

Non-Party Movements and NGOs: Popular Science or People's Science?

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**Paper presented at
All India People's Science Congress
Chennai
December 19-22, 2001
Workshop on People's Organisations and Globalisation**

The dissemination of science is supposed to develop 'scientific temper', the ability to ask questions, to be curious and inquisitive, to expand the realm of knowledge. However, the nature of the question asked will quite often determine the nature of the answer. Let us take, for example, the case of the child ragpicker in the city who has to sort through garbage, often exposes herself to all kinds of harmful substances, and earns barely Rs 20 for her day's labour. If the question posed is, "What can I do to help the poor child?" then it is likely that the answer would be to cut down on the ragpicker's exposure to harmful substances by organising households for segregation of waste at the source itself. However, if the question asked is, "Why is the child poor?" then the answer would have to do with the reorganisation of the trade which denies the ragpicker a minimum legal wage. This is perhaps the distinction between **popular science** and **people's science**.

A few more examples would make the distinction clearer. Thus, if it is accepted that the 'free' market is being controlled by corporate structures to make their enormous profits, then what would (or should) the question be with respect to artisans and producers who are unable to make a living? If we ask, "How can they compete in the market?" then we move towards the 'constructive' activity of building self-help groups and adapting technologies to trigger more production. On the other hand, if we ask, "Why are they unable to compete in the market?" then we could tilt towards the 'aggressive' intent of organising unions to threaten a halt in production. The former is an example of **popular**, while the latter characterises **people's science**. **Popular** science confines itself to dealing with factors within a given system, while **people's science** tends to examine the basis of the system itself.

The phenomenal 40-fold growth in telephone connections in China is often compared to the mere 5-fold growth in India. An inquisitive person might ask, "How can India replicate China's success?" and go on to propose the development of cheaper technologies linked to enterprising 'private' initiatives such as the STD booth operator. However, a thinking person would ask, "Why did China succeed where India failed?" and come to the conclusion that it was China's dominantly 'public' Communist regime that paved the way for wide access to telephony. Similarly, one kind of analyst would suggest food-for-work programmes as an answer to, "What should India do with its huge food stocks to help the starving population?" while another analyst would challenge the food acquisition policy itself when asking, "Why does India have such large food stocks when the population is starving?" Movements and groups, therefore, may be categorised on the basis of whether the science they are practising is **popular** or **people's**.

This is particularly important within the context of globalisation wherein basic structural adjustments are being attempted within the economy. Thus, in the case of the city of Delhi, the triple policies of liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation have impacted deeply on several strata of the city's population. Residents of unauthorised colonies and slums are under threat of eviction, while those of resettlement colonies are being denied basic civic services on the pretext that the infrastructure is breaking down. Environmental lobbies have brought about the closure of polluting and non-conforming industries, as well as the replacement of diesel and two-stroke petrol vehicles with CNG powered transport. Raggickers, vendors, hawkers, and rickshaw pullers are being forced off the streets in the name of law and order. At the same time, in order to make service delivery more 'efficient', all the government utilities such as power, water, transport, health care, and consumer services are gradually being 'unbundled'.

This co-ordinated attack on the urban poor has given rise to several networks, platforms, and alliances that are attempting to counter the attack. One of such alliances is the Sajha Manch which has constituent members from all the sections mentioned above and has taken up virtually every issue of urban life for campaigns. Given the 'structural' nature of globalisation, the Sajha Manch has been forced to examine intensely the nature of **people's science** and its contribution to an understanding of globalisation leading to enlarged public protest campaigns. Emerging from the experience of the Sajha Manch in the last three years, four issues may be posed which confront **people's scientists**. Two of these questions are external to the alliance, while the other two are internal to the functioning of the alliance itself.

Firstly, there is the growing recognition that the processes of globalisation have taken over the media institutions as corporate structures and moulded them into instruments of globalisation. Thus, the media carries intensive coverage of the benefits of globalisation but deliberately ignores or downplays the fairly extensive public protest against it. Hence, a way has to be discovered to couple up alternative forms of mass communication with science campaigns. **Secondly**, State policy is no longer responsive to the articulated needs of the poor. Even if people's organisations mobilise on the streets their ability to influence policy is limited. Organs of the State defeat the people either by not listening to their voices or by co-opting them. Therefore, movements and groups have to discover how to build up public pressure through coalitions of decentralised networks.

Thirdly, when alliances are made between groups and movements, each member of the alliance has its own constituency and agenda. Leaders of these groups are often very protective of their own interests. Thus, the integration of these diverse strands into one integrated stream constitutes a major challenge. **Fourthly**, non-party groups and movements have occupied the space left untouched by the larger political parties but cannot ignore the parties. Since most non-party groups do not contest electoral politics, the question remains as to how democratic institutions can be built in interaction with the political parties.

All these questions are vital to the growth of **people's science**. The manner in which they are answered will differentiate the politics of defence from the politics of offence. The question before any network of People's Science Movements is, therefore, whether they want to participate in the struggle to survive or to revolutionise society.