



Bhopal Jan Utsav: A festival of Hope and Solidarity Celebrating Reason and Diversity

The city of Bhopal witnessed a unique Festival -- a festival of diversity, reason and resistance—between 26th and 28th of November. Named as Bhopal Utsav, it was organised by various progressive



organisations, collectives and movements between. The festival brought together activists from diverse movements, cultural activists, science activists and thousands of people from all walks of life. The festival was conceived as a response to the systematic assault on people's lives mounted by religious sectarian forces and neoliberal economic policies. Over 3,000 people representing movements from across the country, raised their voices in unison to celebrate popular resistance against attempts to unmake the vision of a multicultural and self-reliant nation that fired the independence movement in India. For three days the grounds of the

Rabindra Bhawan reverberated with slogans, songs, and debates which spoke about the real concerns of the people. They spoke of social justice, gender equality, of the primacy of reason over obscurantism, and of freedom – freedom from hunger and poverty, freedom from repression of free speech and ideas, and freedom from caste and class oppression.

Over 60 organizations¹, representing youth, students, women, workers, cultural activists, science activists and many others joined together to organize the festival. The vibrant participation of such a

¹ Organisations involved in organising the Bhopal Utsav included: All India Peoples Science Network, Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samithi, Indian Writers' Forum, MP BGVS, Eklavya, AIDWA, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, Right to Food Campaign, Dalit Adivasi Jan Sangarsh Morcha, Vishist Jyoti Samajik sangathan, Sahari Mazdoor Sangathan, Himmat, CITU, M.P Kisan Sabha, Students Federation of India, All India students Federation, Democratic Youth Federation of India, All India Youth Federation, Janvadi Lekhak Sangh, M.P Bank Employees

large number of organisations underpinned the very essence of the festival – a true celebration of India’s diversity. The diverse nature of participants contributed to the diversity of ideas and arguments, in both formal and informal conversations, that took place throughout the three days.



A panel of eminent personalities from different walks of life addressed the **opening plenary** on the 26th and was joined by powerful cultural expressions that celebrated India’s diversity and its popular struggles against the tyranny of myriad oppressions. Plenary speakers included **Shanta Sinha**, former Chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, acclaimed Indian classical dancer and cultural activist **Mallika Sarabhai**, social activist, trade union and women’s leader and former Member of Parliament **Subhashini Ali**, spearhead of the Right to Information campaign **Aruna Roy**, Magsaysay award winner and campaigner for eradication of

manual scavenging **Bezwada Wilson**, one of the founders of the People’s Science Movement **Prabir Purkayastha**, leading scientist **Satyajit Rath**, scholar and intellectual **Rao Saheb Kasbe** and noted Urdu poet **Asghar Wajahat**. The giant backdrop on the stage, which declaimed: **‘if we are together we are millions in number, if not we are nothing’**, captured the essence of what all the plenary speakers spoke.

Rao Saheb Kasbe spoke about of his vision of the coming together of movements – combining the visions of Ambedkar and Karl Marx – to build a truly inclusive nation. Mallika Sarabhai urged the audience to reflect on the notion of purity being thrust upon us and argued that it is actually the diversity of India that makes it beautiful and resilient. Satyajit Rath and Prabir Purkayastha spoke to the necessity of mounting a collective resistance against the assault on reason and elaborated on ways in which science can become a tool of resistance. Shanta Sinha shared stories of children, which depicted how they instinctively cherish diversity. Bezwada Wilson argued passionately that the corporate friendly government of the day deliberately undermines the concerns of its citizens. He pointed to the increase in caste based violence in the country, and also to increased resistance against caste oppression. Aruna Roy, sharing her experience of the movement for Right to Information, emphasized on the importance of holding the state accountable for its actions. Subhashini Ali spoke about the gravity of threats faced by the nation, that appears poised to tear apart the secular fabric of the Indian constitution. Charul and Vinay from Eknaad Foundation, Ahmedabad, brought the entire audience to its feet through their music which spoke of crumbling livelihoods and popular struggles.

The opening plenary set the tone for the festival and raised questions which were debated and elaborated upon in a number of **panel discussions**. The Panels were organized around the broad themes

Association, All India Kisan Sabha, National federation of Indian Women, Pragatisheel Lekhak Sangh, AITUC, Vikas Samvaad, Rashtriya Secular Manch, Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan, Ekka, Muskaan, Milaan, Central Zone Insurance Employees Association, M.P Medical Representatives Union, Tulika Samvaad, Anganwadi Workers Union, Bhopal Gas Peedith Sangarsh Sahayog Samiti, M.P Mahila Manch, Gharelu Kamgar Mahila Sangh, Card, Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, All India LIC Class 1 officers Federation, Sangini, Adivasi Ekta Mahasabha, Sochara, Awaaz, Dalit Soshan Mukti Manch, Mobile Creches, Jan Pahal, Ekta Parishad, PRS Akil Bharat Shiksha Adhikaar Manch, Shiksha Adhikaar Manch Bhopal and many more, from Kerala, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Assam, participated in the festival.

of resistance, livelihoods, gender, education, self reliant development, rationality and reason and were structured around the following ideas:

1. Voices of Resistance.
2. Reason and Scientific Temper.
3. Our Lives Our Struggles.
4. Science Education and Research.
5. Education Policy and exclusion
6. Gender and oppression
7. Science & Technology and Self Reliance



Speakers at the panels represented movements from different parts of the country and included Megha Pansare, Manishi Jani, Nikhil Dey, Ashok Chowdary, Roma Malik, Debesh Das, Abha Dev Habib, Anil Sadgopal, Shuba Sharma, Soma Sunder Marla, Sabyasachi Chatterjee, Dinesh Abrol and Surajit Majumdar,

The second day of the festival culminated in a **plenary addressed by youth leaders and student activists**. Panelist included **Kanhaiya Kumar** and **Satarupa Chakraborty** from Jawaharlal Nehru University, **Sanjay Rajoura**, well known standup comedian, and **Kawalpreet Kaur** from Delhi University. For over two hours the open air auditorium

remained packed and frequent slogans rent the air. All the speakers, amidst thunderous applause, spoke of their notion of freedom.

The festival had something for everybody, and most activities ran in parallel – with all of them drawing big crowds. An open air stage for skits, plays, and songs, a **colorful exhibition venue**, a film festival, a **pavilion where children articulated their aspirations**, a day long poetry reading session, and much more.



Cultural presentations involved very popular folk and progressive artists including, including Prahalad Tippaniya, Nageen Tanvir, Nilanjana Vashisth and team, Jatan Natya Kendra-Haryana, IPTA-Raipur and and numerous groups from Gujarat, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chattisgarh and Bhopal. Asgar Wajahat, Naresh Saxena, Manishi Jani, Rajesh Joshi, Vishnu Nagar, Shuba Sharma led the **poetry reading**



godmen. Prominent rationalist practitioners and groups participated in this workshop, including Avinash Patil and activists from Maharashtra Andha Shradha Nirmulan Samiti (MANS), Rationalist Narendra Nayak, Tamil Nadu Science Forum and Jana Vignana Vedika. They dissecting 'miracles' using scientific methods and also replicated several common 'miracles' while exposing how they are performed.



the All India Democratic Womens' Association and noted Hindi poet Rajesh Joshi.

As people started their journey back, many to far off places like Assam, Tamilnadu, Kerala and Jharkhand, they carried back the message of solidarity and hope and the belief that the working people of the country are not alone on their struggle to build an inclusive India that is welcoming of all people who live in it.

sessions with their poetry of resistance. A special session was organize in memory of revolutionary poet Muktibodh on his birth centenary.

Sanjay Joshi and Yousuf Saeed curated a **variety of documentary films**. Films shown at the festival included 'Our Gauri' directed by Deepu, 'Yashpal a life in science' directed by Yousuf Saeed, and 'Bant Singh Sings' by Sanjay Kak.

A unique event was the two day workshop on '**Exposing Miracles**' that debunked obscurantist practices and tricks resorted to by so called



The Bhopal Jan Utsav concluded on the 28th with colorful rally that passed through some of the most crowded parts of the city. The concluding rally was addressed by Medha Patkar of the National alliance of peoples' Movements, adivasi activist Soni Suri, and Mariam Dhawale of

