular forces have been shy of uniting with religious or 'fundamentalist' organisations of the minorities. They are defensive on this count. This is incorrect. The fight against the fascists is a political one and the platform to fight it needs only be a political one.

One wonders, how far such a thesis is sufficient or even universally valid today, given our knowledge of the limitations of the Dimitroviaan understanding of Fascism, which looks at it merely as "the dictatorship of the most reactionary elements of finance capital". In fact lots of left oriented people today argue that the battle against Hitler was lost by the Communist party of Germany precisely because of the inherent limitations of the Dimitroviaan line. People were not mobilized on the questions of broader democratization etc. Looking from this angle, it remains an important question as to how far the Maoists were right when they see hope within these fundamentalist groups of Muslim Clerics in the fight against the Hindutva fascism. One could have certainly benefitted from the writings of the scholars like Arthur Regensburg, Wilhelm Reich etc who have pointed out the roots of fascism within authoritarian cultural

³⁷ For names, see MR documents.

³⁸ Dimitrov, originally from Bulgaria, was the Soviet theoretician on Fascism during 1930s. Later on many contesting and more sophisticated Marxist theorisations also arose. However, the 'official/traditional' Marxist parties continued to use his thesis.

³⁹ This was evident in the theme paper presented by Saibaba (AIPRF) on Fascism; see MR documents.

practices. Such an alternative understanding of Fascism could have generated a different kind of peoples mobilization for these programmes. Why groups like sexual minorities, who have a history of resistance to the authoritarian cultural practices of the society were not mobilized, after all?

Here the point is not to debate the Dimitroviaan understanding so much (or to prove that it is essentially wrong) as to point out the complete absence of any other theorisation of Fascism in the discussions. It should also be pointed out that there was no enthusiasm among the 'conservative' minority organisations to join in the other proceedings of the MR. They remained focused solely on Hindutva fascism.⁴⁰ Nor was there any attempt at having them participate in other programmes.

The Reaction from the 'left out' Left Parties

There are many left formations which we have not discussed so far. Among them, CPI(ML) Liberation had quite an ambiguous position about the WSF. Though they did not convene an alternative programme, they did not 'officially' join the WSF either. However members at individual levels were certainly involved. The party had booked stalls at ASF as well as WSF sessions. Rohit Prakash, a card holding member of the party said

No clear directive was issued whether to join or oppose the event. However, the party said, one is free to go to the WSF or MR in personal capacities. The party kept the WSF in observation.

However, as far as I remember, many top leaders of Liberation like Swapan Mukherjee participated in the seminars organised in Delhi University as a warm up to the 'big event'. The party published two articles in its organ 'Liberation' about the WSF event. One of the articles comments that "the opportunity to meet a variety of activists, the atmosphere of cultural festivity, and intellectual debate felt really good", but also that "the frustration at the lack of real political action is something that many people have begun to voice". The articles remained open ended and didn't try to locate reasons for this 'lack of political action' within . However a hint towards NGOs was certainly there. This approach seemed relatively more sensible to me.

Among other parties, a group called the Communist Ghadar Party of India, in an open letter to all the communists in India, says that all

⁴⁰ I have observed this fact myself.

communists should come together, form a solid unity and participate in the forum activities. It further says

We request each and every one of you, communist and anti-imperialist fighters, to pay attention to two vital tasks during the discussions and debates in Mumbai. Firstly, there is a need to organise, to strengthen unity in action against imperialism. Secondly, there is need to step up the ideological struggle against those within the movement who are spreading illusions about capitalism, and about social-democracy or a 'middle' road between capitalism and socialism."⁴¹

Unfortunately, I could not get any further information about this party and its participation in the WSF.

Post-WSF: The Indian Social Forum 2006

The Indian Social Forum held its sessions from 9 to 13 November 2006. In terms of scale, it was much smaller than WSF-2004. On this occasion as well, the dissenting left organisations came together in a formation called 'People Against Imperialist Globalisation'. This was a one day convention held on 10 November at Garhwal Bhawan. The convention was attended by CPI-Maoist, CPI(ML) New Democracy and CPI(ML) New Proletariat through their mass organisations, though some independent groups also joined the convention, including Nepal Jan Adhikar Suraksha Samiti. However, no real explanation was provided for this reunion. The convention put forth two slogans: 'Future is a Socialist World', and 'Imperialism needs safety valves as Peoples Struggles rise'. So clearly this was a communist convention and not open to others.

The Indian Left in 2008: Looking for 'the Spectre of the WSF'

Did the WSF make any dent on the ideologies and thinking of the Indian left parties? Looking at the left parties in 2008, the answer seems ironical. The CPM, the party which was perhaps the most active (in terms of size and intensity) during WSF-2004, is pursuing neo-liberal policies in a most violent form, even more perhaps than many of the bourgeois parties. On the other hand, the Maoists have over the years have emerged as one of the most significant forces in the politics of the most peripheral regions of the country. Though officially not recognised as such, it is

⁴¹ Open Letter to all the communists and other anti-imperialist fighters converging in Mumbai in January 2004, CGPI.

evident that the WSF brought forward the question of United Struggles (or to say in the Maoist vocabulary, *United Front*) in an unprecedented way. The WSF did bring together large groups of people in a common space. It is probable that the Indian Maoists internalised this question in the most visible way. *If the WSF can bring people together, why not we? In fact, we should.* Perhaps thinking along these lines was going on in the heads of the Maoist leadership. The Mumbai Resistance perhaps would not have happened, had there been no World Social Forum! Certain interesting developments happened after MR-2004. The erstwhile CPI(ML) Peoples War and MCCI merged together to form the CPI (Maoist). The All India Peoples Resistance Forum (AIPRF) was dissolved and in its place the Revolutionary Democratic Front(RDF) was formed. The aim of RDF is to garner support exclusively for the 'revolutionary movement' in the countryside. Simultaneously, another front was launched, called the Peoples Democratic Front of India (PDFI). The aim of PDFI is to coordinate different anti-imperialist and anti feudal struggles going on in India. Today, PDFI has a large number of organisations as members and allies, including NAPM of Medha Patkar. Though not formed in the spirit of the WSF, these alliances certainly indicate the growing realisation of the need to form broad coalitions to fight the common enemy. How far the WSF actually stimulated this process is far from clear. However, a certain speculation about its causative/lateral effects seems inevitable.

The Author 'in the First Person'

I first heard about the WSF during its Hyderabad session. However, at that time my knowledge about it was quite limited. My roommate was in AIPRF then .He went to Hyderabad and brought some interesting posters from there. I still remember the text of one: 'Water is a right, not a commodity'. Chayan, my roommate, spoke very highly of the ASF convention. After a few days, however, one of our friends named Kumar had this to say: "It was interesting, but lots of NGOs were there. They don't actually believe in struggles."

But my actual encounter came only when 'the WSF was declared'. A series of seminars was organised in different colleges of Delhi University. By that time the CPM had declared that it would also join the WSF. This was the time many of us were just beginning to get active in left wing politics. But we were already developing a peculiar kind of disgust with the CPM. I didn't particularly appreciate their bureaucratic style of functioning. We saw that many students with deep caste and Hindu

religious biases were also members of SFI, the student wing of the party. Once CPM got associated with it, our scepticisms about the WSF grew. We avoided participating in WSF affairs.

After some time, the formation of MR was declared. Within our organisation, the Progressive Students Union (a student wing associated with one of the factions of Communist League of India), we started debating which forum was the better one. We finally decided in favour of MR. However, we also decided to 'unofficially' go to the WSF. In retrospect, it seems to me, we lacked clear information about the WSF. Personal ties and images proved to be more decisive in solving the MR-WSF dilemma. Whereas the programmes associated with the WSF were organised in seminar rooms and halls of colleges and other institutions, MR programmes were held in lawns and open spaces. Most of the people who would go for the WSF seminars happened to be from upper class, urban families often without any ties with political organisations; whereas MR programmes were attended by committed activists, often from lower middle class families. At a time when doctrinal Marxism was seeping into our heads, the image of the self-sacrificing revolutionary seemed more attractive to many idealists like me. I remember a friend joking: "Have you heard the criticisms that the WSF people are making about us? They are calling us Stalinists!" For a young idealist, the icon of Stalin was like the symbol of 'pure' (and thus revolutionary!) Marxism!

During the sessions of the Mumbai Resistance I didn't really feel suffocated, simply because in those times I could not understand them. For instance, Lenin's theory of imperialism itself was new to me. So I did not break my head over other theorists like Rosa Luxemburg or Bukharin! Also, due to its sheer heterogeneity and size, the WSF seemed like a *mela* (festival). Moreover, we did not really like the system of entry fee and pass checking within the WSF venue. While MR also had a fee, it was nominal (as against the WSF fee in three digits). So ironical though it may seem, to many of us the WSF seemed more bureaucratic than MR. We felt as if a wall between the poor and the rich existed within the WSF. If I remember correctly, the people checking passes in the WSF were no different from the security guards at malls and hotels these days. While in MR, the volunteers constituted of political activists and thus one could hope for minimal decency from them.

It is not that authoritarianism was not there in MR. In fact a large part of this paper is just about the limitations of MR. During the last day in MR, baton wielding volunteers did not allow people to leave the venue as

they needed more people for the rally! However, many of the common activists like us did not have to face much of the high-handedness in MR (for instance, on the question of speakers in the seminars, or feuds within the organising committees) simply because we were not meant for those jobs!

Moreover, inside MR, there was a centralised food distribution system. Everyone, including the speakers, used to take the same food – together! It helped in bringing about certain kinds of solidarities among people. In the WSF, there were lots of food stalls. At one level they seemed attractive, but at another they gave the picture of a marketised and thus unequal space, where people buy food according to their monetary capacities. The point I am trying to make here is that the presence of more democratic ideas/theories in the WSF did not automatically guarantee a real democratic atmosphere. Often MR seemed more ‘people friendly’.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The WSF process certainly created a massive upheaval within the leftist circles of India. On the one hand it brought hope, optimism and energy to a large section of the progressive forces; on the other, it raised doubts, anxiety and confusion within another segment of the Left of the Indian political society. For many who call themselves leftists or communists, the coming of the WSF was the first opportunity to get to know what was really happening on the ‘other side of the globe’. Debates, discussions and seminars began to be organised around ‘what the WSF is all about’. There was greater awareness of newer modes of struggle and organisation. These processes produced new kinds of sceptics as well. The Left in India, long accustomed to a Soviet or Chinese form of Marxism, was placed in an awkward situation. It didn’t really appreciate this ‘new mood’ which was perceived as a threat. But nonetheless, being a big party the CPM could think of dominating the process, but such an option did not exist for many others. This led to the formation of altogether different forums and united platforms.

In retrospect, many of the debates and controversies about the WSF seem misplaced. Too much polemics on funding and the ‘inherent inability’ of open space politics to deliver fruitful political praxis obscured the more interesting aspects of the whole process, such as the experiments with new forms of organisation, or building horizontal solidarities based on voluntary participation.

Too much energy went into trying to settle questions like - whether the WSF is progressive or reactionary; or whether it is really possible to 'hegemonise' the WSF and bring it under 'proletarian ideology'. Unfortunately, almost no real attention was paid to the 'spirit' of WSF.

One wonders if such unproductive debates could have been avoided. In some sense, the Indian Left was not yet ready for the WSF. The WSF's 'new language' tended to produce panic within the ranks of the communist parties. The charter of principles similarly provoked unnecessary controversies, which could perhaps have been avoided if the charter was reworded with a view to the 'sensibilities' of the Indian left parties and their traditions. The bureaucratic structure of the Indian left parties produced its own share of problems. But it seems to me that more careful, consistent and passionate dialogues about the 'real meaning' of the open space politics of the WSF⁴² could have produced better results.

Almost all the 'alternatives' which came up against or in parallel to the WSF proved to be hastily conceived, at times self-contradictory and based on archaic notions of organisation and united front. But that should not detract from the 'mistakes' that the WSF made, which contributed to the consolidation of anti-WSF views. For instance, notwithstanding the 'archaic and bureaucratic' manner and methodology of the Indian Maoists, they are the people defending the rights of some of the most poor people in the interiors of the country.

On the other hand, the CPM has been increasingly becoming indistinguishable from the other bourgeois parties in terms of its growing acceptance of neo-liberal models of development. Yet, the Maoists remained outside the WSF and the CPM became insiders? We need to reflect on such ironies if we want to build successful global movements against empires and their associates.

Notes

1. Almost all of the parties discussed here, are Leninist in Party principles where the central committee decides the work and general political line of the mass organisations. These kinds of party structures are often accused of being authoritarian and bureaucratic.
2. Among the left parties in India, CPI – M is the biggest one. Its mass organisations are SFI, CITU, SYFI, AIDWA etc. The party is also

⁴² As formulated in the article by Amit Sengupta.

known as CPM. It contests in elections and uses 'legal' means only. It has state governments in Kerala, Tripura and West Bengal. In west Bengal the party has been there for almost 30 years.

3. The parties which write ML after their names consider their origin at Naxalbari movement. Many of them still believe in armed struggle. The so called Maoists are also included in them.
4. CPI (Maoist) (formed after the merger of CPI-ML-peoples War and MCCI) is perhaps the biggest Maoist formation in India which believes in armed struggle. Its work is spread into Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand etc.
5. CPI(ML) liberation also an offshoot of Naxalbari movement. However the party now a days contests in elctions and do not take up arms. Mass organisations – AISA, AIPWA etc.
6. CPI (ML) formed after the merger of two erstwhile naxalite parties i.e. CPI-ML and CPI-ML-Red Flag. Mass organisations – AIFTU etc.
7. CPI(ML) New Democracy (shortly ND) – also a naxalite formation. However do not generally take up arms. Mass organisations – IFTU, PDSU, etc.
8. Communist League Of India (also known as CLI-ML or simply CLI.). it is divided into lots of factions now. The party believed that India is a capitalist country and thus the stage of Indian revolution will be socialist revolution. They do not take arms.

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Abbreviations used in the paper

AIFTU	All India Federation of Trade Unions
AIPRF	All India Peoples Resistance Forum
ASF	Asia Social Forum
CoRIM	Committee of Revolutionary International Movements
CPI-M	Communist party of India (Marxist)
CPI (ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist)
CPI(ML) Liberation	Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) Liberation
CPI-Maoist	Communist Party of India (Maoist)
CPI(ML) Peoples War	Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) Peoples War
CLI	Communist League of India
CR	Communist Revolutionary
IFTU	Indian Federation of Trade Unions
ISF	Indian Social Forum
MCCI	Maoist Coordination Centre of India
MR	Mumbai Resistance
ND	Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) New Democracy
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
PALA	Peoples Art and Literary Association
PDFI	Peoples Democratic Front of India
Red Flag	Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) Red Flag
SOC	State Organising Committee
WSF	World Social Forum

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