

## The India Civil Society Summit

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**ON THE 15TH OF AUGUST, 2007, INDIA CELEBRATED 60 YEARS OF FREEDOM FROM BRITISH RULE.** India now claims superpower status as a nuclear weapons state and nearly double-digit economic growth. In contrast to these signs of progress we have the dubious distinction of being on the wrong side of other indicators of human development—maternal mortality, female infanticide and foeticide, and deaths due to preventable diseases, to name several. India's progress is uneven: while she is developing world-class technology and services; she also has the world's largest number of poor and illiterate people. For many, freedom—in its true sense—is yet to dawn. For these people, the struggle continues.



It is in this context that The India Civil Society Summit was organized by a group of NGOs (including Mithra) and other Civil Society organizations. It took place from August 24 to 26 at Ambedkar Bhavan, Millers Road, Bangalore. The summit was a celebration of life, survival, resistance, and the continuing struggles for freedom against increasing odds. It provided a space for dissent and voicing issues, a space for celebrating differences and a space speak of ongoing struggles for freedom.

The purpose of the Summit was to build relationships across boundaries and to create a platform for people-centric nation building. The Civil Society Summit brought together nearly 850 participants representing 67 NGOs from 23 states in India from diverse spheres for a synergy of ideas.

The participants listened to the different points of view of the speakers and the challenges that the nation faces in ensuring “freedom for all.” These are the declarations that were passed during the summit:

1. **POWER TO PARTICIPATE:** The present majoritarian electoral system has to be given up in favor of proportionate electoral system. A proportionate space for all divergent people needs to be given in governance. This will effectively arrest the march of dominant ideas, weapons, violence and money. And instead will establish a value based governance in favor of people of India.
2. **WEALTH CREATION:** The civil society summit recognizes that there is a dearth of business and financial knowledge, making the poor extremely vulnerable in contemporary society. India has adequate wealth and there is no need to create more wealth at the cost of the poor—as it has been done until now. Wealth and

money that had been created at the cost of the marginalized groups are actually locked to them. There is a need to unlock this wealth and money

*[Groups who have been marginalized by the creation of wealth and money are excluded from the economic system within which that wealth now circulates. —Editor]*

3. **URBANIZATION:** The speed that is infused into the process of urbanization in India is alarming. Urbanization can be equated with the internal displacements. Being a displaced people who have migrated to urban areas to eke out the barest minimum required for living, millions of such people live in abject poverty. Thus, urban poverty is alarmingly increasing. There is need to deal with urban poverty while taking also the plight of the rural poor into consideration.
4. **TECHNOLOGY:** The development of modern technology and its benefits remain only with the elites. The civil society summit asserts the need to develop and spread a people's technology as well as people-centered technology. Such a technology will keep [serving] the common man as its goal.
5. **MEDIA:** The Indian media is far removed from the people of India. Indian media is conditioned by factors beyond its own control. It is largely guided by the consumerism and sensationalism of the urban population. The summit asserts that the media in India should change its priority to focus on the rights of the people.
6. **DIVERSITY:** India is a country of diversity. However the instruments and the mechanisms of governance are in the hands of a few groups people. In the lives of the poor in general—Dalits, Tribals, women and minorities such as Hijiras, lesbians, the gays—participation and governance remain a distant dream. The summit condemns all forms of inhuman treatments meted out to them and the denial of Human Rights to them. The civil society summit supports and encourages all efforts of the Dalits, tribals, women, and other minorities to integrate themselves into the instruments and mechanisms of governance while preserving their specificity.
7. **INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION:** The civil society summit appreciates the positive and pro-active efforts of many resource organizations of the northern hemisphere specially their recent efforts of building solidarity networks in their respective countries to support the cause of Dalit human rights and the rights of the other marginalized groups in India.
8. **THE CORPORATE SECTOR IN INDIA:** The Civil society summit recognizes that the Indian Corporate sector has enormous money power which leads them to the threshold of political decision making. Such a powerful sector must be asked whether it has exercised its responsibility towards the poor, whose labor has contributed to their unlimited profit.
9. **WOMEN:** India will be recognized as a matured democracy only when her women are safe and enjoy all rights enshrined in the constitution of India.

#### **MITHRA'S INVOLVEMENT:**

Before the summit, Bella, director of Mithra; Yeshodha, a Dalit activist; and Anita, from Open Space; addressed the press meet. Video channels covered the interviews and the interactions with the press.

Mithra displayed its materials and publications in the summit stall. and the students of Human Rights Education Program—Karnataka of Mithra gave meaningful and relevant cultural programs every day in between the panel discussions. It was quite interesting and they delivered their messages strongly.

Mithra mobilized partners from Susila Dharma India, Prof. Gurudip Aurora and Gangamma from Atam Deep,

DDS and COVA. Lakshmiamma from DDS, the indigenous videographer not only addressed the gathering but also took the full video coverage of the three days programs (The video camera was donated by SD-Britain, Raphael Bate). We plan to involve more SD-India partners in future.

On the whole, coming together and discussing the common and current problems of the people was an enriching experience for all of us. We have decided to hold the next Summit at Bhuvenshver, Orissa.

**CONCLUSION:**

The Civil Society Summit was officially inaugurated on August 24th 2007 at 11.00 a.m. by Mr. D. Thangaraj, IAS, who symbolically beat a drum. The summit concluded on August 26th 2007 at 4.30 p.m. by reciting the pledge, prepared from the constitution of India. Program ended with the beating of drums.

The overriding theme of the Summit was 'displacement' – from land and governance to identity. The emphasis was on the search for solutions and working together.

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