

BRINGING JUSTICE AND CULTURE BACK IN: GLOBAL ACTION FOR LOCAL LIVELIHOODS

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Introduction

This chapter seeks to illuminate the endemic structural conditions that prevent the realisation of a just and democratic society. What is problematised, therefore, is not just the complex relationship between the State, economic globalisation, democratic governance and impoverishment but also the centrality of culture and plurality in people's struggles for economic security, justice and dignity.

Most of these struggles have been part of implementing alternatives that improve – often dramatically – the lives of millions of people. Moreover, they point to the urgent need to bring into focus the interrelationships between the economy and culture, knowledge, nature and justice, and between transnational alliances and place-based politics.

Merely addressing 'poverty' with primarily economic interventions hides these interrelationships and the processes that cause and sustain impoverishment. Millions of those whom the development industry calls 'poor' are, in fact, victims of these processes. This chapter seeks to highlight six of these processes, how national and transnational civil society initiatives are responding to them, and the lessons that they have taught us. I use the term 'impoverishment' because 'poverty' does not capture the fact that, in most cases, deprivation and scarcity is caused and sustained by external processes which need to be recognised and addressed. Each of these processes highlights the paucity of serious responses from the global and national political and economic establishment. The chapter then presents three case studies that address some or all of these processes. The last section presents some continuing challenges.

It is important to note that there are several other critically important local, national and global factors that make the realisation of widening spheres of civil spaces even more complex and challenging – for instance, the resurgence of various nationalisms and ethnicities; the imposition of homogenous and monocultural solutions to plural cultural, agricultural and ecological systems; and, the persistence of high levels of domestic corruption

and individual greed – where the State is either a silent spectator or, worse, a collaborator.

The analysis and the cases are drawn primarily from India, where an intensification of the process of economic liberalisation began in 1991 with a gradual decline in the state's welfarist role. A transition took place towards policies that facilitated privatisation and economic globalisation giving rise to a celebratory mood among a minority about the almost 9 per cent growth rate and the supposed capacity of such growth to solve the country's endemic problems.

While the ruling classes and a growing middle class are increasingly absorbed in this belief, the majority continue to live their lives plagued by insecurity, destitution and social violence. Several studies show that both rural inequality and urban inequality increased between 1993–94 and 1999–2000 (Sundaram and Tendulkar 2003; Sen and Himanshu 2005). Others suggest that, despite 15 years of unprecedented economic growth, over 77 per cent of Indians live on less than Rs 20 (40 US cents) a day (NCEUS 2007). This average further suggests that a majority earns even less, with its plight being compounded by any one or all of the factors to be discussed shortly. These factors, individually or collectively, create and sustain scarcities and compound economic impoverishment. The socio-political people's alliances described throughout the chapter are directly responding to these structural and systemic forces and are therefore different from the largely palliative efforts that are characteristic of the contemporary development enterprise.¹

¹ *There has been an almost parallel progression of adverse social and environmental effects of the current patterns of economic development and 'anti-poverty' programmes. 'Safety nets', 'social safety nets' and poverty alleviation schemes continue to be introduced with few positive or sustained impacts. Most are designed primarily to mitigate extreme poverty or deflect the possibility of social unrest arising out of social exclusion and want.*

Six contextual processes that create and compound impoverishment

The Corporatisation of the State and the weakening of its welfarist roles

The past two decades have witnessed two parallel processes – a more explicit (though not absolute) recasting of the State to facilitate the expansion and control of private capital, and its partial withdrawal from core welfarist responsibilities. Increasingly, the State and private capital serve narrow interest groups – nationally and globally – and have elevated Economic Man above other human pursuits, in the process demeaning other ways of knowing, being and becoming that have the potential of creating a just, equitable and ecologically secure world. In India we are witnessing unprecedented and intense State activism to promote changes in the institutional and legal framework in order to accommodate the new capitalist culture.

It is of some significance that at a time when so much of the central government's activities are committed to the neo-liberal restructuring of the economy, it has also been responsible for some of modern India's most progressive legislation.² Whether it was promulgated to appease increasingly restive communities or was simply an effort to keep the ruling coalition together by accommodating its partners, most of it is palliative – it fails to address the structural causes of inequity and injustice.

In fact, the State is playing a far more 'hard' and aggressive role in legitimising the penetration of corporate capital, and in those processes that deepen the commodification of expanding spheres of life. Across the country, the State has also stepped up the use of its civil and military forces to privilege private capital.

The increasing lack of economic and social security among a majority of the population, as well as the State's gradual withdrawal from basic health, education and training opportunities, plays havoc with people's hopes. Hopelessness breeds despair; the growing spread of armed radical movements is an indication of the deepening polarisation and of the vulnerable being influenced by these movements. This expanding sphere of restlessness and frustration is also being manipulated by other political forces, including many right-wing political parties and groups, for divisive and destructive ends.

² Notable examples include the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005, The Right to Information Act 2005 and The Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006.

Across India, community activists and human rights defenders who have been peacefully struggling for justice have been labelled as 'extremists' or 'Naxalites'. Police and local administrations have levelled a battery of false charges against them, in the process creating a climate of fear that often acts as a deterrent to the capacity of groups to challenge the State's authority. The incarceration of medical doctor and human rights activist Binayak Sen, and the refusal of the State to release him despite massive national and global pressure, are powerful illustrations of this process.

Globally, most Third World nation-states have been usurped by their ruling elites. A significant proportion of their bureaucratic, political and military establishments pursue common interests and goals with their counterparts in the First World, increasingly distanced from the reality of their own societies. Friedman's (2005) flat world is clearly evidenced in the lives and lifestyles of the wealthy minority. In India, threatened by an increasingly restive population, this minority lives in what has been an explosion of gated communities manned by private security agencies and with private hospitals, clinics, schools and clubs serving their needs. Meanwhile, the majority have access only to neglected State-run schools with declining facilities or to health care in hospitals stretched beyond capacity.

National movements for justice and dignity continue to be up against these powerful currents. Their task is all the more challenging as international economic institutions and national governments are becoming far more sophisticated in responding to criticism and dissent. The large sums of donor money available for NGOs, the selective involvement of NGO members, the co-optation and 'management' of dissenting or alternative language as well as the possibilities for lucrative contracts and consultancies have effectively muffled and divided dissenting voices. As a result, some transparency is created but the roots and manifestations of iniquitous political and economic control remain largely unaddressed. It is only in the past few years that a renewed mobilisation within and across borders has become evident, creating nervousness among ruling elites and the dominant structures of governance. This interplay and contestation will be one of the many crucial developments in the world's political and cultural landscape.

This landscape will also witness significant changes in political theory and action as global production, the mobility of global capital and finance and the creation



of mega-corporations contest and even attempt to smother nationally bound labour–capital relations. The role of the State in these transforming relations as well as its re-conceptualisation as capital seeks to use it for its ends; and internal and transnational democratic forces that pressure the State to democratise itself will also increasingly preoccupy political and social consciousness and action. At the moment, however, in the name of good governance, the dominant logic is that, despite the current economic downturn, the State will have to continue to embrace market-friendly policies (World Bank 1997), ensure a stable climate for corporate investment and implement massive programmes of infrastructure development that primarily facilitate a rapacious and undemocratic neo-liberal agenda.

All this – the changing face of dominant processes of globalisation; the unity of ruling elites; the fragmentation of popular movements; the lack of strategies to sensitise political parties, the economically poor and the middle classes; the consequent decline of radical politics; the emerging mobilisation and transnational alliances; and the innovation and creativity that is emerging in the debates and actions of those involved in building and strengthening national and transnational linkages – all this forms the backdrop to understand the building of the global alliances to structurally address economic impoverishment and struggle for economic, cultural and ecological justice.

Intensification of the polarisation of wealth and inequalities of power

India's Cabinet Secretary, K M Chandrasekhar (2008), was candid enough to admit that the widening gap between India's rich and poor is an 'undisputed fact' and that, in the process of growth, distributive justice has been a 'bit of a casualty'.

'A bit of a casualty' is a gross understatement, as evidenced by the government's own reports. A report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS 2007), titled *Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in Unorganised Sector*, reveals that 86 per cent of the working population (394.9 million workers) are unorganised and work under 'utterly deplorable' conditions with 'extremely few livelihood options'. A further disaggregation highlights that an overwhelming majority are even more vulnerable – 88 per cent of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, 80 per cent of Other Backward Classes and 85 per cent of Muslims earn less than Rs. 20 per day.³

The *India: Urban Poverty Report 2009* also mirrors the above: 'Certain aspects of economic development and the changes associated strongly with the process of urbanisation in India have created a backwash effect for the poorer sections of the urban community... urban workers are increasingly being pushed into the informal sector' (Ministry of Housing and Poverty Alleviation and UNDP 2009: 3).

It's the rural areas that have faced the greatest hardship. The National Sample Survey Organisation's *Situation Assessment Survey of Farmers* (NSSO 2003) – 'conducted for the first time in the history of the NSSO' – reveals that in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, where farm suicides were at their worst, 'four fifths of surveyed farmers were in debt', and that in 2003 the average *monthly* per capita expenditure (MPCE) of farm households across India was Rs 503. It is important to note that this is an average across regions and classes and income groups, so that even this grim reality hides huge regional inequities. States like Jharkhand and Orissa had MPCEs of Rs 353 and Rs 342, respectively.

The situation is so grave that even the agriculture minister conceded recently that 'In the budgetary provision, not more than 2% [of the national budget] has been allocated for agriculture, [though that is] where more than 65% of the population works' (Sainath 2005).

Indeed, the overall experience in India suggests that most of the wealth generated by economic globalisation does not trickle down to the poor. In fact, the very structures in government and in the community that can redistribute wealth, protect social services and strengthen livelihoods are being compromised or eroded. Of course, there is significant unevenness in incidences of economic impoverishment. While palliative interventions – investments in assets like irrigation or asset building micro-credit programmes – can alleviate impoverishment, they do not address the dominant system that perpetuates inequality and

³ For decades now there has been a raging debate on poverty levels in India – not just the numbers but also the methodologies adopted, whether incomes or nutritional levels should be the basis for enumeration, whether surveys are seasonal or annual, what the base year for calculation should be, and so on. This is not the place to present and discuss these ideological and methodological differences. The numbers quoted here are from the most exhaustive national sample surveys conducted. For a comprehensive critique of the Indian Planning Commission and the World Bank's erroneous methodology in calculating poverty levels, see Patnaik (2006). Also see Reddy (2008).





deprivation. What work are interventions that address the very structures of inequality and strive to secure more equitable control over productive resources.⁴

This scenario is even more distressing when compared with the gains made by a small minority of the economically wealthy, thus underscoring the growing gap between those who continue to amass economic assets and those who remain marginal or without assets. Between 1999 and 2007 the membership of India's Billionaire Club increased from three to 533, representing a combined wealth of Rs 12.32 trillion. These trends are mirrored globally. The UNDP's *Human Development Report* (2005: 4) states that inequalities have widened sharply with the 'world's 500 richest individuals having a combined income greater than the poorest 416 million' and '40% of the world's population account for 5% of global income' while 'the richest 10%, almost all of whom live in high-income countries, account for 54%'. Another report states that the GDP of the 41 Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (567 million people) is less than the wealth of the world's seven richest people combined (World Bank URL). A recent US assessment (Cavanagh and Collins 2008) says: 'Over the past three decades, market-worshipping politicians and their corporate backers have engineered the most colossal redistribution of wealth in modern world history, a redistribution from the bottom up, from working people to a tiny global elite.' Another report suggests that 'The richest 1 percent of Americans currently holds wealth worth \$16.8 trillion, nearly \$2 trillion more than the bottom 90 percent' (Heuvel 2008).

Concentrations of economic wealth are an obstacle to social justice as the powerful seek to protect the very processes that yield such rapid accumulation. What is unfolding in India is, unfortunately, similar to what Barbara Ehrenreich calls the 'American plutocracy'. (Ehrenreich 2002). Capitalist institutions constitute themselves on the basis of a naturalisation of inequality, and the struggle for equity and justice must squarely contend with and contest this institutional system itself.

⁴ *Since most literature assumes that poverty is a given and that economic growth is essential for its removal, very little empirical work has been done on the linkages between the creation of agency and economic mobility among the impoverished. One of the pioneering articles was by N. Jodha (1988). For another useful if incomplete analysis, see Krishna (2004). Also see Chambers (1997).*

Intensifying the creation of scarcities

A significant amount of economic development continues to come from the intensive and extensive exploitation of natural endowments (land, forests, water and mineral wealth) – endowments that directly sustain the livelihoods of a majority of people. Economic development continues to be largely based on the continuing elite control and manipulation of these 'resources'. Numerous wars and invasions have been unleashed on countries and peoples to secure and sustain iniquitous control over them. If the US, with 7 per cent of the world's population, consumes about 40 per cent of the world's resources, we must recognise that this model rests on the continuing colonisation, and the creation of deprivation in vast areas, of the world. It is, therefore, critical to recognise that this development, iniquitous control and consumption themselves produce scarcities and impoverishment. There is also growing awareness of the unsustainability and ecological footprint of these patterns of development. In countries like India, where the majority depend on nature for their subsistence, an undermining or external appropriation of productive resources has an adverse impact on livelihoods and security.

As iniquitous development has consolidated itself, the private corporation has become the most powerful institution (with the backing of the State) exercising political and economic control over the direction of national and global economies. The power of these institutions depends on their ability to perpetuate myths of development and prosperity primarily based on privileging money, profit and consumer goods. To a large extent, most of the policies and funded programmes of international financial organisations that claim to be developmental institutions addressing or eradicating economic poverty instead legitimise an economic path that displaces people, destroys local and even national economies and creates massive scarcities.

As the case studies in this chapter substantiate, there has been a growing crisis of the survival of India's ecosystem people – farmers, fishworkers, indigenous and tribal people and the millions whose livelihoods are dependent on them. Given that a majority of them are farmers, the crisis of agriculture is among the most critical. The post-1991 phase has witnessed cuts in subsidies and investment, a shrinking of credit, deregulation of the agricultural market with growing corporate control of seeds, inputs and output, further escalating debt, landlessness and impoverishment. What has also



Box 3.1: Global pressure on the Dalits' livelihood – a myth

This contribution examines whether the often articulated theoretical assumption that the Dalits' livelihood options are under pressure and shrinking, due to the effects of globalisation since the late 1980s, is empirically correct. It considers whether there is any scope for such pressure and if so, whether that comes from within or outside India. What the Dalits have gained since the late 1980s is also considered. But before answering these questions, it is necessary to outline the concept of *Dalits* in terms of the people the term stands for and their numerical strength in India.

Dalits in India

The terms *Dalits* and *Scheduled Castes* (SCs) are used here interchangeably, although their meanings differ in their socio-religious, historical and constitutional contexts. In Hindu scriptures, they have been referred to as *Dasa* and *Dasyu*, *Ati-Shudras*, *Panchamas* and *Chandalas*, etc. Others, particularly the architect of the Indian Constitution Dr Ambedkar identified them as non-Hindus, referring to terms such as *avarnas* (people without/outside Hindu *varna* system), *antyajas*, *antyavasin* (people who lived at the end or outside village), *Broken People* and *Protestant Hindus*. They were *Untouchables* and *Depressed Classes* for the British, *Harijans* (children of Hindu God *Hari*) for Mahatma Gandhi, and *Scheduled Castes* for the Constitution of India. Though all SCs are Dalits, all Dalits are not SCs because the Dalits in Islam and Christianity have not yet been recognised as SCs, and thus are not entitled to any of the constitutional benefits that accrue to their counterparts in Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism.

According to the Census of India 2001, the number of SCs in India is over 166 million, comprising 16.2 per cent of the total population (2001). Though their population has increased many fold over the decades, their proportion to the total Indian population has remained only 15 to 16 per cent since 1951. However, the decline in their rural population from 90.06 per cent in 1951 to 79.8 per cent in 2001, and the increase in their urban population from 9.94 per cent in 1951 to 20.2 per cent in 2001, is worth noting.

Dalits' livelihood under global pressure?

A sustained livelihood is recognized universally as a basic necessity for every individual irrespective of his or her socio-economic status, and political and ideological orientations to keep the mind and body healthy and to work towards progress. To ensure such a livelihood, one must have access to one or more means such as land, employment or business; professional or traditional skills; or some machinery/equipment etc. It is therefore logical to examine whether the Dalits had access to such means, particularly to land and employment, prior to the advent of globalisation in the late 1980s, and if so whether they lost or gained more access to those means after the process of globalisation set in.

Access to land

According to National Sample Survey Organisation's report No. 491 (NSSO 2003), the percentage of rural SC households that did not own any land at all was 8.1 in 1992. Encouragingly the percentage declined to 5.7 in 2003, enhancing the scope for ensuring the livelihoods of more SCs by the time the process of globalisation had made significant inroads into the Indian economy. Even as per NSSO report No. 516 (2005), the percentage of landless rural SC households declined from 20.4 in 1987-88 to 18.1 in 1993-94, and further declined to 2.7 in 2004-05. Though the sharp decline in 2004-05 is attributed to the non-inclusion of homestead land (cultivable land around the house) in the previous surveys, the fact that there has been a reduction, since globalisation set in, in the percentage of landless households among SCs cannot be ignored.

These data tend to give an impression that most of the SCs own land. But, the same NSSO report (No.516) reveals that most of the SC households (65.1 % in 1987-88, 68.5% in 1993-94, 79.7% in 1999-2000 and 86.9% in 2004-05) owned less than one hectare of land. However, during globalisation, not only did a sizeable percentage of landless SCs become a landowning class (although the quantum of land owned was less than half hectare), but also the percentage of such households increased. For instance, the percentage of SC households who owned less than half a hectare of land was about 50 in 1987-88 increasing to 53.6 in 1993-94, 65 in 1999-2000, and 72.2 in 2004-05. There was hardly any change in the percentage of SC households who possessed half to one hectare of land. Though there was a decline in the percentage of SC households possessing between two and four hectares of land, and four and above hectares, the decline was marginal. Thus the argument that the SCs have lost whatever little land they had due to globalisation or global pressure, thus threatening their livelihoods, is baseless and empirically incorrect.

Access to employment

Two important data sources for the SCs' employment status since the 1980s - the Census of India and NSSO surveys – contest the frequent claims by social scientists that the processes of globalisation have seriously affected the employment opportunities of the most vulnerable sections of the society, particularly the Dalits. For instance, the percentage of SC workers (main and marginal) to the total SC population (work participation rate) was 39.6 in the 1981 census (the pre-globalisation period). The percentage remained about the same in 1991 (39.2%), and showed a marginal increase in 2001 (40.4%). Among all SC workers, the percentage of main workers remained more or less the same in 1981 (91.1%) and 1991 (91.9%), and declined significantly to 73 in 2001. But such a decline was evident even prior to globalisation: for example, the percentage of SC workers was 48.13 in 1961 and 36.64 in 1971 (Census of India 2001). How then can such a decline be attributed only to global pressure?

Even the NSSO report No.516 (2005) reveals a similar increasing trend in the employment status of SCs since the 1980s. The percentage of SCs employed was 33.6 in 1983, 40 in 1987, and 40.3 in 1994. Although in 2000 the percentage declined to 38.6, it increased to 40.4 in 2005. Even if the rural and urban scenario are considered separately, a similar trend is evident. On the whole, these indicate that since the beginning of globalisation the employment status of SCs has not deteriorated, if not increased drastically, contrary to the claims of economists and social scientists.

Other gains

During globalisation the Dalits in India have been able to give global visibility to their issues, taking the support of a number of local, national and global level civil society organisations, and rightly placing caste issues before the United Nations. In this period some civil society organisations acquired land for the landless Dalits. For instance, between 2005 and 2009, the Campaign for Human Rights, a civil society organisation in Beed district of Maharashtra, along with a number of other organisations, acquired over 17,840 hectares of unused government land (*gairan land*) in the Marathwada region of the state, which ensured the livelihoods of as many as 15,789 Dalits in the region (Jameen Adhikar Andolan 2008). It was during this time, for the first time in the Indian judicial history, that the sessions court of Bhandara in Maharashtra pronounced capital punishment for six men and life imprisonment for two men, all belonging to the Backward Castes, for killing four members of the Dalit Bhotmange family in Khairlangi village. However, the Brahmin-dominated Indian judiciary refused to acknowledge the caste factor behind the killing, a common response in such cases (Menon 2008).

Also during this period thousands of Dalit labourers, technocrats, and professionals have been able to move to rich countries to earn a better living. The presence of outside media in India has indirectly forced the local media to give coverage to Dalit issues. The coming of multinational corporations to India and their concept of corporate social responsibility and diversity policies have influenced local industries and institutions to initiate some welfare measures in favour of Dalits. While multinationals are willing to recruit talented Dalits to their workforces, local companies bluntly deny Dalits such options, labeling them as inefficient. On the whole, the Dalits in India have gained during the globalisation era. After all, what do they have that the process of globalisation could take away from?

Moral responsibility of global civil society

Dalits continue to be the victims of caste. Their livelihood is under threat not because of global pressures or globalisation, but mainly due to their location at the bottom of the caste system that justifies their exploitation by those above them. Therefore, global civil society organisations have the moral responsibility to sensitise individuals and communities of Indian origin to value the ideals of Indian Constitution – liberty, equality and fraternity - and universal human rights. They need to encourage industries and institutions located in India and elsewhere to accommodate Dalits in their workforce and decision-making bodies, ensuring them employment and livelihood opportunities. They should evolve appropriate policies and programmes to improve the Dalits' economic conditions and to protect their human rights and dignity, ensuring that such measures are implemented through multilateral and diplomatic relations.

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been experienced is the diversion of land to Special Economic Zones and other non-agricultural activities. A recent statement made in parliament by the Indian Agriculture Minister, Sharad Pawar, highlights the growing crisis in individual food security. Asked about the scale of farmer suicides in the country, the minister acknowledged that, from 2000 to 2007, 135,000 farmers had committed suicide.⁵ While the causes are complex, most analyses (see for instance Pal and Ghosh 2007) acknowledge the contributing role that economic globalisation has played.

Also, the per capita absorption of food grains has declined alarmingly, to only 155 kilograms annually, based on the three-year average ending in 2002–03. This current level is the same as 50 years ago (Patnaik 2004). Livelihood vulnerability is growing throughout the country – from chronic hunger and food scarcity in states like Orissa and Rajasthan to declining purchasing power leading to an inability to access even subsidised food in ration shops, and from the diversion of lands from non-staple crops to export-led production. The creation of scarcities has also had an adverse impact on the country's urban working classes. There has been an explosion of informalisation and contract work. Even though there are some remarkable examples of resilience and livelihood innovation, the majority now experience greater vulnerability.

Farmers' movements have been warning of the emergence of this economic vulnerability. One of the best and most remarkable examples of a global horizontal alliance of these movements is La Via Campesina.⁶ Another process culminated in a remarkable gathering of social movements, farmers, fishworkers, pastoralists, indigenous people, environmentalists, women's organisations, trade unions, and NGOs during World Food Summit of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome in 2002. They expressed their collective disappointment in, and rejection of the Summit Declaration and stated that: 'Far from analyzing and correcting the problems that have made it impossible to make progress over the past five years toward eliminating hunger, this new plan of action compounds the error of "more of the same failed

medicine" with destructive prescriptions that will make the situation even worse'. What was critically highlighted was the substantial divergence between *national food security and people's food sovereignty* (NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty 2002: 1).⁷ Several farmers' movements in India have forged alliances with La Via Campesina and others in the process highlighting the common plight of the world's small and marginal farmers and affirming their control over the ecological, economic and political systems that assure community security and sovereignty.

Continuing forced displacement

In India, planned development continues to displace over 1 million people every year, in the process weakening social and cultural bonds, and creating widespread economic impoverishment. Since Independence in 1947, over 60 million people have been forcibly displaced by these developmental interventions. Very few have received a rehabilitation package that would have enabled them to create secure livelihoods. Numerous studies (Cernea 2000; Scudder 2005; Kothari 1996) conclude that displacement causes irreversible psychological and physiological harm. It also increases internal and external migration, puts greater pressure on scarce resources and compounds conflict as the displaced seek to reclaim their resources.

Planners continue to defend such displacement as an inevitable consequence of progress. Over the years, they have argued that some will have to swallow this 'bitter pill' or will have to make 'sacrifices' so that others may prosper. Others have argued that 'you need to break a few eggs to make an omelette'. Governments have used their power of eminent domain to forcibly uproot people. Many of the displaced have sought refuge within militant movements. Several states are witness to the growing membership of armed militant organisations as many of those forced into poverty join these insurrectionary forces in the hope of reclaiming livelihoods and productive resources.

It is particularly damning that, more than 60 years after independence, the country still has no protective legislation to enhance the livelihoods of those displaced 'for the common good' or 'in the interest of the nation'.

5 *The latest survey of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP 2008) records 86,922 suicides during 2001–05.*

6 *For a history of La Via Campesina, its networks and campaigns as well as its publications, see La Via Campesina (URL).*

7 *Another growing global network, the People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS), brings together small food producers particularly of peasant-farmer organisations and their support NGOs. See PCFS (URL).*





The history of resettlement legislation and policy is a painful testament to the inability of the Indian State to adequately recognise the rights of those it displaces.

International financial institutions have also been compelled to define standards for those displaced in projects funded by them. Despite some progress, a serious gap persists between policies and practice. For instance, the World Bank's own internal reports are a graphic testimony to gross violations of its own policies (see for example Wapenhans 1992 – a report commissioned by Lewis Preston, the then President of the Bank⁸ – or the periodic Resettlement reviews).

What also remains neglected are the secondary and tertiary displacements that ensue in the wake of the primary process. For instance, dams displace millions but they also disrupt livelihoods upstream and downstream, causing millions more to become more vulnerable. Likewise, Special Economic Zones (SEZs) may compensate landholders but studies suggest that for every landed farmer displaced from SEZs four to six others lose their livelihoods which are dependant on the locally available seasonal or annual occupations. These vast populations of the 'unrecorded' are rarely acknowledged as 'victims of development'. In the past decade movements have highlighted this victimisation, and have created alliances sharing and intervening in these injustices (see the case study on dams below). A National Working Group on Displacement (NWGD), formed in 1988, significantly influenced the process of state recognition of the rights of the displaced including both the comprehensive right to sustainable livelihoods and the right to land (National Working Group on Displacement 1989). The NWGD has also forged links with national and global initiatives highlighting how displacement causes impoverishment, stressing the responsibility of international financial institutions when projects they fund cause displacement and the need to look at options that are least displacing.

Militarisation of the State and economic displacement and impoverishment

Growing internal disparities and scarcities are among the primary reasons for the dramatic rise in both the internal and external militarisation of the State. The influence of

Maoist and Marxist–Leninist groups has significantly increased at the sites of impoverishment and displacement. A recent Indian government study (Government of India 2008) has acknowledged that almost a quarter of India is under the direct or indirect influence of armed militant groups. The study states that the neo-liberal policy regime has accentuated the process of deprivation and aggravated discontent among the deprived. It also cites numerous instances where projects in the name of development destroy, or make vulnerable, access to livelihoods and natural living habitats.

Despite this acknowledgement of the root causes of political militancy, most State responses have been militaristic, creating and even legitimising a culture of reciprocal militarisation.⁹ The State has armed Village Defense Committees in states like Chattisgarh, thus intensifying militarisation (PUCL et al. 2007). These State-armed vigilantes have been the cause of a substantial rise in targeted killings and have compounded the crisis of survival of already vulnerable communities. Investigations by national civil society organisations prompted several global human rights organisations to take up the issue and to use the media as well as appropriate UN forums to pressure the Indian State (Human Rights Watch 2008a). In March 2008 India's Supreme Court expressed its disapproval of the constitution of Salwa Judum (self-defence groups) by the Chhattisgarh government. Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan asked Additional Solicitor General Gopal Subramaniam: 'How can the State give arms to some persons? The State will be abetting in a crime if these private persons kill others' (Asian Centre for Human Rights 2007).

The repression by State forces and the activities of Salwa Judum have forced 30,000–50,000 persons to move to the forests of neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. Experiencing grave economic vulnerability, they face yet another round of repression as the government has 'used excessive force to repeatedly evict or relocate them, without consulting with or giving alternative adequate housing to the displaced. Forest officials have repeatedly burned many of these hamlets to

⁸ For three incisive studies of the inner workings of the World Bank and how it contributes to economic and environmental impoverishment, see Rich (1995), Goldman (2005) and Peet (2003).

⁹ India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, addressing a meeting of chief ministers and senior police officers on 19 December 2007, said 'Left-wing extremism is probably the single biggest security challenge to the Indian state ...we cannot rest in peace until we have eliminated this virus'. He then proposed to set up a dedicated police force which would be highly trained, equipped and motivated to tackle this 'menace'. Interview on CNN-IBN, 'Devil's Advocate', 15 February 2008.



the ground' (Human Rights Watch 2008b). Human Rights Watch found that the government follows a discriminatory policy that refuses to extend the benefit of government welfare schemes, such as food subsidies and employment guarantees, to these displaced communities.

In December 2008 the State was compelled to heed national and international pressure and is now actively considering the withdrawal of its support from Salwa Judum. Whether this will be followed by an urgent plan to address Chattisgarh's endemic economic problems is another matter altogether.

There are several areas in the country where these cycles of militarisation and counter-militarisation are prevalent – Kashmir and the North East are other unfortunate examples of this process. Such cycles will only intensify if current trends of displacement, economic immiseration and vulnerability continue (Wangkheirakpam and Kothari 2007).

State militarisation is also witnessed in the growing number of incidents where it has resorted to violence to quell peaceful protest. Between 2006 and 2008, there were at least a dozen reported police firings on groups peacefully protesting against the undemocratic imposition of development projects – from steel mills to mining – in different parts of the country. Again, it is unfortunate that many movements that are part of the non-violent resistance are labelled as 'terrorists' to justify State violence.¹⁰

States often deny violations. For instance, in the context of the Human Rights Watch report, the central Home Ministry issued a standard rebuttal saying, 'From time to time, reports are brought out by national and international organisations on human rights. India is a thriving democracy and has adequate institutional mechanisms to ensure that human rights of its citizens are protected.' It added that India had an 'independent judiciary, free media and commissions at the national and state levels to promote and protect human rights' (*Times of India* 2008). It is evident that, rather than constructively addressing economic impoverishment and assetlessness, the State finds it easier to cover up its militarisation.

¹⁰ *The literature on police firings is vast. Some of the most notable civil society investigations have been undertaken by the People's Union for Civil Liberties, the People's Union for Democratic Rights and the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee. Important films on the relationship between development and state violence include Meghnath's Development Flows from the Barrel of the Gun and Amar Kanwar's Freedom.*

Continuing hegemony of a deeply undemocratic economic system

Independence in India heralded a commitment to widening the sphere of democracy and of social and economic justice. Numerous institutional and legal steps were taken to facilitate this transition. This widening of the democratic ethic – from the workplace to the family, from the central political system to local government – has been one of the hallmarks of dramatic changes over the past 60 years.

Unfortunately, the past two decades have witnessed a reverse trend in national and global economic policy and practice. Vast amounts of money are now traded in the global marketplace that have no bearing on productive investment. There has been an exponential growth in speculative capital as it scours the foreign exchange and commodity markets (to name just two) in search of profits. Financial mechanisms like hedge funds have sustained practices that nurture secretiveness and a vast web of poorly regulated transactions. The recent economic crisis is a direct manifestation of this largely unregulated activity primarily based on virtual funds with little to show in the productive economy.

It is no surprise that a significant number of investments in India are speculative. In 2006, 24 per cent of foreign direct investment was in real estate; indeed, some of the country's recent entrants into the Billionaire's Club are from this sector. Not only is much of this investment weakly regulated, but new laws and rules have been adopted that intensify this process. One such step was the law facilitating the setting up of Special Economic Zones (Government of India 2005; Leong 2007).

One of the most difficult tasks for affected communities has been to make corporations and other international institutions accountable to the human rights system. The World Bank and the IMF, both of which claim to be part of the UN 'system', continue to be diffident in respecting international normative standards. In fact, many within these institutions see these standards as a hindrance to the successful implementation of their adjustment programmes and other institutional changes that they seek in order to create a viable corporate-and-finance-driven marketplace. A critical review of the World Bank's three main pillars – the International Finance Corporation, the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency and the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes – reveals the dominant influence of private corporations in the setting of their priorities. The Bank also seems to have learnt little from



the failures of its structural adjustment programmes to reduce economic poverty and inequality. Studies in 22 countries where its recent Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility programme was implemented show how this programme undermined both citizens' organisations and the efforts to strengthen institutions such as parliaments and political parties (Green 2009).

The establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) further institutionalised an undemocratic trading regime. These developments reinforce trends whereby global commodities are increasingly controlled by large corporations for private profit, reinforcing in the process conditions where livelihoods based on these resources steadily worsen.

Some challenges to this iniquitous and discriminatory trading system are coming from the growing economic influence of countries like China, Brazil, India and South Africa. However, the stalled Doha Round has not motivated economic and political leaders to seriously address the undemocratic character of the trading regime. Instead, an entire array of bilateral trading agreements is being negotiated that will set up new legal frameworks that will be even more exploitative and destructive than the WTO.¹¹

Three additional constraints

Structural weaknesses of inter-governmental initiatives and institutions

There has been a long history of initiatives to address inequality both between and within nations. From the early years of the UN, multilateral processes have devoted significant institutional attention and financial resources to address these inequalities. The more notable ones are the Brandt Commission on the New International Economic Order, the South Commission, the Brundtland Commission and the Business Council for Sustainable Development.¹² Other institutional developments – the Bretton Woods institutions, the World Trade Organization as well as multilateral and regional trade agreements – have rhetorically claimed to address poverty. Still others, like the annual World Economic Forum held at Davos, have, in the recent past, expressed concern about the poor and sought to validate economic steps – like

¹¹ India is currently negotiating over 20 free trade agreements (FTAs). Important transnational alliances are engaging this largely secretive process; see the regular digests of *FTA Watch – India* (URL).

¹² For a more comprehensive overview of the history of commissions, see Dubash et al. (2001).

expanded micro-credit programmes – that are necessary to address poverty. In fact, the World Economic Forum instituted the Global Governance Initiative to Implement Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Unfortunately, most of these efforts have failed to address the causes that perpetuate and sustain inequality and economic distress. Many, like the initiative on MDGs, are problems masquerading as solutions because the prescriptions adopted – particularly greater liberalisation of trade and finance – continue either to create new areas of deprivation or to largely bypass the world's critically neglected geographical and social areas. Corporate social responsibility is another growing arena which seeks to mitigate some problems but also does not address the basic structural issues outlined above.

Undermining and manipulating growing democratic aspirations

Closely linked to the iniquitous extraction of people's livelihood resources is the persistent appropriation of people's politics. States and powerful economic institutions have been increasingly sophisticated in managing dissent. Those in power are better organised and have almost complete control of the media. Donors, most of the aid establishment and other private and public funders have long understood that one of the best ways to deal with the rising aspirations in civil society is to 'NGO'ise' it. While this trend has provided new openings for innovation and can provide the spawning ground for more progressive mobilisation, it has largely been depoliticising.

Anti-colonial and pro-democracy struggles have nurtured aspirations among historically deprived and discriminated-against peoples to claim their democratic space. Dominant systems of governance expend significant amounts of energy in keeping these aspirations in check lest they threaten the controls of those in power. Movement actors believe that states and other powerful institutions and interests evolve diverse demobilisation strategies to contain dissent. Many progressive mobilisations have been either mainstreamed or completely emasculated.

Declining space in the media for justice, equity and sustainability

Another major challenge to the deepening of democracy is the shrinking of media space for the processes highlighted above and for the struggles for justice





and dignity in response to them. In the past decade, the media in India – particularly the English-language media – have been dominated by the market euphoria that has captured the imagination of the top 20–30 per cent of the country. Serious analysis on the extent and causes of economic poverty or of the numerous efforts to structurally address this poverty is almost completely absent. Even though India's large media houses have been owned by major business houses, there was until a decade ago a commitment to investigative journalism. All this has witnessed a serious decline.

Civil society responses

The realities presented above have given rise to thousands of responses from civil society. Even though categories are problematic, these responses can be located in one of two clusters: those that are Reformist and/or Transformative, and those that are Rejectionist and/or Regressive. Obviously some of the latter are far from civil, although the boundaries of what is civil and what is not are contested.

In the first cluster can be found, for example, responses to international financial institutions (IFIs). The reformist national and global civil society mobilisation has focused on creating structures of accountability and have had significant successes – from innovations in global standards to enhancements in due process. The mobilisation has led to the institutionalisation of Equator Principles¹³ or a variety of Safeguard Policies¹⁴ or the creation of Inspection Panels or Ombudsmen. It has created disclosure policies and some mechanisms of redress. The transformative mobilisations, on the other hand, argue that these institutions are an integral part of an economic system that privileges wealth and private capital and are, therefore, structurally incapable of addressing the root causes of economic destitution.

These transformative initiatives are part of thousands of movements and other mobilisations that believe that they cannot submit themselves to totalising ideologies, strategies and policies. They not only challenge displacement and the processes that create destitution,

dependence and scarcity, but are also active in creatively building alternatives, realising that civil society must move beyond a predominantly single-issue emphasis towards creating political alliances that evolve plural engagements with political and economic power. Some politically engage states and capital while others seek to strengthen local structures of autonomy and democracy.

In that sense, there has definitely been a thickening and maturity of civil society responses and proactive research and action. It is in the latter arena that we witness the unprecedented scale, depth and pluralism of popular responses in almost every arena of human endeavour – from alternatives to representative democracy (ranging from deliberative and direct democracy to self-rule) to alternatives to 'free trade' (from fair trade to Local Economic Trading Systems, from taxing flows of finance capital to the Tobin Tax) and democratising the market and re-embedding it in local and national production systems; from proposals to dramatically reduce the ecological footprint to comprehensive proposals to establish economic democracy; and from restoring and institutionally enabling control over scarce natural resources to comprehensive strategies to restore and regenerate the planet's ecosystems. The thinking and practice represented in these responses are critical inputs for any evolving plan for a more equitable, just and ecologically sustainable world. Any exercise in addressing impoverishment and inequity must critically engage with these diverse proposals.

In the second cluster, many responses seek to further a discriminatory agenda based on religion, caste or gender. Others believe that transformation can be achieved only through armed struggle. 'Civil society', in that sense, is a very complex arena where the very essence of civility and how it can be achieved is deeply contested.

In India, movements for social justice, despite many setbacks, have shown tenacity and perseverance. Their struggles are witness to the fact that sustained mobilisations on the ground, coupled with intense engagements with the State, do yield positive results. What has marked the fishworkers' struggles, for example, or those of many tribal and indigenous peoples, or of the survivors of the Bhopal industrial gas leak of 1984, is the creativity and imagination in their strategies of collective mobilisation, both nationally and globally. What is important is that the potential and role of domestic social and political forces (as they challenge the forces of capital) and the influence of these nationally bound struggles on the nature of

¹³ *Equator Principles make up a comprehensive benchmark for the financial industry to address social and environmental issues in project financing. Adopted in 2003, they were revised three years later and have now been adopted by more than 60 financial institutions around the world.*

¹⁴ *Social and environmental safeguard policies adopted by international financial institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.*



transnational alliances and linkages should not be underestimated. Conversely, transnational alliances often strengthen local social movements by providing a wider arena in which to pursue advocacy and political strategies that contribute to the democratisation of society. The Chiapas movement in Mexico and its prioritisation of this democratisation is a powerful illustration of both these processes.

The case studies discussed in the following sections also underscore another important lesson: that strategic alliances were forged by ecosystem people concerned about their livelihoods, their culture and their knowledge systems with the larger national and global movement for social justice, engaging quite explicitly with those who better understood the national and global political economy.

The national and global alliances of fishworkers

Some of the most successful global alliances to defend local livelihoods are those of traditional and other commercial fishworkers committed to sustainable fisheries. For decades now, millions have suffered as a result of the intensive and extensive trawling of the planet's oceans and the unsustainable harvesting of fish from its lakes and rivers. More than 120 million people throughout the world are estimated to depend on fish, the largest wild food harvest, for all or a part of their incomes (FAO URL). In India alone, over 10 million fishworkers are directly involved in small-scale and artisanal fisheries. The supportive and indirect employment is several times that number of other workers. The mobilisation is even more dramatic as the oceans are largely beyond national jurisdictions and their open access, intensive exploitation and weak regulation make them a classic case of the 'tragedy of the commons'.

One of the pioneering efforts in India is that of the Kerala Swathanthra Matsya Thozhilali Federation (KSMTF, Kerala Independent Fish Workers Federation). Formed in 1982, the Federation was the culmination of over five years of fishworkers' unionisation in Kerala. What is remarkable about the Federation is that it organised and inspired path-breaking struggles to defend the rights of small-scale and artisanal fishworkers. It has faced the wrath of the State on numerous occasions but has now become a political force that no political party can ignore. It was the KSMTF that along with the All Goa Fish Workers' Union and the Tamilnadu Fish Workers' Union provided the foundation for the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF).

Today the Forum has members from the nine coastal states. Many are unique in one other aspect – their role in informing and influencing formal political processes. They have allied with the organised political parties across the political spectrum, making it difficult for any party to disregard the issues that concern them. Of course, the Forum itself has been challenged by internal dissensions and difficulties in collectively resisting massive external threats. Nevertheless, it is the strength of their alliances and the sustained and strategic engagement with the State and central governments as well as a wide section of political parties – and their formative role in the building of transnational alliances – that have given the movement important visibility and political efficacy.¹⁵

Inspired by the Indian mobilisations and those of other national networks, fishworkers from around the world came together in November 1997 in New Delhi and formed the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF). Belonging to movements, organisations, cooperatives and federations from 23 countries, the participants represented artisanal, traditional and small- and medium-scale fishworkers along with others of their craft and onshore who belonged to networks that have their own vessels. Also included were indigenous and tribal peoples for whom fish harvesting is an integral part of their cultural identity. The associations ranged from the National Fishworkers Forum in India to the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (PCFFA) and Chile's National Confederation of Artisanal Fishworkers. Less than two years later, they met in the US for the first time, giving US fishworkers the first opportunity to meet with fellow fishworkers from all over the world.

The initial idea for the WFF had emerged from discussions between representatives of national fishworkers' organisations and a growing concern that a proposed FAO Symposium on World Food Security (to be held in Quebec City in October 1995) made little mention of the livelihoods of fishworkers. Two of the main coalitions in this discussion were India's NFF and the Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters. The meeting issued a statement which explicitly stated their concerns:

We, the representatives of small-scale fish harvesters from North America, South America, Africa, and

¹⁵ For a comprehensive report on the Kerala struggle, see Kurien (1995). For the national situation, see Nayak and Vijayan (2006).





Asia, express deep concern over the reckless plunder of the seas by the large industrialised fleets of the World, leading to a substantial depletion of fish stocks and endangering the food security for millions of people.... The depletion of marine fish stocks is due to the worldwide industrial fleet of 25,000 vessels which are creating nutritional problems for millions of people as well as other problems for small scale fish harvesters who have a long term social, cultural and economic dependence on fish resources and are being squeezed out of existence.

(Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters 1995)

The issue that eventually led to the creation of the WFF was the growing depletion of the world's fish stocks as a result of the policies of governments and private corporations seeking to maximise production and profit, in the process creating crippling vulnerability in their lives. It was also critically important that the alliance was rooted in national struggles dating many decades back. Over four years, the WFF's concerns and mobilisation encompassed issues as wide-ranging as aquaculture, industrial and agricultural pollution and habitat destruction.

Just four of 17 objectives of the WFF reflect the complete divergence of these organisations and national federations from the principles of corporate trawling whose primary purpose is to maximise productivity and profit. The commercial fleets that trawl the oceans, and the governments that support them, have become increasingly aware of the severity of the diminution of fish stocks, but the rapaciousness continues to the point where there are critically low (or even absent) populations of fish left in large swathes of the oceans. In inland rivers several species have disappeared, and numerous rivers now host no fish populations at all. The objectives also underscore the contrast between the commitment of the national fishworkers to regeneration, sustainability and responsibility to future generations and the commercial fleets' practice of an increasingly intensive extraction with little or no concern for regeneration or sustainability.

The four objectives are as follows:

1. Protect, defend and strengthen the communities that depend on the fishery for their livelihoods.
2. Create an understanding of the resource as a common heritage of humanity to ensure, through sustainable fishing practices, conservation and

regeneration of the marine and inland resources and ecosystems, that is passed on to future generations.

3. Protect fishing communities, fish resources and fish habitats, such as mangroves, from both land-based and sea-based threats – including displacement by tourism, pollution (especially the use of the sea as a dumping ground for toxic waste), destructive industrial aquaculture, overfishing and destructive fishing practices.
4. Play a monitoring role to ensure compliance by states and transnational corporations with relevant international agreements; oppose any trade agreements that threaten the livelihoods of fishermen.

(WFF URL)

The diversity of the fishworkers' mobilisation is a testament to the multiplicity of threats to their livelihoods and the scale of the challenge that they face to confront and reverse the rapacious corporatisation of fish: from the resistance by fishing communities and environmental groups in Russia to proposed oil drilling by ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell, to the protests by national fishworker organisations against State repression and substantial mobilisation to oppose the privatisation of coastlines, rivers and lakes.

In 2001 the WFF split primarily because of the differences between small-scale and artisanal fishworkers and those whose primary activity was not fishing but trading. Though not complete, the split was also along North–South lines. The overwhelmingly Southern movements and organisations created the World Forum of Fisherpeople. Despite these differences, the two alliances, along with others, have succeeded in not only highlighting the multiple levels of violations of their rights but also the urgent need to protect and sustain the health, sanctity and sustainability of the world's water regimes.

The other important initiative, which predates the WFF, is the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF). The ICSF is a solidarity and support network primarily engaged with fishworkers' movements in the South striving to establish equitable, gender-just, self-reliant and sustainable fisheries. Active since 1984, it has worked closely with fishworkers' initiatives in the small-scale, artisanal sector. It came into being in Rome at a parallel people's conference held as a popular response to the FAO-organised International





al Conference of Fishworkers and their Supporters (ICFWS). The organisations and individuals who came together for the parallel meeting felt that the FAO was more concerned about commercial, industrial and scientific aspects of fisheries than with the plight of the millions of small and artisanal communities whose identities and livelihoods were integrally linked to their subsistence fishing economy. The ICSF has committed itself to not only monitor the state of lives, livelihoods and living conditions of fishworkers and to intervene with policy makers but to also facilitate the strengthening of the small-scale fisheries sector.

These global and national mobilisations have been yielding important results. Not only have national policies been changing in support of traditional, artisanal and small-scale fishworkers but global efforts have also been stepped up. There is also a growing recognition on the part of the UN of the need to review national and international fishery policies that favour intensive industrial fishing and the export orientation of what is harvested, as it is now clear that these practices directly threaten local and national food security.

Indigenous peoples, tribals and global civil society

One of the most dramatic examples of the complex global interconnections woven by local civil society actors in collaboration with international organisations, scholars and activists is the multiple mobilisations that culminated in the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 September 2007. After more than three decades of negotiations, delays and numerous drafts, the declaration was adopted by an overwhelming majority of 143 countries. The US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia opposed the adoption.

Parallel to this global process, in India, long before the formal appropriation of much of the sub-continent's forests by the British in 1878, resistance to colonial incursion and control was manifest in several parts of the country. By the beginning of the twentieth century numerous revolts, rebellions and protests were taking place across much of tribal India. In many ways, some of this laid the groundwork for the movement that eventually, in 1947, freed the country from colonial control (Kothari 2007).

After the initial euphoria and hope generated by Independence, a slow process of disillusionment set in as successive governments at the state and federal levels

expanded their control over natural resources primarily for industrial and urban needs, creating an unprecedented and pervasive climate of impoverishment and vulnerability as livelihood resources were undermined or destroyed. The disillusionment was aggravated because the promise of the recognition of distinct cultural and territorial rights remained unrealised and largely on paper. The hope of many tribal communities that progressive political parties would facilitate the process of securing and defending their rights was belied in many places, and by the 1970s a wide cross-section of movement organisations and mass mobilisations were witnessed in many forest areas. Within a decade, critically important regional and national coalitions were formed, notably the Shoshit Jan Andolan (Movement of Oppressed Peoples), the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ICITP) and Bharat Jan Andolan (Indian People's Movement). In clear continuity with the agenda that impelled the resistance to colonial control, these struggles have demanded the restoration and protection of tribal and indigenous peoples' lands and forests, as well as a speedier implementation of the devolution of powers to the village councils (Gram Sabha).

More recently, another national formation, the Campaign for Survival and Dignity, with the external support of left-wing parties, spearheaded an effort to secure recognition of tribal rights to forests in a context where forests and lands had once again become sites of a fresh wave of colonisation, coupled with development programmes that had little to do with restoring and legalising customary and territorial rights.

In a set of unprecedented mobilisations in 2005 and 2006, these movements and groups were able to rally tribal Members of Parliament. Many other politically powerful representatives were also mobilised and, after an acrimonious public debate lasting over a year, historic legislation was passed in Parliament on 13 September 2006. A little over two months later, the President gave his assent to The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006.¹⁶

At the same time there has been considerable opposition to these developments from a parallel civil society mobilisation of a section of environmentalists and wildlife conservationists. These activists are

¹⁶ For more details of this process, see the series of press releases and documents at *The Forest Rights Act 2006* (URL).





concerned that the Forest Rights Act will effectively make forest land a tradeable commodity, leading to the erosion of India's forests, and that the critically important areas that are free of human interference will now be open, in the process endangering India's fragile biodiverse and wildlife habitats. Defenders of the Act argue that its provisions provide sufficient safeguards against diversion and predation. Other supporters assert that forest conservation will in fact be strengthened, as corroborated, they say, by a long history of community protection.

Interestingly, many supporters of the Act are not entirely satisfied either; they argue that the final language of the Act differs from what was negotiated and raises several procedural hurdles and restrictions against the realisation of people's rights. The Campaign for Survival and Dignity welcomed the Act but sharply criticised a number of provisions in the Rules, arguing that they undermined democracy and the spirit of the legislation. Even after the President's assent was given in 2006 there was a year's delay in the formal notification of the Act, during which time there were massive protests throughout the country, culminating in a week-long protest in Delhi in November 2007. Despite the protests, the Act was notified in December 2007. Since then there has been sustained mobilisation to reclaim control over forest lands and to strengthen the process to secure livelihoods.

The other contentious issue that mirrors struggles around the world is the State's invocation of 'public purpose'. Increasingly, this sovereign right is being exercised to appropriate lands for private companies and other private interests. Activists have responded by saying that this is a misuse of the State's authority and that it violates national and international law. The issue highlights the contestation between people's sovereignty over resources that are integral to their livelihoods and cultures and the State's sovereign right to exercise its power of eminent domain.

Several movements and groups have built strong alliances with other indigenous and tribal peoples' mobilisations in different parts of the world, and have played an active role in efforts to highlight their concerns at several international forums. The ICITP, for instance, has been an active participant in the deliberations of the UN's Forum on Indigenous Peoples which spearheaded the process that led to the adoption of the Declaration. Indian groups have also made annual presentations at the UN Sub-Commission on Indigenous

Peoples, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and other UN forums. They have joined alliances on issues as wide-ranging as intellectual property rights and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Several groups have also been active in regional efforts, one of which (Asian Indigenous and Tribal People's Network 2008) now produces an annual State of Tribal People's Report. The regional forum that produces this report has prepared similar country assessments of a dozen other Asian countries and has produced parallel reports documenting the non-implementation of economic, social and cultural rights, also playing an important role in regional and international forums including the UN's Human Rights Council. It is this national and regional foundation that then links into the global network. In addition to the UN Declaration, the global mobilisation has expanded the conventional interpretations of sovereignty and self-determination. Moving comprehensively beyond the narrow frames of civil and political rights, these collective processes have resulted in several important declarations and charters that seek to affirm the cultures and identities of indigenous and tribal peoples.¹⁷

A linked effort has been the global civil society alliance to secure a place for indigenous and tribal rights in international law. One of the most crucial successes so far is the legal recognition of the right to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), which gives these communities the right to make choices on how they are governed and who can have access to their lands and resources, including for conservation. Similar laws have now been secured in many countries, notably India, the Philippines and Indonesia, and are an integral part of the UN Declaration.¹⁸ These movements have also highlighted a basic difference between the dominant legal systems that privilege intellectual property rights and indigenous knowledge systems, particularly when the former legitimise the corporate appropriation of indigenous knowledge. Movements have placed an important question before the institutions and legal regimes that privilege intellectual property rights: can

¹⁷ See for instance *The Mataatua Declaration on Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights*, the *Kari-Oca Declaration*, the *Declaration of Principles of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples* and the *Charter of the Indigenous-Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests*.

¹⁸ *McCay and Colchester (2004). The Indian law is the Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1998. For a history of the making of the Act, see Kothari (2007).*





historically evolved customary knowledge systems that are an integral part of the livelihoods and cultures of communities be subordinated and destroyed by legal regimes established by corporate-dominated institutional systems like the WTO?

It is this sustained national mobilisation and the evolving links with global networking, often against very powerful forces, that have secured the livelihoods of millions and created the potential to strengthen community rights. There has been strong cross-learning, most often on the foundation of solid political activity. Yet the threats are still immense as there continues to be an ever-expanding corporate demand for the forests, lands and minerals.

In many ways these 'successes' have come not as an outcome of decades of frustration and perseverance but as a process that began with the first resistance to colonisation. Since that time many centuries ago, in every continent, indigenous and tribal peoples have been waging some of the most sustained struggles to retain control of their territories, resources and ways of life. They have also affirmed in their strategies and tactics the importance of cultural politics beyond class, socio-economic conditions and a material redistribution of resources.

Globalisation, the anti-dam movement and global alliances

Another significant example of efforts to build horizontal linkages that transcend national boundaries is the alliance to challenge large dams and the widespread displacement, destitution and impoverishment that they cause. This transborder alliance, with local mass movements at its core, is linked with organisations, scholars and activists from across the globe.

More than two decades old, this transborder alliance was inspired by the mobilisations in the valleys of India and Brazil and struggles challenging large dams and water privatisation across the world. Several developments have marked the history of these alliances – the organisation of the first-ever international meeting

of dam-affected people in Curitiba, Brazil, in 1997 (see Curitiba Declaration 1997); the withdrawal of the World Bank from all large dam projects; the two major meetings of social scientists from Brazil and Latin America concerned about the adverse impacts of large dams; and the formation of the first democratic multi-stakeholder commission, namely, the World Commission on Dams (URL).

These alliances underscore the fact that, while the global debate about the efficacy of large dams has been transformed, the movements themselves have a limited capacity to engage with dominant power structures or to strengthen efforts to create legitimacy for alternatives that can sustain rivers, livelihoods and ecosystems.¹⁹ The mobilisation has had positive effects on local livelihoods, widening awareness of both the politics of water and the dangers and the limitations of large dams, as well as the need to secure community control and to strengthen sustainable use of natural resources like water.

Much of the alliance building has attempted to make governments, corporations, and international financial institutions like the World Bank accountable to international norms and to the international human rights system. The alliances also believe that these institutions are only the more visible symbols of a power configuration that is firmly embedded in the contemporary structures of corporate capitalism and that the World Bank's role in addressing poverty is severely constrained by the political and economic interests that dominate the institution.

Within each country there have been intense debates on whether local movements and national campaigns should extend beyond the national boundaries and, if so, to what extent. Would pressuring powerful western governments amount to a delegitimisation of the democratic processes within the country? What should be the nature of an alliance with organisations based in the North, particularly in view of significant socio-economic and cultural differences? How and by whom should movement representation be defined?

In the context of the struggles against dams on the Narmada river in India, local and national mobilisation gradually linked with other national movements and international advocacy campaigns. In the context of the World Bank's involvement in one of the Narmada dams, Northern activist groups met their parliamentarians and Bank representatives. It is significant, for instance, that by 1991, 60 per cent of Swedish and 80 per cent of

¹⁹ One of the pioneering constituents in the alliance is the 20-year-old Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA, Movement to Save the Narmada). Rooted in the communities living alongside the river, the NBA is a national alliance of organisations jointly campaigning for justice in the Narmada valley. The NBA has also campaigned for justice around dozens of other proposed dams on the Narmada and has extended critical support to dam struggles throughout India and beyond.

Finnish parliamentarians had signed a memorandum to the president of the Bank seeking a review of the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP). This strengthening of the global alliance led to a series of unprecedented developments. The Japanese government announced that it was withdrawing its financial commitment to the SSP. The Bank announced that it was setting up an independent review committee, whose report called on the Bank, 'to step back' (Morse and Berger 1992). The Bank did not heed this recommendation and issued a note called 'Review of Current Status and Next Steps' (World Bank 1992). Collective pressure from the alliance was stepped up, including with full-page advertisements in major international newspapers signed by over 800 organisations from all over the world. The Indian government and the Bank, recognising that the Next Steps could not be satisfactorily implemented, decided on a face-saving strategy, namely, that the Bank withdraw from the project. It was the first time that the Bank was compelled to withdraw from a project that it had vociferously defended (Kothari 2002). Obviously, much of this would not have been possible without the successful mass mobilisation in the Narmada valley. At that time, about 150,000 people in over 200 villages were active in the movement.

The maturing of the global alliance resulted in two historic developments. First, the Bank (with the International Union for Conservation of Nature, IUCN) was compelled to set up the World Commission on Dams (WCD) in 1998. Second, in Brazil a growing network of communities and organisations opposed to large dams inspired unprecedented collaboration among social scientists, independent researchers, political activists and other organisations to initiate a process to undertake systematic research and to coalesce the findings into a collective public response. The Movimento Dos Atingidos Por Barragens (MAB, Movement of Dam Affected People) became critically engaged with this collaboration and at many dam sites the network was able to successfully work with local state officials to address issues raised by MAB.

The establishment of the WCD was a breakthrough as this was the first time that global civil society had been instrumental in the process of setting up a commission where defenders and opponents of dams sat as equals to deliberate comprehensively the advantages and drawbacks of large dams and to define a normative framework to inform the process of building dams. In that sense, it was a dramatic step forward as

an institutionalised global response to a development–environment controversy. In that sense, the WCD represented 'a changing set of authority relations in global environmental politics' which Ken Conca (2003) refers to as 'the hybridisation of authority'.

The WCD also represents the democratising of global governance as civil society engages global decision makers and publics in the very politics of and alternatives to dominant development paths. An independent assessment of the WCD (Dubash et al. 2001) outlined the range of challenges as civil society strives to build enough countervailing power to influence national decision making on large dams (McCully 1996).

Two other lessons have been crucial: the need to establish a global process to pursue the adoption and implementation of the WCD's recommendations, and the need to widen public debate and to strengthen local struggles to secure a more just, equitable and environmentally sustainable process of water management. Both these tasks have proven difficult. Dam builders have been reluctant to change their ways; and even though an institutionalised process was established to take the WCD process into national and global policy²⁰, sustaining a global process proved logistically and financially difficult. The issue of participation also proved a stumbling block as it was difficult for all those who participated in the WCD process to channel their concerns and to have them discussed, much less addressed. Essentially, what the participants confronted was the limited ability of an international process to influence, let alone transform, the policies, behaviour and priorities of national governments (Keck and Sikkink 1998). To what extent can the State be supplanted by global civil society? If States refuse to validate global norm setting, what avenues for adoption are available to global civil society? In fact, in several cases, such as India, the governments became even more belligerent against those groups and movements challenging big dams. The very conflicts that gave rise to the WCD were in many cases exacerbated. As Conca (2003: 181) states, 'one consequence of elevating State–society conflicts to a broader, global level of norm construction was to reinject and reinvigorate those conflicts at the domestic level'.

In any case, the WCD process opened up dramatic new possibilities for multi-stakeholder deliberation and

²⁰ The UN Environment Programme agreed to host the follow-up process, but after several contentious sessions the momentum generated by the WCD declined.



norm setting. While subsequent efforts to replicate the openness and comprehensiveness of the WCD have suffered from limitations, there is little doubt that the WCD process and its aftermath gave confidence to numerous affected communities to engage national and global power centres and to affirm the manifold alternatives that are more economically just and ecologically sustainable.

This is all the more important as there has been a definite decline in inter-state policy making on a wide cross-section of important global issues – for instance, the planet's agro-biodiversity and forests, or regulating the flow of GMOs. Global civil society has succeeded in evolving sophisticated and rigorous independent challenges as well as alternatives to this neglect or to dominant policy and practice. An even greater inter-state failure (despite the Montreal and Kyoto Protocols and the efforts of the Inter-Parliamentary Committee on Climate Change) is the inability to evolve concrete strategies to reform the North's wasteful consumption patterns or the emerging economic powers' destructive energy and natural resource-intensive developmental path. Again, global civil society has been instrumental in evolving a comprehensive climate justice alternative as well as concrete steps and proposals towards softer energy paths.

Global civil society has also highlighted the cumulative impacts of multiple local onslaughts – impacts that cause grave harm to humans and to nature's fragile life systems. The inter-state system (with some exceptions) has not even begun to acknowledge this outcome, much of which has irreversible consequences.

Conclusions and the challenges ahead

Numerous questions have been raised in this process of alliance building. As demonstrated in the case studies above, processes of economic development and globalisation have compounded the loss of control of local communities over their resources and their lives, often creating impoverishment, insecurity, social unrest and conflict.

Unless such control is restored, any efforts to transform the existing inequities and scarcities will be largely ineffective. Political engagement must address both domestic and international processes. This raises many challenges, as actors involved in these alliances have limited energy and often cannot balance the tasks of seeking concessions from international institutions and national governments with the more important political task of concentrating on issues of social

and ecological justice in their own national and local contexts. Many years ago, I wrote:

Very few individuals involved in building horizontal linkages of citizens' initiatives and people's movements address the deeper systemic and structural issues. This is partly because so much energy is expended in the local space, in 'fire-fighting' and in ensuring that some of the changes accepted by dominant institutions after an intense period of campaigning and advocacy actually get implemented. But partly it is also because the deeper questions are harder to deal with; they confront very fundamental aspects of our own lives and challenge us in turn by exposing our (own) institutional and personal weaknesses. This is not to minimise the significance of efforts to hold those in power accountable. Each effort and each step forward helps create democratic space where the potential to nurture political struggle is strengthened. (Kothari 2002)

The imperative to balance local priorities and needs with the energies required to sustain global alliances will remain a major challenge. Local mobilisation, so many movement actors argue, is far more important because it politicises and strengthens people's democratic power and attempts to hold the State accountable to its national and international obligations.

Additionally, many movements are disconnected from the formal processes of politics. Not only is the power of dominant politics underestimated, but there is also a widespread belief that an engagement in party politics dilutes the purity of one's cause. On the other hand, there is an evolving process based on the belief that there is a need to redefine politics itself by moving away from party politics to a wider process of democratising society itself.

All this underscores the need for political convergences and consolidation, particularly since most alliances are built on single issues. Given the growing worldwide aspirations for justice and democracy, one of the biggest challenges for individual struggles and for nascent global alliances is to convert sentiment and anger against dominant institutions into sustained political strategies (Kothari 2000) without subordinating plural identities (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998). Whereas each participating movement or group has a committed base and ample idealism, the national movement space is marked by fragmentation and lack





of sustained collaboration. This lack of political consolidation also presents a major challenge to all alliances, as corporate and financial institutions have much better coordination and cooperation. The obvious instances of the latter are the roles they play in international institutions like the WTO, the annual Davos Summit, the Business Council for Sustainable Development or the new Global Compact with the UN. Many other joint strategic groups are linked to powerful think tanks and political establishments. The alliances challenging the WTO or the IMF or those struggling to secure freedom from debt have a long way to go in influencing domestic and global politics. The mobilisations for the World Social Forum have provided a remarkable open space for a wide range of debates, proposals and strategies, but their translation into sustained political processes has only just begun.

All this presents challenges for a new vision of universalism that does not impinge on smaller identities and pluralistic structures and which, in turn, is not impeded by their struggles. Stated differently, the challenge is how to build international solidarities and links toward a holistic, universalistic world view which does not impede the cultural flowering of diverse identities – a process that not only reverses the cultural aggression and hegemonic thrust of dominant institutions, but strengthens the fabric of pluralism, diversity and justice.

In that sense, the alliances detailed above are just the beginning. An overwhelming proportion of the economically impoverished and the oppressed, as well as the victims of the development process, continue to depend on patronising political and economic establishments that can no longer deliver even basic rights. The middle classes, meanwhile, remain largely indifferent to or insulated from the conditions, contexts and roots of poverty, ecological degradation and social injustice found within and across states.

The dramatic changes taking place in Latin America – both in countries like Bolivia and Guatemala and in communities and barrios across the continent – raise the hope that neo-liberalism is not invincible, that not only does it bring forth its own contradictions but it has revealed that it is incapable of guaranteeing security and dignity. The institutional and legislative changes that are taking place, from the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean (ALBA) to the Global Bank of the South and the expanding spheres of autonomy of communities like the Zapatistas, point to the vast

innovativeness on the part of states and civil societies in confronting and building alternatives to dominant economic and political power and to those structures that create and legitimise scarcities and destitution.

For far too long the debate on poverty has been dominated by developmentalists and economists who have legitimised the belief that poverty is a series of 'lacks', thus justifying an entire gamut of development interventions, as well as the provision of goods and services that are necessary to achieve the so-called good life. A growing body of rigorous academic work is converging with the lived experiences of a majority of the world's people in concluding that dominant economics largely ignores the breakdown of community and the erosion and destruction of livelihoods and life-support systems (see for instance Marglin 2008). Today more than ever we need to comprehensively redefine our conception of the 'good life', one which will not cause the ruin of the planet's social and environmental fabric.

Advancing global civil society means addressing the dominant conceptions of poverty. This demands a transition to a very different set of principles and values. In fact, in numerous communities simplicity and dignity have become preferred values, and self-realisation comes through simple living and a soft ecological footprint. In the face of decades of oppression, inequality, devastated livelihoods and ecological destruction as well the growing awareness of global crises like climate change, these values are being adopted by a growing number of people. These communities and individuals believe that wealth comes from non-economic attributes (Rahnema 1997). In fact, confronted by the growing concern about rampant consumerism and the irreversible harm we are causing to our fragile planet and to a majority of its peoples, we can argue that the limitless pursuit of material wealth and the accumulation of material goods is an obstacle to freedom.

If our efforts are aimed at achieving social and economic justice for the economically underprivileged and victimised, the most sustained efforts have to be made to address the concentration of wealth at the top of the economic pyramid and the institutional systems that legitimise and perpetuate it. Inequality is a crippling threat to the wider realisation of economic and social security. While people's initiatives need to be strengthened and expanded, it is also imperative that states be pressured and compelled to defend and protect the common good.

Thus, in a fundamental sense, the efficacy and limits





of global civil society will continue to be defined by mass politics in the national space, whether representative or autonomous. Given the present conjuncture of economic and political power, civil society mobilisations will have to continue to play two critically important roles: first, to hold power accountable and to not ally with it, to restrain it from eroding democratic, cultural and ecological space, to define innumerable ways in which it can be exposed and challenged, and to expand and strengthen democratic political space; and, second, to continue to define and implement, often against great odds, a vast array of paths that demonstrate that societies based on cultural politics, justice, a radical redistribution of power and assets and ecological responsibility are not just utopian but are the ground on which collective and individual struggle must rest. As Arundhati Roy (2003) so eloquently said, 'Remember this: We be many and they be few. They need us more than we need them. Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.'



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