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# Reflections of Mumbai



*Normally coverage of the World Social Forum (WSF) in SA by the mainstream media is limited or non-existent as it is generally overshadowed by the business aligned World Economic Forum, which takes place in Davos at the same time. This year the event received huge coverage – not because of the deliberations – but rather as a result of activities outside of the forum. **Thobile Yanta** and **Devan Allay** share their experiences and explain the significance of the event.*

**M**umbai, an Indian city of 16m people became the host for the 4th meeting of the WSF. It was the first time that the WSF had been held outside its traditional base in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Mumbai leaves you with no doubt that it is a city faced with the severe development challenges that afflict many other countries though to varying degrees.

If you complain about our chaotic mini-bus taxis in South Africa, then go to Mumbai and you will realise that our situation is no way comparable. In Mumbai, it's not inconceivable to see cows, goats, dogs and people competing for the same space in busy traffic. The air pollution caused by a combination of emissions from the exhaust pipes and industry makes the city look a bit hazy towards the evening. This reminds you of Soweto or Alexandra on winter days, where gases from the coal stoves create thick clouds of smoke.

Deliberations at the forum provided a space for civil society and trade union

organisations to engage on issues that concern them. Unlike Porto Alegre, where there was semblance of unity among social movements, some sections of civil society organised a parallel event under the umbrella of the Mumbai Resistance 2004 (MR 2004). The MR 2004 characterised itself as 'a concretely defined alternative socio-economic structure (unlike the amorphous 'another world is possible' of the WSF) built on a basis of self-reliance, moving towards a genuine socialist order.'

Both the participants and observers regarded the 4th WSF event as a resounding success. The forum was attended by over 100 000 delegates from 154 countries. This shows about a 40% growth in attendance from previous years. In total, the forum hosted 1 200 workshops, meetings, and debates about a variety of issues. This included human rights, international trade, environment, peace and war, global justice, economic globalisation, multi-national companies and worker rights, third world debt and so on.

The forum demonstrated once more its character as a global people's forum whose core objective is to address ordinary people's concerns about growing inequalities within and between countries, growing poverty, violations of human rights and lack of access to land and quality jobs. It served as recognition of the fact that economic globalisation in its current form is not leading to improvement in ordinary peoples' lives. These are people from the lower classes and casts, the unemployed, the homeless and the landless.

Where to next? The WSF will meet again in Porto Alegre in January 2005. However, there are suggestions that Africa should be accorded an opportunity to host the WSF in 2006.

*Yanta is a researcher at Naledi.*

#### **Mumbai - the city**

Nothing could have prepared me for Mumbai, even after being cautioned by friends who holidayed there. As we were being transported in the early hours of the morning from the airport to our hotel, the level of poverty became quite apparent. Potholes covered the road. The only dwellings we could see through the poorly lit streets were all informal (our shacks) and the air was filled with a light stench.

For the duration of our stay, we learnt something new everyday. I had been warned not to give money to people begging. But the sight of the poor puts one in a zombie-like state. As you reach into your pocket to pull out the change you are immediately surrounded by people begging.

People live in absolute squalor. The entrance of their dwellings is right on the road and what was meant to be a pavement forms part of where they live. I later learnt that it was not only the poor that lived under these conditions - the problem it seems is simply one of space. People live anywhere and everywhere: under bridges, on top of other informal dwellings, under trees, anywhere as long as a structure can be erected. Bathing, washing clothes and dishes at the entrance of a dwelling or in the road was a common sight.

It takes more than one and half-hours to travel 50km. The roads are mainly two lanes but there is a perpetual tussle for space. In all this chaos there is some order - there are few accidents from what I have been told (we never saw one).

Another striking reality is that although poverty is all around, people in India do not go to bed hungry. At

night you would see people congregate around feeding schemes. What I learnt gave me some hope that 'capitalist may possibly have a heart'. Most of the feeding schemes are sponsored by the wealthy of India.

There was also this sense of safety as one walked through the streets at any time of the night. We later learnt that the reason for this was the police first shoot and then ask questions.

A spirit of entrepreneurship was evident everywhere. People would do anything to make a living. All over you would see people making things and selling them off.

As I was walking from one venue to another I saw a stream of construction workers walking out from a building site. Amongst the workers were children who looked under the age of 16. Throughout Mumbai the sight of children working is common.

The entrepreneurship mentioned above was evident in the bureaucracy as well. Naledi had produced a number of books and CDs for the WSF, which were couriered to Mumbai. We learnt of the excessive powers the bureaucrats had. It took us three days to get our books and CDs out of the customs from the airport. Initially we had to pay 5 000 rupees for custom duties (these books were to be distributed free to delegates), but after being advised (by the bureaucrats) to enroll the service of certain individuals we paid 2 200 rupees at customs. Eventually it cost us close to 7 000 rupees to finally get our books and CDs. So much for a corruption free society!

*Pillay is a researcher at Naledi.*