



## We20 – Defending the Right to Dissent

India had assumed the G20 presidency end of 2022 and the Leaders' Summit was held in early September 2023. During this time the Government used it to seek political and electoral mileage, conducting over 200 meetings in 60 towns and cities, making a spectacle out of it

The picture that was presented and the show put on reeks of vulgar display at a time when India's performance on every social barometer is abysmally poor. While India's position on several rankings related to electoral democracy, freedom of speech, press freedom index were falling, and attacks on religious minorities were on the rise, India projected herself as the 'Mother of Democracy' and 'Vishwaguru' in its publicity blitz towards the build-up to the Summit, using public money. Rs. 51 crore was incurred by the central government alone for these advertisements, while what was spent by the state governments and municipal corporations are yet to be ascertained.

The economy is in shambles. Cronyism, corruption, fraud and vulgar accumulation of wealth are legally sanctioned, valorised and made it into a virtue in itself. This has led us to a situation where unemployment rate is the highest in 45 years. GDP growth had been on a downward slide before 2019. With COVID-19, and with the nationwide lockdown, that slide turned into a fall, sending India to negative growth for the first time in 40 years. Retail inflation rates are still high, impacting the food and essential goods of common people. We can look at rising household debt,



wealth inequality, rampant accumulation of wealth and power, jobless growth, and the crisis of livelihoods, and all these will tell us the economic state in which we are.

Demonetisation and the goods and services tax regime have broken the backbone of the informal sector, which employs nearly 90% of the workforce, and small traders, something which they never recovered from. The GST regime has also crippled the state governments in terms of their ability to find resources of their own to meet their needs, posing a serious threat to fiscal federalism.

This is in addition to the crackdown on civil society, criminalizing dissent and engineering communal polarisation in a massive and planned manner. Or the compromising of all key institutions of this country which could have and which played a role in the past, to speak truth to the powers and hold them accountable. All of these are essential to this regime to promote and sustain the dream of 'Amrit Kaal.'

While a Bofors rocked a government decades back, a Rafale jet deal, or Electoral Bonds or PM Cares or even a Hindenburg report is not even looked at with the seriousness it deserves and pursued to their logical end by the media or judiciary and the voices of the opposition parties are either expunged or they are disqualified. The secrecy which is made to accept and silence bought over these matters with the ED and IT raids has further exacerbated the gap of accountability. It is in this context India was hosting the G20 Summit and the related meetings.

Fundamentally, legitimacy of G20 has been challenged by progressive forces for the

past many years. Firstly, G20 is reflective of a self-appointed elite body, which has no legitimacy, functioning in a top-down manner because they make up 80% of global economic output. Secondly, the G20 is a major obstacle in the process of democratization of economic governance. The fact is that the presidency has come to the southern (Global South) leadership by no measure means that it would be progressive because a lot of governments in the Global South have embraced neoliberalism.

The namesake spaces for civil society to engage like C20 have been co-opted by appointing groups aligned with government ideology.

We20: Peoples' Summit was one of the people's responses to India's G20 presidency. The We20: Peoples' Summit was intended to serve as a counterpoint, addressing the shortcomings and concerns that many argue are inadequately tackled by the G20's policies and decisions. Police stopped the We20 on the 3rd day. Before the police disrupted the We20, 6 out of the 9 workshops took place. The remaining 3 workshops were held online.



### Peoples' Response to India's G20 Presidency

Key activities which were a part of the peoples' response to G20 were:

1. We20: A Peoples' Summit on G20
2. Public hearing on the forced evictions in different cities, and
3. State level meetings and protests
4. Issuing position papers
5. Publications

In February, a [public statement](#) by Indian people's movements, trade unions and other civil society groups on G20, signed by over 100 organisations/individuals was issued.

## We20 – A Peoples’ Summit on G20

The We20 was jointly organised by approximately 70 organizations through a process which started in December 2022. Many organisations have invested in it to make it an impactful set of events.

The [We20 Summit](#), was held at the Surjeet Bhavan, New Delhi from August 18 to 20, 2023, as a significant gathering attended by over 700 people from 18 states. The summit served as a platform uniting progressive public representatives, social movements, human rights defenders, and organizations representing vulnerable communities. Emphasizing dissent and democracy, the event was planned as an inaugural ceremony, nine workshops, and a cultural program.

The inaugural session held on August 18 had the following speakers: Abdul Shakeel, Basti Suraksha Manch; Prof. Arun Kumar, (retd), JNU; Brinda Karat, All India Democratic Women’s Association; Dayamani Barla, Adivasi-Moolvasi Astitva Raksha Manch; Hannan Mollah, former Lok Sabha MP, All India Kisan Sabha; Harsh Mander, Karwan-e-Mohabbat; Prof. Jayati Ghosh, Economist, University of Massachusetts Amherst; Manoj Jha, Rajya Sabha MP; Medha Patkar, Narmada Bachao Andolan, National Alliance of People’s Movements; Olencio Simoes, National Fish Worker’s Forum; Rajeev Gowda, Former Rajya Sabha MP, Vice Chairman, State Institute for Transformation of Karnataka; Rekha, Annadata Bhartiya Kisan Union; Ritwick Dutta, Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE); Roma Malik, All India Union of Forest Working People; Shaktiman Ghosh, National Hawker’s Federation; Teesta Setalvad, Democratic Rights Activist, Citizens for Justice and Peace; Thomas Franco, former General Secretary, All India Bank Officers’ Confederation & People First.

### *Workshops*

The [workshops](#) covered diverse topics, reflecting the critical issues associated with the G20 and India's presidency. The workshop themes included the right to information, digital data and surveillance, tackling climate change, protecting the environment, biodiversity, and associated human rights, global finance, big banks, and their impact on people, agriculture, food security and the G20, confronting inequality, safeguarding labour rights and strengthening social protection, reimagining cities for just, sustainable, participatory, and inclusive urban environments, addressing fascism and marginalization, and reclaiming resources while envisioning a different future.

The workshops were held on the following topics:

- G 20 and India's Presidency: In Whose Interest?
- Right to Information, Digital Data and Surveillance
- Does Modi Administration Really Deliver on Tackling Climate Change, to Protect Environment, Biodiversity and Associated Human Rights, as claimed with G20 and Other Global Fora?
- Global Finance, Big Banks, and its Impact on People
- Agriculture, Food Security and the G20
- Confronting Inequality, Safeguarding Labour Rights and Strengthening Social Protection
- Reimagining Cities: Fostering the Right to Just, Sustainable, Participatory, & Inclusive Cities
- Fascism and Marginalisation
- Reclaiming our Resources, Reimagining our Future



More details of the workshops are available [here](#).

The inaugural program and the workshops were held at venues named after our comrades:

- Adv. Shahid Azmi Hall
- Rohit Vemula Hall
- Gauri Lankesh Hall
- Vimal Bhai Hall
- Fr. Stan Swamy Auditorium

The We20 program succeeded in physically bringing together civil society organizations, fostering a space for networking, and challenging dominant ideas of development and the influence of the G20 on global decision-making.



### *Declaration*

A joint [declaration](#) titled 'People and Nature over Profits for a Just, Inclusive, Transparent, and Equitable Future' was released, calling for solidarity and unity among democratic forces, peoples' movements, civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and progressive individuals. The declaration urged robust South-

South cooperation and advocated for a just, inclusive, transparent, and equitable future for people worldwide.

### Media & Publications

We20 garnered good [media attention](#) as it aimed to create a narrative challenging the neoliberal order and its propagandists in the G20 nations. Here is a set of publications/ articles which have been released to analyze various aspects of the G20 and enhance public education. These publications cover a wide range of topics, from legacy and prospects to the impact of G20 policies on vulnerable communities. Notable publications includes



1. [India & G20: Legacy & Prospects for Multilateralism amidst a Polycrisis](#)
2. [Reading the Rhetoric: G20, its Politics & What the 2023 Presidency Means for India](#)
3. Report: [The Forced Evictions Across India and G20 Events](#)
4. Report in Hindi: [G20 सम्मेलन और देश व्यापी जबरन बेदखली](#)
5. Gang of 20 – A Comic Book (Available in [English](#), [Hindi](#), [Marathi](#), [Bengali](#))
6. [A brief history of G20](#)
7. [Chronicles of a Missed Opportunity Foretold: India and the G20 Presidency](#)
8. [A Statement sans Solutions: India's G20 Presidency and Its Outcome](#)
9. [Why the G20 declaration is far from the triumph it's being hailed to be](#)
10. [Unpacking G20](#)
11. [G20 in India: The story so far](#)
12. [Video: The Story of G20](#)
13. [Energy profile of G20 countries: are they compliant with necessary Climate actions?](#)
14. [Video: Life in the times of G20- An explainer](#)
15. [Decoding G20 \(Hindi, English\)](#)



### *Police action*

The WE20 program and the challenge to the G20 narrative led to officials getting nervous on the civil society mobilisation. Without any official document, on the second day, police in large numbers arrived at the venue and asked the program to close down. In the absence of any official communication, people refused to and held protests near the gate, while the parallel sessions continued, with many renowned speakers in attendance. Here's the [statement](#).

On the third day, police served a notice to close down the program. [Press note](#).

Despite these challenges, we gathered to condemn the government's anti-democratic actions and proceeded to read, discuss, and pass the Declaration by the delegates, a testament to our collective commitment.

Transition to Online Format:  
Due to the above-mentioned issues, some sessions of the We20 program had to transition to an online format, sending a clear message that the government can stop a program but not people's voices. While this allowed for continued engagement, it might have posed challenges in terms of replicating the in-person experience and possibly impacted the dynamics of participant interaction.



However, the shift to an online format resulted in increased participation from different parts of the country. The increased online engagement could be seen as a positive aspect, offering broader accessibility, but it might have presented challenges related to technology disparities, language, connectivity issues, or limitations in replicating the collaborative atmosphere of in-person events.

## Preparation for Civil Society Dialogues and Meetings

To foster comprehensive discussions about the G20, thirteen thematic working groups were formed, comprising of academics, civil society researchers, and activists. These included working groups on Agriculture, Climate Crisis, Just Energy Transition, Global Economic Governance, International Trade and Development, Banking and Finance, Labour and Employment, Shrinking Democratic Spaces, Digitalisation and Surveillance, Rising Inequality, Social Protection and Welfare, Privatisation of Public Services, Gender, and Debt.

In total, over 80 individuals across various sectors participated in these working groups, delving into the connections between various sectors and the G20. This effort resulted in [nine sectoral papers](#) and insightful discussions

## Public Hearing on Forced Evictions in New Delhi and Beyond

New Delhi, the venue of the G20 Summit, has witnessed one of the most brutal evictions, affecting over 250,000 people who were forcefully evicted, and their houses demolished in various parts of the city. These include Tughlakabad, Mehrauli, Yamuna floodplains, Sarai Kale Khan, Mayur Vihar, Dhaula Kuan, and Kashmiri Gate. Many of these demolitions were carried out early in the morning without adequate notices in many cases and accompanied by police forces with mobile jammers so that visuals did not get circulated till the demolitions were over. Forced evictions were also held in different parts of the country, where G20 related events were held. These include, Indore, Mumbai, Udaipur and Nagpur.

In some of these instances, city administrations, in collaboration with different departments such as municipality, tourism, and police, orchestrated the eviction of street vendors, waste pickers, and traders. The demolition of houses belonging to the urban poor, destruction of night shelters, and displacement of homeless people occurred under the pretext of removing "illegal encroachment" from urban spaces. In some cases, even the judiciary failed to provide relief to the affected communities.



In response to these distressing events, community organizations and civil society groups initiated discussions and organized a public hearing at Surjeet Bhavan in New Delhi on May 22, 2023. The jury, consisting of senior journalist Pamela Philipose, dalit activist Beena Pallikal, former deputy Mayor of Shimla Tikender Panwar, former bureaucrat Harsh Mandar, and senior lawyer Anand Yagnik, heard heart-wrenching stories of early morning demolitions, destruction of school books, and disruptions to water facilities during the public hearing. Notably, these actions were carried out without due process of law, including notices and just rehabilitation. Representatives of people impacted by forced evictions from Nagpur, Indore, Udaipur, Kolkata, Mumbai and Delhi deposed before the jury.



The jury members strongly denounced the demolitions as cruel and brutal, characterizing them as an extra-constitutional event that did not adhere to the rule of law. The report was released at a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents Club, New Delhi on July 13, 2023. More details:

- [Public Hearing Details](#)
- Full Report ([English](#), [Hindi](#))
- [Press Release](#) (Public Hearing)
- [Press Release](#) (Report Release)

## Civil Society Meetings and Protests

As part of the civil society response to G20, a series of meetings and discussions on the G20 were conducted in different cities across the country, including Kerala, Kolkata, and Tamil Nadu.

### *Kerala:*

A one-day dialogue hosted at YMCA Aluva brought together participants representing diverse groups and backgrounds in social, cultural, and political spheres, hailing from



different districts of Kerala. Spearheaded by renowned social activists including CR Neelakandan of National Alliance of People's Movements, Benny Kuruvilla of Focus on Global South, and Maju Varghese of Centre for Financial Accountability, the program delved into a myriad of pertinent issues. The discussions emphasized India's transformation from a leader in the fight against imperialism and colonialism to a nation increasingly subservient to global capital.



*West Bengal:*

The Hawkers Sangram Committee, facilitated a one-day meeting at the Academy of Fine Arts, Kolkata on July 25, 2023. About 24 organizations working on various issues converged to discuss topics related to agriculture and food security, labour and employment, shrinking democracy, press freedom, and dissent. The meeting also protested against cruel evictions of street vendors in various cities, carried out in the name of city beautification for G20 events. Sakthiman Gosh and other NHF leaders were present at the meeting.



*Tamil Nadu:*

A one-day meeting was organized at ICSA Chennai on August 14, linking local issues with those of the G20. Discussions were led by Dr. Janakarajan, Sundarajan, Poovulagu, Saravan, Vijayan, Dr. MC Rajan, Inamul Hassan, and Thomas Franco. The meeting aimed to connect the impact of G20 policies with local concerns, fostering a nuanced understanding of the global implications on a regional scale.



*Protests:*

Under the leadership of National Hawkers Federation, protests were held in different parts of the country on the day the Leader's Summit was happening in Delhi, on September 9, 2023. Protests were held in West Bengal, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Arunachal Pradesh,



Telangana, among other places. Photos and videos of the protests are available [here](#).

## Conclusion

Amidst a serious crackdown on the civil society, criminalising of dissent, arrests of many activists and the way G20 was treated as an unquestionable holy cow, it was significant that many people's movements, trade unions and civil society groups coming together to assert their rights, question undemocratic platforms like G20 and put forth issues that touches common people. ♦

