

*~ Passage to India ~*



*A Report on the People's World Water Forum  
and the World Social Forum*

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I have just returned from a moving, exhilarating and exhausting two-week trip to India and want to share my reflections with you while the images and memories are still so fresh. Colleagues Bill Moore-Kilgannon and Anil Naidoo from The Council of Canadians accompanied me, and we teamed up with friends from the Polaris Institute, Kairos and Development and Peace from Canada, as well as Public Citizen and other friends from the U.S., to make a strong North American contingent.

## Part One: The People's World Water Forum in New Delhi, January 12-14

In New Delhi, India's capital, water activists from over 60 countries gathered at the India International Center for the first People's World Water Forum. Plans for this forum started at the 2003 World Social Forum in Brazil, became more solid at the World Water Forum in Kyoto last March, and finalized in meetings in Cancun during the September ministerial of the World Trade Organization (WTO). It became clear to the many "water warriors" in Kyoto that the World Bank and the big water companies behind the World Water Council intend to continue to promote the commodification of water and deny that water is a fundamental human right. So we realized that there was some urgency for us to come together as a more formal international movement to counter this "global high command of water," as Ricardo Petrella has so aptly named the World Water Council. Knowing that many water activists would be coming to India for the World Social Forum, we decided to hold our water forum in New Delhi just days before the big gathering.



Our tireless hosts were Vandana Shiva and her wonderful staff from the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology. It was a hard-working two and a half days, with information and strategy sessions on bottled water, privatization of water services, dams and river linking, the World Bank, WTO and the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), pollution and conservation, and water as a

human right. Not surprisingly, as the forum was held in India, there was an emphasis on the struggles in that country, including the attempt by the transnational corporation Suez to privatize New Delhi's water and the aggressive invasion of Coke and Pepsi into many parts of rural India. We were thrilled to learn of the fight back by the water workers of New Delhi against Suez, the formation of local activist groups against the bottled water companies, as well as the creation of a national network against Coke and Pepsi. You won't be surprised to learn that we were infiltrated by "experts" in the workshops who were clearly paid by Coke to assure us that the drying up of water tables in the communities in which Coke operates is entirely coincidental and has nothing to do with the millions of litres being removed every day from these sites.

The forum ended with a unanimous vote to create a new network called the People's World Water Movement and the adoption a declaration ([see attached](#)). For me, there were three highlights of our joint strategy that stand out and serve to guide our international water work in the coming years. The first is the need for a formal United Nations Convention on Water as a Human Right. It is time the people of the world had this guarantee locked into an international convention, which can then be used at the national and local level in our struggles against water theft. The second is the need to intensify our fight against the GATS, a deal that will be used as a weapon against local struggles if water is ever included as a service in this agreement.

The third clear goal is a very bold one: we decided to target two companies for upgraded fights – Coca-Cola and Suez. We chose these two companies not only because they are so flagrantly destructive of local communities and environments, but also because there are already on the ground struggles going on around the world against them. Coke, for instance, is being resisted for its terrible labour practices in Colombia and other places, its exploitation of groundwater in India and Latin America, and its invasion of schools all over North America. The goal now is to better link these campaigns and to set some common targets and strategies.



## Part Two: The World Social Forum in Mumbai, January 16-20

How to describe this event? I guess I would have to start with the city itself. Mumbai – formerly Bombay – has a population of 18 million people, 60 per cent of whom are living in slums or directly on the streets. If current trends of de-population of the rural communities due to WTO agriculture policies persist, in ten years time the number of people living in slums in Mumbai will rise to 80 per cent of the population. The current Indian government is quickly adopting economic globalization and with it is coming the growth of a wealthy entrepreneurial class with money to burn, and the entrenchment of the “underclass” – already present in India from the caste system, which is still very much alive.

I have been to other Third World cities, including Mexico and Manila, but have never witnessed the sheer massive volume of destitute people eking out some kind of existence on the streets. For example, if your car is stopped in traffic, it is quickly surrounded by dozens of street children, with babies in arms, begging for a little money. As well, the exponential explosion in the number of cars on the streets, many of them very old and dirty, plus the almost total lack of garbage collection or basic sanitation for the people on the streets, makes Mumbai the most polluted city I have ever seen, or smelled.



At the same time, there is a tremendous energy to the city, indeed to the entire country, which was mirrored at the World Social Forum (WSF). The event, which was held at a huge abandoned warehouse site, brought together more than 100,000 people from all over the world (including several hundred Canadians) to sing, dance, protest, talk, listen, strategize and give each other hope. Keynote speakers included Indian writer Arundhati Roy, anti-dam activist Medha Paktar, French farmer Jose Bove (with whom I shared a panel) and many more great activists and thinkers from around the world. Hundreds of workshops on every aspect of economic globalization and alternatives to it were filled to capacity. I participated in quite a few, including workshops or panels on water and food security, trade agreements, and reforming the UN. Activists from the People's World Water Movement spread the word

around the WSF and had a powerful impact on the gathering.

More than any other memory, I will remember the demonstrations of the poor and powerless at the 4<sup>th</sup> WSF. Dalits (formerly “untouchables”), disabled street children, displaced dam refugees, Tibetan and Burmese human rights activists, women against domestic violence, and many, many more, marched up and down the dusty roads of the site, chanting, dancing, singing, shouting and celebrating their common humanity and new found sense of power. At times, the din was so loud, you could not hear the speeches, even with the powerful sound systems.



As I watched and listened to these amazing street demonstrations, I felt a surge of hope and knew in my heart that the politics and policies of neo-liberalism will never be able to dampen the human spirit or destroy the sense of social justice so clearly alive among the people. The words “Asia Rising” kept coming into my mind. Some criticized the event as chaotic; what I saw, however, was an outpouring of amazingly organized grassroots activism and a milestone in a movement whose time has come.

## Part Three: Solidarity Tour to Kerala, January 21-23

After the World Social Forum, I participated in a trip to two water-bottling plants where local protest is growing. This trip, for me, was the most important of my two weeks in India.

The southern state of Kerala has had progressive government for years and it shows. There are not the great disparities between rich and poor that characterize Mumbai and New Delhi. Everyone has work to do and life in the towns and villages of this beautiful agrarian state is very much like it was decades ago. However, in Plachimada, a small community in the interior of Kerala, a grim struggle has grown between the local tribal people (Dalits and Adivasis) and the Hindustan Coca-Cola Company. Coke and Pepsi use satellite imagery to locate reservoirs of groundwater in India, and have set up dozens of controversial bottling sites in poor rural communities around the country.

The Plachimada project is located on 38 acres of former rice paddies and extracts up to 1.5 million litres of water every day to be made into Coke, Fanta, Sprite, Thumbs Up, and other products. Every day, 85 trucks, each containing 600 cases of 24 bottles, leave the plant, exporting local water far away. Within a year after the plant opened, local water sources started to dry up, putting hundreds of farm families out of business. All 260-bore wells installed by public authorities have gone dry. As well, the soil, water and air around the plant have become contaminated from the sludge by-product, which includes cadmium and other trace metals. What is left of the water is not fit for bathing or cooking, so high are the chlorides from wastewater pumping from the plant.

For almost two years now, the local women have staged a daily sit-in directly across from the Coke plant (see cover photo). All day, every day, in rain or shine, old women, young women and babies, occupy a low-set straw shelter and sit impassively staring at the trucks coming and going from the plant, surrounded by hundreds of private security guards the company has hired. Coke sued the women, demanding that their picket be dismantled. The local people fought back in court and won a lower court ruling that allowed them to continue to picket and limited the amount of water that the company can extract. The company is now appealing that ruling and it is likely to go to the highest court in India.



Maude Barlow, Vandana Shiva, Jose Bové lead march with local women protesters to Coke plant gates

The "World Water Conference – 2004" was held in a huge outside stage, set up directly across from the plant and equipped with loud-speakers so powerful that everyone in the Coke plant heard every word of the two-day event. The local activists, backed by M.P. Veerendrakumar, the head of a major newspaper publishing company who opposes the Coke plant, put on a wonderful event, filled with fiery speeches, moving theatre and music, and graced by every major political figure in the region. At the public rally on the second evening, there were easily 5,000 people in attendance.

Significantly, the World Water Conference also adopted the Plachimada Declaration, [see attached](#).

I sat with the women protesters for several hours, sharing stories of grandchildren (through an interpreter) and even borrowing some for much-needed hugs. A favourite memory of this time was asking a group of beautiful young schoolgirls, dressed in white uniforms, "Who wants to be Vandana Shiva when they grow up?" and seeing every hand reach in the air instantly! We were invited in to the Coke plant, where we met with officials who assured us that there was plenty of water in the region and the farmers' dried up wells had nothing to do with them. We emerged from the plant to a bank of television cameras and denounced the company in no uncertain terms.



On the last day of the trip, vans and buses took us to a nearby community that is fighting a Pepsi plant causing similar devastation on the local people. Here we read out the Plachimada Declaration promising our support and calling for a boycott of Coke and Pepsi – something I have long wanted to do. I left India feeling a very deep commitment to help the people of these rural communities fight the theft of their water by these unscrupulous companies and to build an international movement to reclaim water for people and nature.



On February 18, the Kerala State Government ordered the Coke plant to be shut down for 4 months because of its effect on the water in the area. Coke is now trying desperately trying to sell the plant. This is a clear victory but we must continue to work with our friends to ensure that the plant is permanently closed.