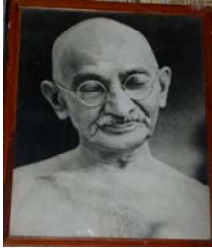


# Under Babu's Shadow: Forging a Joint Front for the Marginalized

## IFA Partners' Meet at Sevagram, Wardha, December 2007 [ifa2007meet@yahoo.com](mailto:ifa2007meet@yahoo.com)



Impatient with the pace of social change, we in IFA are always looking for ways to speed the process. Having established relations with many grassroots groups in India, we have been thinking about ways we can help link them together. The efforts came to fruition last year with the decision to hold a meeting of the various IFA partners in India. By popular choice, Sevagram, Mahatma Gandhi's ashram in the heart of India, was selected as the meeting site.

The process began with considerable apprehensions. We had supported some meetings in India before but had never actually organized one. Furthermore, here, we were hoping to get together, leaders from all corners of India who are all highly accomplished and have great standing in their own fields. Would they spare the time? Would they consider it a worthwhile exercise? And how would they respond to each other? What role would we play in the entire process? Would it cost too much? Would it be a prudent use of our resources?

Well, when it was all over, we can say with great



satisfaction that the answer to all these questions has been a resounding yes. We had a great meeting; a very productive meeting and we believe we see in it the beginnings of something with potential for creating widespread change in India.

The meeting was attended by two-dozen leaders from all over India. Seven IFA members also attended. The meeting was held over three days from December 6 to December 9 and most stayed for the three days.

**Madhu Kishwar**

**Arvind Kejriwal**

**Sandeep Pandey**

**S. Sudarshan**



**Manushi Sangathan, Delhi**  
**Jagadish Pradhan**

**Parivartan, Delhi**  
**SR Hiremath**

**Asha Parivar, UP**  
**Shashi Tyagi**

**Karuna Trust, Karnataka**  
**D.S. Lohiya**



**Sahabhagi Vikash Abhiyan**  
**Orissa**

**Samaj Parivartan Samudaya**  
**Karnataka**

**Gramin Vikas Vigyan Samiti**  
**Rajasthan**

**Manav Lok**  
**Maharashtra**



**Ravi Chopra**  
Peoples Science Institute  
Uttarakhand



**R B Patil**  
India Development Service  
Karnataka



**Mohan Hirabai Hiralal**  
Vrikshamitra  
Maharashtra



**Nalini Kant**  
Manavi  
Bihar



**Gururaja Budhya**  
Urban Research Center  
Karnataka



**Paromita Goswami**  
Shramik Elgar  
Maharashtra



**Subash Mohapatra**  
Forum for FFDA  
Chhattisgarh



**G N Simha**  
REACH  
Karnataka



**Suvarna/Yogesh Shastri**  
Sahajeevan  
Madhya Pradesh

Half of the first day was devoted to introductions since many were not familiar with the others' work. The remaining part of that day and the entire next day were used for panel discussions on the most relevant issues pertaining to everyone's work and to the marginalized people in general. On the third day an attempt was made to develop some short and long-term action plan. The meeting started with two premises.

The first statement defined the commonality of the origins of the various groups in attendance:

**“Post-independence India’s failure to deliver on the promise of economic upliftment of the vast majority, led many to organize efforts and build organizations that sought to succeed where the governments had failed. Despite the diversity of this work, intervention for or on behalf of the poor, the weak and the marginalized, was the common thread that ran through**

The second statement defined the commonality of the agenda facing all:

**“Poverty, hunger and want are endemic to a large segment of the Indian population. The resources of the society (economic, political, scientific and social) have largely remained unavailable for (or, where applied, have failed in) a meaningful addressing of this problem and whatever commitment there has been, seems to be declining.”**

The meeting concluded with a series of action items. All agreed to work for the following goals:

1. Sharing of Information.
2. Research of laws, processes and policies such as Special Economic Zones.
3. Documentation and promotion of best practices in government, police, bureaucracy, etc. This to be done via Documentaries, media reports, articles, etc.
4. Retreat for spiritual development available with the Karuna Trust facilities in Karnataka.
5. Training and exposure visits.
6. Participation in movements such as the ‘Save the Yamuna’ campaign or the ‘Save the Rivers’ marches in Uttarakhand.

The following actions felt doable at present:

1. Development of a Common Website with links.
2. Sharing of information in other traditional ways.
3. Additional smaller meetings during the year focused on specific issues.
4. Training based on individual group resources.

The following are possible but would require significant resources

1. Researching existing laws: This would require interviewing people (including executives, scholars, etc.), analysis and debate on the information collected and then formulation of a new/revised bill.
2. Advocacy and lobbying for enactment

For those of us who attended the meeting, it was a memorable experience. The campus is a simple and quiet place across the street from Gandhiji's Ashram. The accommodations are Spartan but sufficient. The days were full with sessions starting right after breakfast and going till dinner. At night, whenever the power was available, there was time to share DVD's and other items of interest. The food was simple but delicious and the hospitality duties were wonderfully discharged by Suvarna and Yogesh from Sahjeevan. SR's group from SPS took care of the logistics, disbursement of travel funds, etc. Ashim Jain had a major role in the overall organizing and was truly pivotal to the entire process.



More than anything else the meeting brought together people of great caliber, knowledge and experience. What they all share in common is a deep-seated concern for the poor and life long-commitment to their cause. We spent three days in intimate, relaxed settings. There were lively discussions at lunch, dinner and even in the early morning walks to



the local teashop. The atmosphere of common purpose and camaraderie was truly something to be savored. We all came highly inspired and enriched.

As a follow up to the meeting, a yahoo group has been established by Ashim Jain who is shouldering much of the responsibility of coordination in India. Two smaller meetings have been held, one in Sevagram and one in Pune. These were focused on the issues of the new laws on Natural Resource Management and Rehabilitation of those displaced by development work. These laws are currently being debated by the Indian parliament and are going to have profound influence on the poor for generations to

come. It is therefore imperative that they should be poor to the maximum extent possible.

IFA members have also reviewed the outcome of this meeting and everyone is very excited about the prospect of creating major synergy in the fight against poverty. It has been decided to fund a few smaller meetings throughout the year along with the yearly meeting at Sevagram. The expenses for the 2007 meet were about \$3000. It is felt that most of the groups would be able to arrange for their own travel and that being the major part of the expense, we should be able to keep the total budget to no more than 3 to 5% of our total disbursement.



*It was thrilling to participate in IFA's meeting of its project champions held at Gandhiji's Sevagram Ashram. They came from all over India, each with a uniquely inspirational story as to how they started helping the poor and ended up making it their life's mission. And as we heard more about their background it hit me: they were all as highly credentialed as any of us.*

*It was amazing how quickly special bonds developed among the attendees during the 3 days we were there. Synergy was palpable. This meeting reinforced my conviction that IFA is working with some of the best projects and champions for uplifting the poor in India.*

*---Kailash Narayan*