

The World social Forum, Mumbai, India. Jan 16 – 21, 2004.

From Betsan Martin, Aotearoa-New Zealand.

The World Social Forum in Mumbai was an unbelievable mardi gras of people, issues, protest energy, from which the most persistent quality that endures is drumming. There were drums to summon peace and an ecological sanctuary for Tibet, drums to denounce globalization, drums to announce a new world order in which those who are presently marginalised – tribals, women, indigenous people, those without housing, those who suffer from HIV and Aids...would become participants in decision-making and beneficiaries of a new order of inclusiveness and respect for diversity. Every issue in the world is being drummed for.



Tibet – A Zone of Peace

Banners and seminars on 'Ecological Debt' arrested my attention. I didn't get to a presentation but the idea is a most compelling challenge to the over-use and degradation of resources.

Drums for reconciliation of religious and political conflict brought up the Israeli-Palestinian anguish, Muslim-Hindu divisions, histories of struggles against oppression and authoritarianism.



Religions and Peace presentation. Sidhartha and Swami Agnaveesh

Generally the call for democracy seemed accepted as the panacea for bringing about resolution; yet, as a representative from the liquid continent and one mindfull of the experience of indigenous peoples here, democratic process has been the vehicle for the alienation of land from indigenous peoples and all the cultural and linguistic implications of that. Currently, the introduction of neo-liberal economic policies and their all-embracing implications from privatisation of water to removing the autonomy of farmers, seem quite removed from the influence of democratic process in favour of the priority of market commerce.

In the Pacific these issues are being fiercely experienced. There was little evidence of a Pacific presence at the World Social Forum, other than a presentation on nuclear policies for which New Zealand is reknown. Referring to the liquid continent was another alert to global attention to water – in this case to the taken-for-granted expanse of oceans as part of the ecosphere. A wondrous response from a water expert, to the 'liquid continent' notation was ' yes, the Pacific is the lungs of the world'.

Mumbai is a city of 20 million people, with 8000 new arrivals every day. Slums are all around, so are middle-range dwellings and obvious expressions of luxury. The New Zealand instinct for egalitarianism is constantly challenged to give way to contradiction. Comparatively it is hard to make any comment, except to say that New Zealand, and perhaps I can include Australia, have no possible excuse for having any homelessness, any serious deprivation, any unrepaired injustice regarding indigenous peoples in the face of our temperate climate, moderate populations, land resources and productivity.

Drums and cymbles might have signified protest, but they went with dancing and enduring commitment to the priorities at hand.



Celebratory drumming

The dust and heat make you into a mud pie, which peels off in the bath in layers. Yet, there's plenty of bottled water, marsala tea, dhosa's, curries, sandwiches, chick pee concoctions laden with coriander, fresh fruit juices. Coke, Pepsi and cigarettes were banned from the Forum grounds. Most of all priority issues were analysis of globalization, women, Free Tibet, tribal/indigenous land, water - and its distribution and management, economic solidarity.

Every day we went off early to the Forum grounds in a bus or taxi. Just getting there is an encounter with a million taxi's, cars, auto-rickshaws, buses and children who live between the lanes of the traffic selling a few flowers when the cars are too slow or the lights are red. I had absolutely no idea of any direction - of up or down or east or west.

Being at the grounds means walking and looking and listening and talking until we dropped, making our way through 100,000 people, pretty much all with black hair, and who still look at westerners with curiosity.

Just getting there was an encounter with a million taxi's, cars, rickshaws, buses and children who live between the lanes of the traffic selling a few fragrant flowers for adorning women's hair when the cars are too slow or the lights are red. I had absolutely no idea of any direction - of up or down or east or west.

The energy is right up and dynamic. There are a million marvellous bookstands with publications galore on Gandhi, Ecology, spirituality, science, technology. Only the 20k weight limit on the plane ticket demands restraint on indulgence on the intellectual fiesta. Workshop presentations and seminars give the opportunity for information, analysis and discussion. Protest, in various forms, is a major mode - I have come to feel there are more constructive ways of bringing about change in the long term - more in the direction of affirming what is needed. What inspired me was the affirmation of this analysis by Alliance leaders with a statement that working with mindsets is the work in front of us.

My participation in the World Social Forum was with the Alliance21 team and being on a committee to initiate thought and practice on Human Responsibility. It seems imperative to face environmental responsibility, along with new modes of governance, sexual responsibility with the Aids crisis, and ethics to sustain and embrace diversity. Having established priorities of Human Rights and Peace in the last century, responsibility becomes a fitting approach to the next.



Members of Charter for Human Responsibility team at WSF

Alliance21 is a global network for a 'united, responsible and plural world', which supports ecological, economic, cultural initiatives that come out of constructive, collaborative ventures. These may be local or transverse. Water is an example of transverse collaboration and exchange for sustainable management. Priorities for the direction of Alliance21 are responsibility, governance and ethics, with the evolution alternatives to the concept of development.

After being at the World Social Forum, a week in Bangalore, further south, at Fireflies Ashram brought fresher air of a few acres of trees and organic food growing, and the spiritual sustenance of dear friends creating a community for international exchange, with the opportunity to teach from the cultural richness of India and to share the experience of complexity and co-existence. My friend Sudha took me to villages where she works with householders and farmers on growing and marketing food, and on health and sanitation. These villages could be assigned as slums; they were ordered and with a vibrancy of people involved in improving their conditions. A magnificent aerobic toilet block had just been built – 12 or so toilets and washing facilities, treating and recycling all waste material, for 150 or so households. This is a first in India, and had attracted considerable publicity.

The theme of the World Social Forum was 'Another world is possible'. Someone muttered to me it should be 'Another world is being created'. I reflected on the pre-eminence of women's priorities presented there, and mused 'A mother world is possible'.



Women in Black – Women for Peace