

Vision Document: India Social Forum 2023

1. Introduction

World Social Forum (WSF) started more than two decades ago as an open platform of social movements, trade unions and civil society organisations of the world. The first WSF was organised in Brazil. While the world was seeing the worst impacts of capitalism and new liberal economic policies, WSF voiced that another world is possible. This other world could be based on the values of freedom, equality, and justice. Since then, the WSF process has continued globally with different intensities in different years.

The India Social Forum 2023 (ISF 2023) serves as a crucial stepping stone towards the upcoming World Social Forum (WSF) in February 2024 in Kathmandu, Nepal. ISF 2023 aims to bring together state-level and grassroots organizations and people's movements across India, focusing on civil and political rights, socioeconomic rights, and social movements based on identities such as Dalits, tribals, women, labour, and minorities. It will also facilitate the participation of trade unions, farmers' unions, informal labour unions, and other relevant stakeholders.

India Social Forum is not an organisation, and it does not require to be continued as an organisation.

2. Context

We find ourselves in a world witnessing an alarming rise in authoritarian regimes, which can be seen as a logical extension of the neoliberal regimes under which the World Social Forum first emerged.

It must be noted that peace and justice are also under attack globally and within India. A number of poor people and social activists languish in jails as the justice system needs to be more efficient and sensitive. Communal and racist hatred is on the rise. The livelihood of communities dependent on natural resources is in danger and climate change is adversely affecting most geographies and people in the world.

Corporations are undermining democracy and controlling most pillars of the democratic set-up. Disparities have grown to obscene levels. In the Indian scenario, measures such as GST, demonetisation and lockdowns further marginalised local businesses and livelihoods.

India as a South Asian country shares some common problems and challenges in the region, right from the migration of workers and poor people to the impacts of climate change.

We also see a global rise in majoritarianism and aggressive nationalism. India is also a witness to it. It is negatively impacting all rights including ethnic rights and the political and social environment.

Against this backdrop, it becomes crucial to draw upon India's history of organizing social forums. The forum will emphasize the need for collective action to counter the challenges posed by these regimes. By fostering collaboration, ISF 2023 aims to address the erosion of civil and political rights, socio-economic disparities, and the marginalization of marginalized communities.

3. Building on the Legacy

ISF 2023 draws inspiration from India's rich legacy of organizing regional, World, and India Social Forum processes in 2003, 2004, and 2006, respectively. This legacy highlights India's commitment to democratic values, social justice, and inclusivity. ISF 2023 will build upon this foundation, leveraging the lessons learned from the previous forums, and channelling the collective energy towards a more

equitable and just society. These milestones underscore our commitment to fostering a democratic and inclusive space for dialogue, cooperation, and collective action.

In 2004, the Mumbai Social Forum marked a significant turning point in India's engagement with the global social forum movement. It brought together a diverse range of organizations, activists, and concerned citizens who sought to address pressing social, economic, and political issues. The forum served as a platform for open discussions, workshops, cultural events, and protests, creating an atmosphere of intellectual exchange and collective mobilization.

The Mumbai Social Forum saw the convergence of various social movements and civil society organizations, addressing topics such as globalization, corporate power, gender justice, environmental sustainability, and marginalized communities' rights. It provided an opportunity for participants to share their experiences, strategies, and struggles while collectively envisioning a more just and equitable world.

Inspired by the success of the Mumbai Social Forum, India took another significant step forward by organizing the India Social Forum in 2006. This national-level forum built upon the momentum generated in Mumbai and aimed to further strengthen the social justice movement across the country. It drew participation from a wide range of grassroots organizations, NGOs, trade unions, women's groups, environmental activists, and student organizations, among others.

The India Social Forum served as a platform for dialogue, collaboration, and building solidarities among diverse social movements in India. It sought to amplify the voices of marginalized communities and address structural inequalities prevalent in society. Through workshops, seminars, cultural events, and networking sessions, the forum facilitated the exchange of ideas, strategies, and best practices to tackle pressing socio-political challenges.

The India Social Forum in 2006 focused on key issues such as land rights, access to resources, communal harmony, caste-based discrimination, workers' rights, women's empowerment, and environmental sustainability. It created space for dialogue on these critical topics, fostering cross-learning and collaboration among different movements and organizations.

The successes and lessons learned from the Mumbai Social Forum in 2004 and the India Social Forum in 2006 form a crucial foundation for the upcoming India Social Forum in 2023. We recognize the power of collective action and the potential of social forums to mobilize and unite diverse voices for transformative change. Building upon the legacy of these past events, we aim to reignite the spirit of activism and solidarity to confront the challenges posed by authoritarian regimes and neoliberal forces in the present context. The India Social Forum 2023 will serve as a continuation of this rich tradition, promoting inclusivity, dialogue, and collective action in the pursuit of justice, equality, and human rights.

4. Objective

The primary objective of the ISF 2023 is to create a platform that fosters solidarity, mutual learning, and the development of shared agendas among civil society organizations, trade unions and social movements. By providing a safe space for dialogue and collaboration, ISF 2023 aims to strengthen civil society resilience, forge alliances, and collectively address the pressing socio-political challenges facing India.

The India Social Forum 2023 will build upon the themes explored in previous social forums while incorporating the emerging challenges and opportunities in the global context, including the

upcoming World Social Forum (WSF) in Kathmandu, Nepal. The key thematic areas for the India Social Forum are as follows:

1. **DEFENDING DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS:** Drawing inspiration from the previous social forums, the India Social Forum will prioritize the defence of civil and political rights. It will address the challenges posed by authoritarian regimes, the shrinking space for civil society, threats to freedom of expression, and the protection of human rights defenders. This theme will emphasize the importance of democratic processes, transparency, and accountability in governance structures.
2. **SOCIO-ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND EQUALITY:** Building on the legacy of previous social forums, the India Social Forum will continue to focus on socio-economic justice and equality. It will address issues of inequality, poverty, land, forest, water and labour rights, and access to essential services such as education, healthcare, water and sanitation and housing. This theme recognizes the urgent need for transformative policies and practices that ensure inclusive development and economic justice for all sections of society.
3. **EMPOWERMENT OF MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES:** Inspired by the social movements and struggles showcased in previous social forums, the India Social Forum will give special attention to the empowerment of marginalized communities. This includes addressing the rights and concerns of Dalits, tribals, women, minorities, youth and other marginalized groups. The forum will promote inclusive policies, affirmative actions, and equal opportunities to ensure social justice, equity, and the elimination of discrimination and marginalization.
4. **WORKERS' RIGHTS AND DIGNITY OF LABOR:** Taking cues from the earlier social forums, the India Social Forum will dedicate significant focus to workers' rights and the dignity of labour. It will emphasize the strengthening of trade unions, farmers' unions, informal labour unions, and other labour movements. This theme will address issues such as fair wages, social security, safe working conditions, and the recognition and protection of workers' rights, highlighting the crucial role of workers in achieving social justice.
5. **ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE JUSTICE:** Recognizing the growing urgency of environmental challenges, the India Social Forum will integrate the theme of environmental sustainability and climate justice. It will highlight the interconnectedness between social justice and environmental issues. The forum will explore strategies to address climate change, promote sustainable development, and protect the rights of communities impacted by environmental degradation.
6. **GLOBAL SOLIDARITIES AND COLLABORATIONS:** In alignment with the upcoming World Social Forum, the India Social Forum will emphasize the importance of global solidarities and collaborations. It will promote dialogue, exchange of ideas, and networking among activists, organizations, and social movements from different countries. This theme will foster transnational cooperation and collective action to address global challenges and promote a more just and inclusive world.

By incorporating these thematic areas, the India Social Forum 2023 aims to build upon the lessons learned from previous social forums and align itself with the vision and objectives of the upcoming World Social Forum. It will serve as a catalyst for dialogue, cooperation, and collective action, inspiring transformative change and fostering a more equitable, sustainable, and just society.

5. STATE-LEVEL SOCIAL FORUM

A lot of work has already gone into mobilising state-level groups in the past 3-4 months. State-level meetings have taken place in Delhi, UP, Bihar, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, MP, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Uttarakhand among others. Delhi also hosted the first India Working Group meeting in March 2023 and June 2023.

To ensure comprehensive representation and participation, ISF 2023 will build on the process of organizing state-level social forums in at least 10 states across India. These forums will be held from August to October 2023 and will provide a platform for diverse civil society organizations to come together, exchange ideas, build solidarities, and develop shared agendas for the common struggles ahead.

6. KEY OUTCOMES

Through ISF 2023, we envision achieving the following outcomes:

- a. Enhanced Solidarity:** Facilitate the exchange of experiences, knowledge, and best practices between diverse civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and unions, fostering a stronger sense of solidarity.
- b. Shared Agendas:** Develop collective agendas and action plans that address common struggles, empowering civil society organizations to amplify their impact and advocate for positive change.
- c. Grassroots Mobilization:** Strengthen grassroots mobilization by empowering marginalized communities, including Dalits, tribals, women, workers, youth and minorities, ensuring their voices are heard and their rights protected.
- d. Network Building:** Expand and strengthen networks of civil society organizations, trade unions, farmers' unions, and informal labour unions to foster sustained collaboration beyond ISF 2023.

7. CONCLUSION

In the ISF, some plenaries can be proposed by the central team or the India Working Group. But most of the other events, conferences, workshops, cultural programmes etc would be proposed and organised by different thematic working groups.

ISF 2023 represents a critical milestone in the journey towards the World Social Forum in 2024. By harnessing the power of collective action, solidarity, and shared agendas, ISF 2023 aims to create a vibrant and inclusive platform that nurtures social change and advances the rights of all citizens. Together, we hope to facilitate a collective process that upholds the principles of justice, equality, and dignity for all upholding the values enshrined in the constitution of India.