

World Conference on Racism: Asking the Real Questions

Author(s): Samir Amin

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World Conference on Racism

Asking the Real Questions

A breath of revival was clearly palpable at the world conference on racism at Durban arising from the solidarity of the Afro-Asian peoples attending it. The success of the conference was that the African and Asian governments have been mindful of what clearly are the prevailing views of their own people

SAMIR AMIN

The significance of the World Conference against Racism lies in the new prospects that it has opened. A breath of revival was clearly palpable in Durban arising from the solidarity of the Afro-Asian peoples attending. In fact, a renewal of this solidarity is one of the essential, or rather fundamental, conditions for building a more equitable form of globalisation than the present system, which the G7, led by its North American boss, wants to impose on the peoples of the planet by every means possible including extreme violence.

During the 1990s, the United Nations initiated a series of global conferences addressing some of the major problems of our time ('poverty', population, children, women, and the environment, among others). It also introduced a new way of holding conferences at two levels simultaneously: official meetings at government level and, at the same time, meetings of delegates from 'civil' society. Until then, the dominant establishment, namely, the US, working through the World Bank (in its role as a kind of ministry of propaganda for the G7) and through the UN bureaucracy, had effectively controlled the statements of this 'civil society'. With financial inducements and by manipulating a majority of NGOs – so naive, to put it mildly, as to subscribe to the dominant system's motions – they were able to void the impact of the demands and declarations of the peoples the NGOs were supposed to have represented.

The Durban conference – the last in the cycle – had been concocted on the same pattern that had worked for the US in the past. Protests against 'racism' and all forms

of 'discrimination' had been worded so as to make them meaningless: governments and NGOs attending the conference were invited to confess their sins in chorus and express regrets about the surviving 'vestiges' of discrimination against 'indigenous peoples', 'non-Caucasian races' (to use the official parlance of the US), women and 'sexual minorities'. The recommendations that had been prepared in advance were painless and based on the North American faith in legalism, that is, that problems can be solved through legislation. The underlying causes of advance were painless and based on the North American faith in legalism, that is, that problems can be solved through legislation. The underlying causes of the major forms of discrimination, direct results of the social and international inequality produced by the logic of globalised liberal capitalism, were left out of the original draft.

But at Durban the massive number of participating African and Asian organisations, bent on asking the real questions, stood in the way of this strategy of Washington and its cronies. Racism and discrimination in all its forms are not synonymous with the sum of criminal behaviours suffered by the hapless victims of 'extreme' prejudice who, regrettably, continue to be found in large numbers and in every society across the planet. Racism and discrimination are generated, produced and reproduced by the logic and expansion of capitalism, as we know it, especially in its so-called liberal form. The kind of globalisation imposed by dominant capitalism and its henchmen (with the governments of the Triad in the lead) can only result in 'apartheid on a global scale'.

I have summarised the main strategy adopted by the African and Asian organisations attending the Durban conference. Having sensed danger during the heated discussions of the preliminary committee, the governments of the G7 had decided in advance to boycott the conference and declare its 'failure'. The African and Asian delegates held out. According to plan, they forced discussion of the two topics that western diplomats did not want to broach.

First, was the subject of 'reparations' for the devastation caused by the slave trade. I use quotation marks because the papers that were presented brought out into the open the depth of the chasm dividing the two sides. American and European diplomats laboured strenuously to undermine the issue, reducing it, with condescension and a touch of contempt, to a question of the 'amount' that these 'professional beggars' were claiming in damages. That is not how the African delegates saw it. They did not see it as a matter of 'cash' but rather of acknowledging that colonialism, imperialism, and the slavery that they entailed, were largely responsible for racism and the 'underdevelopment' of the continent. These were the motions that made the representatives of the western powers explode.

Second was the subject of Israel. Both African and Asian delegates were clear and precise on this point, namely, that the continuing colonisation by Israel of the occupied Territories, the eviction of Palestinians in favour of Israeli settlers (in effect nothing other than 'ethnic cleansing'), and the planned 'bantustanisation' of Palestine (Israel here applying down to the last details the methods of South Africa's former apartheid), all simply make up the final chapter in a long history of imperialism which is 'racist' by definition.

By withdrawing from the conference with its faithful ally Israel, America openly declared its intent to sabotage the proceedings. The Europeans stayed on though, represented from lower echelons of government and, as we know, exerted every pressure within their means to corrupt the most vulnerable delegates. ('How much?' was one of the ways, as reported by several of those who were contacted in this regard.)

These efforts were not without success at the official level of the conference and the resolutions adopted by majority vote

toned down considerably the original motions, which had been introduced by the African and Asian organisations. This is where the Durban conference was a success – that the African and Asian governments had been mindful of what clearly are the prevailing views of their own people who now were provoked even more by the arrogance of the diplomats of the west.

The spirit of Bandung has breathed again. The 1955 Bandung conference which saw the tide of Afro-Asian solidarity and of the Non-Aligned Movement (non-aligned on liberal globalisation these days) set in motion a first round of national liberation movements which primed the world for coming changes. Whatever the limitations of the systems arising from this first phase of independence from imperialism, and whatever the illusions they may have inspired (not unusual in history), it was their decline which made possible dominant capital's counter-offensive and the deployment of a new imperialism in the form of globalisation. Before our eyes a new wave is building of a farther-reaching liberation. Durban has been one of its precursors. We shall no doubt see others in future.

Because Durban constituted a people's victory, the whole G7 propaganda machinery has been put to work to disparage its significance. It is very disappointing that the dominant media have not understood this. Even more that they parrot whatever the US and Israel want them to believe. At best there have been 'reports' by journalists who were not present at the Durban conference; but there also have been outright lies. The truth is that none of the texts coming out of the conference can be in anyway be termed 'anti-semitic'. It is time to stop giving in to this kind of blackmail which has been paralysing any criticism, however relevant, of Israel.

With Seattle, Nice, Gothenburg, Genoa and Porto Allegro, Durban has been one of a chain of encouraging developments at this time. Now is the moment for all those, who justly condemn dominant capital's neo-liberal globalisation strategy, to understand that theirs is a common struggle and that the struggle of the peoples of the south against imperialism and the hegemony of the US is no less important than the fight for justice by the underprivileged within the developed capitalist states themselves. In the after-

math of the attacks on the symbolic targets of New York's financial centre and the Pentagon, we must realise that there can

be no united front against terrorism without a united front against international and social injustice. **EPW**

No Full Stops for the Narmada

Life after the Verdict

A year after the Narmada verdict, all presumptions held by the court has been proved wrong. Adivasi land and their houses have been progressively submerged without them having been fully resettled. In the face of the government's continued indifference to the plight of the ousted, the NBA continues its protests, recently compelling the Maharashtra government to set up two independent committees to assess issues of resettlement and the cost-benefit aspects of the dam.

SANJAY SANGVAI

On October 18, 2001, exactly a year after the majority decision of the Supreme Court in the matter of the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP), the villagers in the Narmada valley held rallies and meetings and signature campaigns, to protest against the verdict and declared that their struggle for the justice and the fundamental rights is still continuing. On that day, over 2,000 tribals from the Maharashtra gathered at Dhadgaon (in Nandurbar district) and questioned the propriety of the majority judgment, when the state governments and the Narmada Control Authority (NCA) too admitted that the resettlement up to 90 metres of the SSP was not complete.

They pointed out that the latest decisions by the Maharashtra government, was a clear admission of the illegalities inherent in the continued construction of the dam. On September 27, the 11th day of the indefinite fast by main activists of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), the state government agreed to verify the total number of oustees and the status of rehabilitation of Maharashtra oustees of the SSP with the help of the NBA. It also formally announced that in case the committee found that the oustees below 90 metres were not resettled, it would convey to the NCA not to increase the present height of the SSP. The state government

agreed to constitute a task force to verify the status of resettlement in every SSP-affected village in Maharashtra, within two months, which include the officials and the representatives of the NBA and the Punarwasan Sangharsh Samiti (PSS).

The government also agreed to set up a secretary level 'overview committee' and a 'planning committee' on a ministerial level to prepare a master plan of resettlement. No ex parte allotment of land would take place hereafter. About the land rights of the 73 villages in Akrani tehsil, the government would take a positive approach and it would support the NBA's contention regarding giving the land rights in the Mumbai High Court.

It was the latest, though an indirect one, admission of the failure of the resettlement up to 90 metres of the dam and that there have been major problems over this. This admission is doubly important. Firstly, the same Maharashtra government has been filing the affidavits at regular intervals that there was no problem regarding the resettlement of the SSP oustees up to the height of 110 metres. Secondly, based on these affidavits and also by the state governments of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and the union government, the Supreme Court, on October 18, 2000, by a majority judgment by the chief justice Anand and justice Kirpal, ordered that the resumption of the work on the dam. It ordered the immediate completion