

Peddling Illusion as Reality

The Many Ironies of the Global Protest Movement

○ Barun S. Mitra

I wonder if anyone noticed the irony of the World Social Forum (WSF) recently held in Mumbai. The erstwhile Bombay is home to Bollywood, that uber-successful Indian product, now seeking new markets around the world. In the theatres, the dream merchants create an illusion with as little pretence to reality as possible, aiming to provide their audiences a brief escape from real life. On the streets, this spring, we had the spectacle of the anti-globalisation brigade also seeking to sell illusion – not as fantasy, however, but as fact.

It is a moot point whether the anti-globalisation protestors are being deliberately dishonest about the true nature of their activism or are turning an equally deliberate Nelson's eye to the real world. Having perfected the art of protest at global fora, they are now out to create a brand for global protest lobbies. Products of globalisation themselves, they want to deny the fruits of globalisation to others.

Consider the other ironies. Ardent critics of global corporate brands, protest movement icons from Che Guevara to Naomi Klein and Arundhati Roy have all become international logos. Quite an achievement when you read Klein's bestseller *No Logo* published a few years ago. Roy, of course, has used her Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things* to move ahead and present herself as the god of global protest. And then there is all that Che

merchandise, sold in militant protest against global consumerism!

The global protest businesses have mastered modern communication technologies to create global networks, yet do not want modern technology to reach the masses. They claim to speak for the voiceless millions among the world's poor, yet either fail to get elected to the lowest of public offices or opt not to. They are masters at marketing and attracting attention but spare no efforts to restrict the market. They demand empowerment but seek to restrict the freedom of choice that people, particularly the poor, may exercise in the marketplace. They thrive on donated capital, particularly foreign capital, yet oppose anyone else having access to capital. They are against the profit motive, yet have perfected the art of generating profits out of nothing.

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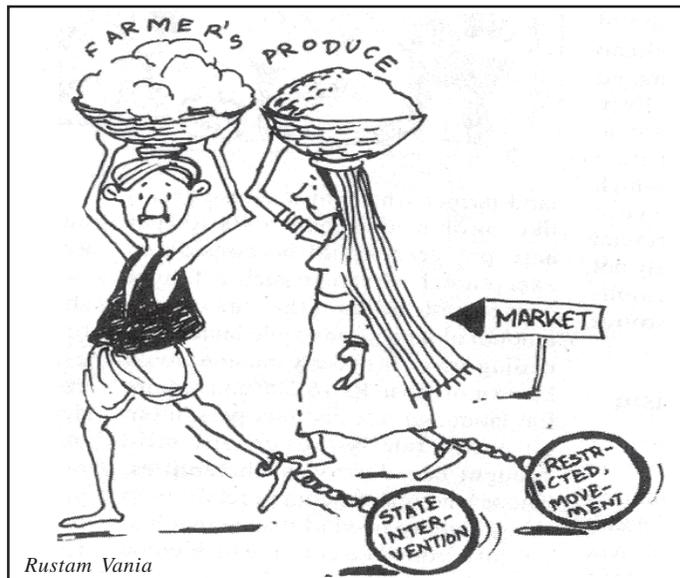
These people ignore the fact that poverty is caused by too little, not too much trade. They talk of sustainability, these people who sustain their projects on external life support. They want to preserve and protect the environment, yet refuse to bring environmental resources under the disciplining influence of the marketplace. They rage against possible loss of wildlife, yet fail to recognise that the only animals who don't have the threat of extinction over them are the ones that are commercially available for consumptive and non-consumptive uses. Again, the conflict of interest between the protest groups and the object of their protest becomes evident. After all, if the environment improves and wildlife thrives, much of the green movement will become extinct.

A central theme of the globalised protest movement is to highlight how globalisation is disempowering, displacing and alienating the poor. Yet they ignore the fact that the single most important instrument needed to protect the poor is to recognise their property rights. The poor have more assets in their hands waiting to be capitalised than all the foreign aid given in the name of the poor over the past 50 years. However, for the protest movements, private property rights for the poor are an anathema. After all, how could the protesting elite trust an 'illiterate and ignorant villager' in a remote village in a poor country to take care of the hallowed objectives of the protestors?

Consider the debate over agriculture. The protestors want farmers to receive a higher price for their produce but don't want them to have the freedom to trade and seek the best price in the marketplace. They want to install a 'fair trade' regime guaranteeing higher prices and eliminating traders and middlemen. But such a high-price policy will only induce even greater production and ensure certain collapse of the price in the market, thus ruining the very farmers that such a policy is expected to protect.

The activists wax eloquent about the benefits of organic farming, and castigate modern agricultural practices. Prince Charles of England, who can well afford to grow organic produce in his palace grounds, is, quite appropriately, one of the mascots of "old" agriculture. For most poor farmers in the world, agriculture is a life and death issue. The protestors don't want farmers to enjoy their freedom to farm, to decide what is in their best interests. And so, they press the case against biotechnology in agriculture and coerce many governments to delay or ban new technologies, while impoverished farmers, from India to Latin America, are lapping up spurious and pirated bioengineered seeds in the hope of improving their families' income.

The protest brigade talks of the significance of the government in social sectors like education and health but does not consider that it is government intervention that has severely restricted the access of the poor to such basic services, while at the same time making private



Rustam Vania

investment in these areas needlessly difficult. They want to subsidise the poor – could it be that they are ignorant of the fact that it is these very subsidies that have perpetuated state monopolies, benefited the privileged and denied the poor services like electricity, water or sanitation?

The protestors want to improve the access the poor have to better medicine; they hold pharmaceutical corporations guilty of protecting intellectual property rights (IPR) at the cost of higher priced medicines. However, the fact is that in many poor countries, India included, there have hardly been any IPR protections for

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medicines and yet these countries are hardly the health capitals of the world, with benefits going to the poor. When corporate bashing is the reigning ideology of the protest groups, IPR is a very good issue to wave. But if better health care for the people is the real concern, then one has to look at the whole rotten health-care delivery system, where the price of medicine

typically accounts for only 10 to 15 per cent of the total costs. That will invariably train the spotlight on the public sector health-care system but whoever heard of the professional protestors protesting against the 'holy cow' that is the public sector?

It is estimated that 5 million children die annually around the world due to poor quality drinking water. Yet the protest brigades go to war against the alleged pollution in bottled water or soft drinks. They have a point – after all, bottled drinks are what these protest armies survive on while the vast majority of the poor can only dream of those bottles.

One principal battle cry in Bombay was 'no' to privatisation of water. This in a city where almost 40 per cent of households have no reliable supply of water at all and in a country where about 60 per cent of houses don't have piped water, forget the quality of the water available. And all this under the benign state monopoly over water. It is needless to point out that the war on water is hardly in the interest of the public at large.

The anti-globalisation lot are critical of what they call the 'robber barons' for building cosy relationships with the government to

protect their profits, yet they aspire to become the new robber barons by claiming a share of government power without accountability.

The WSF castigates the 'neo-colonial forces' for trying to deal with the forces of global terror, yet the WSF itself represents the forces of the more seductive new cultural colonialism. Protest groups have been very active in Western Europe voicing their concerns, at times even violently, on issues ranging from globalisation to the war in Iraq. Yet when Yugoslavia was collapsing into chaos and the whole of the Balkan peninsula was on fire, these

conscience-keepers opted to look the other way. While the protest lobbies celebrate their own self-importance, they don't seem to celebrate the first real freedom the people in Iraq have got for the first time in almost 50 years – the freedom to protest.

These activists are the new empire-builders who have no qualms about profiting from poverty and oppression. The greater the poverty, the greater the opportunities for them to expand their own empire. Not surprisingly, for all their avowed concern for the poor, they hold the poor in utter contempt. They do not

recognise the right of the poor to decide for themselves.

And now for the supreme irony: for all its innate contradictions, the WSF protest lobbies help us cherish our freedoms. They do not respect the freedom of others but without freedom there can be no protest. These global protest movements only help to reinforce those freedoms. So when these products of globalisation protest globalisation, the rest of us can only appreciate the strength and resiliency of our freedom, political and economic.

The author is the Director of the Liberty Institute, New Delhi. □

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