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India Holds Government Accountable For Millennium Development Goals

By Pamela Philipose, Womens Feature Service



Among the various definitions of "noise" is this one: "Something that draws public notice". And "Making Noise" is precisely what groups all over India are doing, or planning to do, in the days ahead in order to wake up the government to its promises. In the year 2000, India was among the countries that had signed on to achieve, by 2015, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These goals straddle eight core concerns, including the foundational one of reducing poverty and hunger. In many ways, this process is the world's most ambitious social development intervention, in both intent and scope.

On September 20, leaders from all over the world will gather at the UN headquarters in New York for the global summit to review the progress made on these goals. Meanwhile, in India, the 'Stand Up Take Action/Make Noise For The MDGs' campaign will be flagged off on September 18 by 100 musicians performing and urging action on the MDGs against the majestic backdrop of Delhi's Purana Qila (Old Fort).

Celebrities such as Bollywood film stars Rahul Bose and Ranbir Kapoor are part of this campaign, and may pop up on television screens to make their appeals of action. But it is in among India's poorest states that lie in its heartland - believed to do even worse than sub-Saharan Africa on many human development indices - that the real test of the Indian government's MDG commitments will play out. This is also where, incidentally, civil society groups are holding public hearings and launching rallies to "make noise" and put crucial issues on the front burner.

The National Confederation of Dalit Organisations (NACDOR) is one of these groups. Says NACDOR's National Convenor, Ashok Bharti, "Our basic demand is that the MDGs should be approached in a holistic, people-centric manner, rather than be addressed in bits and pieces. If people are not central to a programme, it fails. Take the Right to Education Act that was recently passed. The Act left out pre-primary education from its ambit and thus undermined its very purpose."

NACDOR is presently organising a Millennium Adhikar Yatra in rural Uttar Pradesh, which will mobilise the poorest and most marginalised communities, raise awareness and pressurise people's representatives to get the government to deliver. Later this year, on December 5, NACDOR plans to organise a large public meeting in Delhi to demand that the government provide a blueprint on how it aims to achieve the MDGs.

The rights to food and employment are regarded as central to achieving MDG 1, which sets out to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Several campaigns on these twin objectives are well underway. Annie Raja, General Secretary, National Federation for Indian Women (NFIW), explains, "We at NFIW have decided to focus on Goal 1. On the 18th, which has been designated as Make Noise Day, we will demand the universalisation of the Public Distribution System." NFIW members will submit a memorandum on the issue to the local authorities, both at the district and state level.

A memorandum is also coming the way of the Madhya Pradesh chief minister, on the failures of his government in implementing India's most ambitious employment guarantee intervention - the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), regarded as a lifeline for many who lack sustainable livelihoods. "We are linking right to employment with the right to life," says Sachin Jain, director of the Bhopal-based Vikas Samvad. His organisation is coordinating an effort involving several Madhya Pradesh groups that have fanned out to 16 districts of the state and are holding public hearings on the MNREGA. "The insights generated by these hearings will be shared at a state-level public hearing later this month at Gandhi Bhavan, in Madhya Pradesh's capital city of Bhopal, and a joint statement will be submitted to Chief Minister Shivraj Chouhan," reveals Jain.

Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (WNTA), an umbrella organisation of groups from all over India, has been holding consultations on each of the MDGs, including a recent one on Goal 4 focusing on child mortality. It has also staged a series of women's tribunals in states like Jharkhand, Uttarkhand, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, and Maharashtra and Karnataka. According to Suman Dasgupta, Programme Coordinator, WNTA, "The attempt is to engage with various concerned stakeholders - especially among disadvantaged groups - so that the MDGs process is owned by and driven by people."

Interestingly, many who otherwise don't figure in the development discourse of the country are also seizing this moment to register their presence. In Karanataka, WNTA organised a tribunal for transgenders, while in Maharashtra de-notified and nomadic tribes will come together to 'make noise' by playing their traditional instruments like the 'shankh' (conch), 'shehnai', 'been' (snake flute) and 'tasha' (kettle drum) at Mumbai's sprawling

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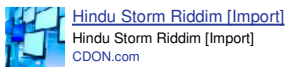


Azad Maidan and later at Delhi's Jantar Mantar. Reveals Pallavi B. Renake, National Coordinator, Lok Dhara National Alliance for De-notified and Nomadic Tribes, "De-notified and nomadic tribes, who number around 110 million people, don't figure on the government's map. Yet, 94 per cent of them are landless, 72 per cent do not have ration cards and 28 per cent are actively excluded from society. Since they don't have education, they don't get jobs, documentation or access to loans. They find themselves in very dire straits but are totally overlooked."

These are not articulations of despair; these are new assertions of rights - a trend that the MDGs process has helped to galvanise. According to Bharti, the problem is that the government routinely adopts an aggregate rather than inclusive approach, so that socially excluded groups - whether they happen to be de-notified tribes or Dalits - continue to be outside the loop. "If India does not achieve the MDGs, the world will not achieve the MDGs; and if Dalits and tribals do not achieve the MDGs, India will not achieve the MDGs. So we need to get our priorities straight," he remarks.

The idea, as Minar Pimple, Regional Director, Asia and the Pacific, United Nations Millennium Campaign, pointed out when he was in Delhi recently, is really for all citizens to hold governments accountable. With the world in the last lap of the race to achieve the MDGs, Pimple does not underestimate the challenges ahead but remains hopeful. As he put it, "We can still make it - provided there is political will at all levels of government; provided MDGs are fully adopted at the national, state and local levels; provided delivery systems are fully functional and accountable to people; and provided that over the next five years citizens become the core element of the MDGs process."

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