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## CELEBRATING 3 YEARS OF PROGRESSIVE COOPERATION

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RLS-South Asia celebrated three years of progressive co-operation in the region from 10th to 12th Feb, 2014 with a conference, a theatre play, and an opening ceremony from in New Delhi. The theme of the political conference was: 'Versatile Resistance from Left against neo-liberal Agenda: Party politics, progressive centres and culture - Local responses from South Asia and Germany'



The three-day programme was witnessed by a gathering of several delegates of the German party "DIE LINKE" (the Left) and many social and political activists from India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. It was inaugurated by Dr. Dagmar Enkelmann, head of Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and Dr. Carsten Krinn, Re-

gional Representative of the Foundation for South Asia. Beginning on a very relevant and yet overarching note, the first papers were read by Prof. John Neelsen (University of Tuebingen) and Prof. Ravi Kumar (South Asian University, Delhi) who spoke about the Neo-Liberal attack on People's achievements. While Dr. Neelsen expounded on the subject with an emphasis the Western world, Dr. Ravi Kumar concentrated on the South Asian picture of the same.

Impact of Neo-Liberal attacks on Urban Communities, the next session, involved two presentations by Dr. K T Ravindran, who is a retired professor from the School of Planning and Architecture, and Dunu Roy who is the coordinator at Hazard Centre, an organisation that assists communities and people in identifying, understanding, and combating the "hazards" that beset them. Both speakers critiqued the urban planning process of Delhi which is controlled by the elite few who consciously exclude targeted sections of society and seek to disposes them of the little they have. The session also emphasised the nature of the 'World class city' that Delhi is striving to become and tried to critique the desire for more steel, more glass, and more height that the builders and plan-ners seem to have developed.

In the evening, a play based on the letters, writings and views of Rosa Luxemburg was performed for the participants. It was introduced by Stephan Krull (chairperson of RLS Lower-Saxony), who gave a short introduction to Rosa Luxemburg's life and threw some light on



why she is important for the foundation as a symbolic icon. The play connected the life and times of Rosa with the current state of politics in India through a young student couple and their leftist group who are trying to find space for their ideas and their desire to make a change. As they read through the writings of Rosa: letters from prison, communication from travels and analytical works, the character of Rosa, the worker, the analyst, the revolutionary, the dreamer and the lover opened up before the audience. All this while, Rosa herself was present throughout the play in person, thus going back and forth in time and proving that Rosa remains as relevant today as she was in her time. It was written and directed by Noor Zaheer who is a cultural activist, researcher and actor.

Next day began with a session that juxtaposed presentations from organised left and non-party left. Ulrike Detjen from DIE LINKE, North Rhine Westphalia presented on Left Urban Resistance in a metropolitan German city, informing us of the valuable contributions of the members of DIE LINKE in Cologne Council. She explained how DIE LINKE had been successful in getting important programmes such as 'electricity for all', 'sports for all', 'accommodation is a human right' etc. passed in the council. Amarjeet Kaur from Communist party of India then shared with the participants some points about the Scope of Left in a shrinking political space at the local level. These presentations were followed by a response from Gautam Mody, General Secretary, NTUI who pondered about the link between a person as a worker and a person as a citizen because of different discourses that these terms fall under.



The session on Media and Cultural means to respond included the presentation- Stimulating Debate with Art- Model and Photography- by Peter Schmidt who explained the political and economic context behind his art exhibition at the venue, making it even more interesting for the participants. Miniature models of workers who occupy office spaces after the 'usual workers' are gone formed his first presentation 'Putzmunter'

(literally translated as: 'spirited clean' - meaning: "as fresh as a daisy"). Models of men women cleaning desks, corridors, toilets etc. in the afterhours introduced the onlookers to a very original and refreshing form of art while also cajoling them to look beyond what is easily visible. He emphasised that these were very rarely ever counted as 'colleagues' in big firms and he spent



extensive time with them trying to portray their life in his models. His second exhibition 'Ein Eurojob' subtly critiqued the banal nature of one euro jobs in Germany by showing aspect from the lives of one euro job workers. Since the concept of one euro jobs is not known widely in India, this exhibition especially interested the Indian audiences.

In the next presentation titled 'Scope of Left in a Shrinking political Space- the case of Shimla Municipality, Himachal Pradesh Tikender Singh Panwar shared his personal experiences as the Deputy Mayor of Shimla and as a member of Communist Party of India, Marxist. He engaged the audience with interesting anecdotes from his constituency and spoke about the contradiction of belonging to the left while being part of the government.

The following session, titled Modern means of communication (media), included Mr Roshan Nair from Awaaz.de and Mr Raghu Mainali from Creative Media Group, Nepal as speakers. Mr Mainali spoke about the importance of community radio in Nepal and his own experiments with the medium. Mr Mainali



demonstrated the information channels in the society and how this information can be further distributed. Mr Nair, then, explained his organisation's work with farmers and technology in rural India, where they are innovatively using cell phones as a key instrument in various aspects of people's life. Mr Paresh Chandra, research scholar at Delhi University and the discussant of the session picked up from where the two speakers left off and talked about the role of Media and Communication in left struggles today. The session was moderated by Mr Prabir Purkayastha who works with News Click, New Delhi.

This was followed by a lively panel discussion on Spaces for Organising Political Finance within a growing neo liberal Framework. The discussion was introduced by Marlies Linke, Head of Asia Desk at RLS, Berlin and was moderated by Praful Bidwai who is an independent journalist in New Delhi. It included Thomas Isaac (CPI (M); Ex-Finance Minister of Kerala), Dr. Helmuth Markov (Minister of Justice, Brandenburg, and until recently Finance Minister, Brandenburg), and BV Vijayalakshmi (Communist Party of India). The panellists engaged with questions on important subjects such as austerity measures, debts, management of state finances etc. and came up with an array of opinions and suggestions. BV Vijayalakshmi gave a detailed account on the methods deployed by Communist Party of India to get its funds. The highlight, of course, was a lively disagreement between the other two panellists regarding debts and austerity. While Thomas Isaac was in favour of continuing debts, Helmuth Markov though it impractical and argued for austerity measures and against waiver of debts. The floor was later opened to the audience which led to a lot of interesting questions and observations.

The day came to a close with the official Opening Ceremony of Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, South Asia. Dr. Dagmar Enkelmann (head of RLS), as the first speaker, congratulated the team at RLS both for their work in the region till now and for the organisation of the conference. Mr Cord Meier-Klodt (Deputy Chief of Mission to India, German Embassy) expressed his pleasure at the establishment of foundation affiliated to the Left in India since all six political parties from Germany are now



represented in India. He welcomed RLS, South Asia as the 'new kid on the block' and said he eagerly anticipated its future activities. Professor Achin Vanaik (Retired Professor, Delhi University) also lauded the work done till now by RLS, South Asia and also posed several future possibilities of further work and Cooperation. One of them being actively promoting nuclear disarmament in the region, an issue which is close to his heart and of no mean significance for people. Dr. Carsten Krinn, the regional representative at RLS, South Asia, then proceeded to tell the audience about the process of building up the South Asia office in New Delhi and thanked the people and organisations that had played a key role in this process.

The last day was opened by theatre person Moloysree Hashmi who spoke about the works and objectives of her organisation Jan Natya Manch (JANAM), which is a group of self-trained actors and has to its credit more than 7,500 performances of about 100 street and proscenium plays across 140 towns and cities of India. She said that the Indian Progressive Theatre Association served as a predecessor and an inspiration for JANAM and also told the audience about the organisation's founder Safdar Hashmi. Moving on to the present, Ms Hashmi narrated the experiences at "May Day Bookstore" and "Studio Safari", newly created Left spaces in Shadipur, Delhi. She spoke about the overwhelming response of left and progressive but non-left contributors who gauged the importance of such spaces and supported them from the very beginning. As a response to her presentation, Mr Yogendra Shahi from Centre for Nepal Studies elaborated on the experiences of his organisation as a left actor in rural Nepal. The next session saw a fascinating presentation by Stefan Nadolny and Frank Aßman called Liberating space in an urban context. The two shared information about Peter Weiss Haus in Rostock, Germany of which they are founder members and shared insights into the workings of the space. They started with how they acquired the historically very meaningful space and went on to fully renovate it. Peter Weiss Haus provides an umbrella space to many people belonging to several strands in the Left. It undertakes different kinds of cultural activities and host a Café and beer garden in its premises. Citing a similar endeavour, Brother Varghese Theckanath from Montfort Social Institute, Hyderabad made a presentation on the process of building up the institute and its activities. The institute is a resource centre to train and promote engagement in issues of sustainable development and human rights among a wide variety of partners and collaborators.

This was followed by a presentation titled Women Centre supporting Workers at a free trade zone by Padmini Weersuriya and Nimalka Fernando which dealt with the visions, aims and principles of Women's Centre, Sri Lanka. Women's Centre endeavours for a society that ensures the dignity, equality and rights of women and wants to rally and organize working women and other oppressed women, moreover building a women's leadership that can independently overcome the opposition and challenges that they face. Dr. Rajani Kunamneni from Chandrashekhar Rao Foundation responded with her presentation on her organisation's work. The CR Foundation, Hyderabad provides several facilities like a home for the aged, a research centre, women welfare centres and vocational training institutes.

Nimalka Fernando and Mohan Mani from Centre for Workers Management then summed up the approaches of the local political centres. Making a very important observation, Mr Mani said about the presentations before him that these smaller organisations, though small in size, play a key role in filling up the gap between government activities and the grassroots. They are vital in the day to day lives of the people in their own local areas of work.



The conference was concluded with remarks from Meghna Guhathakurta from Research Initiative, Bangladesh and Wilfried Telkämper, head of RLS-CID, Germany. Both extolled the efforts of the RLS team in bringing together papers on diverse subjects from across the left spectrum and looked forward to future endeavours of the foundation in South Asia.



#### SPEAKERS:

Frank Aßmann **Peter Weiss Haus** | Praful Bidwai **Council for Social Development** | Paresh Chandra **Delhi University** | Ulrike Detjen **Die Linke** | Dagmar Enkelmann **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung** | Nimalka Fernando **Platform for Freedom** | Meghna Guhathakurta **Research Initiatives** | Moloysree Hashmi **Jan Natya Manch** | Thomas Isaac **CPI (M)** | Amarjeet Kaur **CPI** | Pragma Khanna **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung** | Vinod Koshti **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung** | Carsten Krinn **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung** | Stephan Krull **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung** | Rajiv Kumar **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung** | Ravi Kumar **South Asian University** | Rajani Kunamneni **CR Foundation** | Marlies Linke **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung** | Cord Meier-Klodt, **German Embassy** | Raghu Mainali **Community Radio Support Centre** | Mohan Mani **Centre for Workers Management** | Helmuth Markov **Die Linke** | Gautam Mody **NTUI** | Stefan Nadolny **Peter Weiss Haus** | Roshan Nair **Awaaz.de** | John Peter Neelsen **Tübingen University** | Tikender Singh Panwar **CPI (M)** | PrabirPurkayastha**Newslick.in** | K.T. Ravindran **School of Planning and Architecture** | Dunu Roy **Hazard Centre** | Peter Schmidt | Yogendra Shahi **Centre for Nepal Studies** | Wilfred Telkämper **Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung** | Brother Varghese Theckanath **Monfort Social Institute** | Achin Vanaik **Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace** | Padmini Weersuriya **Women's Centre** | Noor Zaheer **IPTA** |

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