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Secularism and People's Science Movement in India

K P Kannan

The idea of a People's Science Movement evolved as a result of the tremendous response of the common people to the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad and today the idea of conscious application of science in social activism is taking roots.

THE term 'People's Science' has, in recent times, appeared in the Indian media with an activist connotation. Initiated, often in specific local contexts, by those who could be characterised as belonging to the intelligentsia, a number of voluntary groups and associations have now sprung up and view themselves as part of the People's Science Movement (PSM). The specific and local level initiatives of these groups are varied: popularisation of science among the common people especially children, innovation in the pedagogy of science, research and action relating to people's health and environmental problems, innovation in communication by blending traditional art forms with a scientific analysis of contemporary problems, research in and dissemination of technology appropriate to the conditions in rural areas and so on. The size of groups vary from a band of few persons committed to initiatives in one area to around thirty-five thousand, as in Kerala, encompassing all the mentioned initiatives and more.

One of the earliest groups to use the word science in an activist sense was the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP). The idea of a PSM evolved as a result of the tremendous and positive response of the common people to the activities of the KSSP although several smaller groups with similar intentions and motivations were functioning in different parts of the country. I think it is this coincidence of interests and intentions which helped shape the People's Science Movement in the country ever since a convention of groups under the banner of PSM was held in 1978 in Trivandrum under KSSP's auspices. Since then, despite differences in interpretation and detail, the idea of conscious application of science in social activism has been accepted by several groups whose numbers are increasing. Let me try and summarise this particular conception of science and its role in the People's Science Movement. A fairly long period of interaction with the people led KSSP to the realisation of the need to use science in the broadest possible sense, embracing all branches of human knowledge, thereby stressing the essential unity in nature. This understanding, in its turn,

brought to the fore the artificial and partial nature of the compartmentalisation of human knowledge into several branches without consciously trying to understand the essential unity and complementarity in them. Experience showed a natural science content in every social issue and a social science content in 'science and technology'. Imbibing and inculcating the method of science to understand not only the physical reality but the social reality as well and attempting to raise relevant questions in order to find solutions to social problems is what gives science an activist role.

The above formulation gives, in my opinion, both a theoretical as well as practical perspective to various PSM activities. In order to highlight the activities of these various groups and to proclaim the entry of 'science' in the popular consciousness, a *jatha* called the *Bharat Jan Vigyan Jatha* was organised by 26 organisations during October-November 1987. Starting from five different corners of the country these *jathas* finally converged on Bhopal, the scene of the gas disaster in 1984. The immediate purpose of the *jatha* was the popularisation of science among the common people with the ultimate objective of developing a People's Science Movement in the country. To realise the dimensions of a social movement, and that too using science as the basis, in a country experiencing the onslaught of obscurantist forces of all types is a task which is far beyond the scope of the twenty-six organisations. But what they share is no illusion but a dream, for the realisation of which they have embarked as messengers. Some of them are young enthusiasts working in different educational and research establishments seeking to relate their world of learning and profession to the realities and needs of the Indian situation. Others are scientists and persons belonging to different other areas of activity such as trade unions, grassroots developmental groups, students as also people who have hitherto not been involved in any organised social activity.

ROLE OF ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS

It is not merely the intellectual content but the initiatives from intellectuals that

distinguishes the PSMs from other movements. There is no dearth of intellectuals in this country. But the mere existence of intellectuals is no guarantee that movements like the PSM will automatically benefit. In a project in which science is sought to be used to empower the vast majority of the poor living in rural areas, the manner in which intellectuals could perform a catalysing role is an important one. Let me bring in here the role of, what Gramsci called, organic intellectuals who originate and exist outside the common people unlike the traditional intellectuals who emanate and evolve out of the growth of people's movements in the rural context. Throughout Indian history it seems to me that intellectuals belonged, by and large, to the first category although examples of the second type are not rare. However in the contemporary situation, wherein the vast majority of Indians live in rural areas under conditions of poverty, illiteracy and various forms of oppression, the need for the growth and nurturing of organic intellectuals is imperative and one that PSM should address itself to. Those sensitised intellectuals working in various groups belonging to the PSM and who now have an urban background but possess considerable experience of working in rural areas can play a catalytic role in the growth and nurturing of organic intellectuals. The existence of such a class of organic intellectuals in some parts of India—as for example in Kerala—has, in my opinion, contributed to the spread and strengthening of a People's Science Movement there. I am here referring to the remarkable growth of KSSP which was started in 1962 but began to assume the dimensions of a PSM since the mid-seventies. Let me explain.

KSSP adopted the slogan of 'Science for Social Revolution' which sums up its conception of the role of science in our society and as a practical guide to its various activities. The KSSP is aware that it is not the only organisation which aspires and works towards a social revolution in India. Indeed there are many organisations, political, social and cultural, with their own long history of working towards that goal. The basic factor motivating most of these organisations is the reality of extreme economic and social inequality in Indian society. At the same time, there is a concomitant inequality in the sphere of, what may be called for want of a better term, knowledge. The gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' in this sphere is as wide as in other spheres. When a PSM perceives this gap and decides to work towards reducing it, then one may say that it has carved out a 'space' for its functioning. However, it will be an extremely limited one if activity is confined to dissemination of informa-

tion. On the other hand, if this sphere of activity is perceived in terms of the aspiration for progressive transformation of Indian society then the slogan of 'Science for Social Revolution' assumes practical significance. It is here the role of sensitised intellectuals becomes crucial. PSM presents opportunities for intellectuals to interact with people. It is not merely the people who benefit by this interaction. Intellectuals also learn from the life experiences of the people. Poor and illiterate people cannot be accused of being ignorant as is often made out to be. What they have is a series of unconnected and unstructured life experiences and sensory perceptions and are often not in a position to see them in a structured whole. Sensitised intellectuals can help shape these experiences in a structured whole with their theoretical and empirical knowledge not only of the immediate context but the larger social context, past and present, of their own societies as well as those of others. When these two groups meaningfully interact there is an enrichment of knowledge and a sharper understanding of reality. It would then set in motion a meaningful democratisation of knowledge. It is my contention that the social environment for the emergence of such a process of democratisation of knowledge exists in Kerala and there are already signs of such a process taking shape. The extent and content of popular debates in Kerala on questions initiated by PSM, such as on environment, people's health and formal and non-formal education, is evidence of this proposition. Indeed, the socio-economic and political history of Kerala since the turn of the century with its popular content as in movements such as social reform, secular-rationalist, socialist-nationalist not to speak of the Village Library Movement with its blend of Gandhian and socialist streams, has been such that it has by now given rise to a group of rural intelligentsia—school teachers, village library activists, social and political workers with a rural background. The sensitised among them have been participants of one movement or another and thus carry with them a wealth of experience of working with the people. It is this rural intelligentsia (not necessarily the higher order intellectuals) that I call 'organic intellectuals'. The growth and spread of organic intellectuals across the entire breadth of rural India will, to a large extent, determine the social and cultural regeneration in the Indian countryside.

BUILDING MASS COUNTERVAILING POWER

As noted in the beginning, several projects have been initiated by various PSMs in India. There is dissemination of infor-

mation and knowledge including that which have a direct bearing on contemporary social reality (deforestation/pollution, health problems, etc), there is dissemination of technologies appropriate to the socio-economic environment in rural areas (e.g., the heat-efficient and smoke-reducing *chulas*, water control devices, building construction, drinking water, oral rehydration therapy, sanitation and biogas production) which some groups undertake with a view to develop creative mass energies so that these contribute to self-reliant and participatory development. In doing all these and more, innovative modes of communication are being developed to promote critical thought among rural masses. Examples of these are the *sastrakala jathas* which seek to combine folk art forms with the message of science in analysing and understanding contemporary problems.

Some of these are purely informative, some are educative, some are intended for agitational purposes (recall the many struggles over environmental issues and the work of PSM groups after the Bhopal disaster). The task should be to channel these efforts into a mobilisational form in which the participation of sensitised intellectuals and the people could be progressively raised to higher and broader levels. What I have in mind here is the building up of the countervailing power of the masses, conscious and organised, informal and participative, self-reliant and decentralised against the tyranny of formal institutions, traditional intellectuals, the bureaucracy, specialists and faceless establishments. Science, understood in its integrative sense of combining both social and physical reality, can and should play a crucial role in this task. PSM in India has that potential and its realisation will depend on the continuously expanding urge of sensitised intellectuals to reach rural masses and the latter's urge to respond to specific initiatives. I have no doubt that the objective condition of environmental degradation directly impinging on the livelihood of rural masses and the struggles arising from it is a manifest example of the convergence of the two urges.

POLITICS OF PSM

Precisely because the nature of the task of PSM is so basic and preparatory to the progressive transformation of the lives of rural masses, it is important that PSM should keep itself above party politics and the political fragmentation that is so evident in contemporary Indian society. This is not to say that PSM cannot or should not have any politics of its own. In fact the slogan 'Science for Social Revolution'

should adequately sum up its politics. But it should strive to develop this politics by a principle of inclusion (and not exclusion) wherein all those who share the view that science can be consciously used to advance progressive social transformation can play their part. In regions where some level of social infrastructure already exists such as in Kerala in terms of literacy, spread of schools and village libraries, female literacy and education, transport and communication and the presence of a wide network of people's organisations PSM has certain initial advantages. But in regions where these do not exist on a wide scale there is the additional task of carrying out such preparatory works as literacy, especially of women, the establishment of minimum infrastructural facilities and the creation of rural networks. This calls for a much broader participation especially from the different people's organisations.

SECULARISM AND PSM

So far no specific or explicit reference has been made to secularism as a goal for PSM. This is because PSM in India has not yet explicitly addressed itself to the concept of secularism. But the spirit of secularism pervade the ideology and activity of PSM. Let me therefore try and articulate the concept and operational content of secularism within PSM. What is relevant to begin with is not the dictionary meaning of secularism but its meaning and understanding in the Indian context and for that purpose the constitutional understanding seems a proper starting point. Under the constitution, secularism is interpreted with reference to religion and its relationship to the individual and the state. My understanding of secularism as enshrined in the constitution is that the individual in India is free to follow any religion or no religion while the state will be independent of all religions in that it shall not take any partisan attitude towards any religion nor shall it allow itself to be influenced or controlled by any religion. At the same time the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on matters political, economic and social on the basis of religion. This is a non-confrontationist attitude to religion. In essence the work of PSM is also one of non-confrontation although in furthering the objective of secularism it will increasingly question the role of religion in perpetuating the socio-economic *status quo* characterised by poverty, inequality and lack of access to such basic needs as education for a large number of people in this country. Even while engaging in such basic programmes, many people's science groups have had to reckon with the

organised power of those who claim to represent religion. Let me illustrate this point with the experience of KSSP.

KSSP began by popularising science and by the early seventies the role of science in society began to emerge as a major topic for discussion. Between 1973 and 1976 several thousand study classes and discussions were organised throughout Kerala around the theme 'Nature, Science and Society'. These classes dealt with three major topics: (i) evolution of matter, (ii) evolution of society, and (iii) relationship between science and society. The essence of the first topic was that change is the essence of matter from the micro universe to the macro universe. There is nothing without change. Matter and energy are one and the same. Space and time cannot be understood independent of matter. Space and time are the methods by which matter and its change are sought to be understood. Matter, space and time are inseparable essences. The second topic dealt with different theories of the solar system, the evolution of life on earth, the transition from ape to man and the role played by hands, labour, communal living and language in this transition. Further it dealt with the different ages in history and then to the tribal way of life, to slavery, feudalism and the contemporary systems of capitalism and socialism. It also dealt with the motive forces of contemporary systems of capitalism and socialism and its implications for the exploitation of natural resources. The third topic dealt with the proposition that for primitive man, life and science was one and the same. Through his struggle for survival his labour laid the foundations for science in terms of his strategies for hunting, fighting, housing and so on. It is with the coming of civilisations that science and technology attains a distinct identity. The development of science in Greek, Indian, Chinese and Arabic civilisations are also dealt with. The Dark Ages in Europe, the renaissance and the unprecedented development of science and technology along with the contribution of science and technology to modern life and the problems and challenges facing humanity are also examined.

The aim was not to propagate atheism or confront religion. The understanding has been that to confront religion without attempting to change the social environment which generates dependence on religion as dogma is unscientific. Yet concepts of time and space and its infinite and unknown characteristics, evolution, relativity and interrelations were not to the taste of those representing religious conservatism. Thus, when these classes were conducted in several villages in Kerala, there was a direct attack on them by a newspaper belonging to the Muslim

League. At the same time, arch conservatives of all shades in the bureaucracy sought to use this criticism to restrain the several hundred school teachers, who were the main activists of the KSSP, from conducting these classes. Such opposition continued until recent times when the range and influence of the activities of the KSSP expanded many fold.

The second attack on the philosophy and activity of KSSP came from Hindu communal organisations. The main charge was that KSSP negates the glorious tradition of Indian science, something which has no substance. The real objection seems to be against the secular conception of science and its activist connotation as practised by KSSP to highlight socio-economic problems. The intolerance of this group took a crude version in the form of physical assaults when a group of KSSP activists were attacked in Quilon on October 15, 1988 by armed RSS members in uniform. During a state-wide and much publicised three-week long Children's Festival organised by KSSP during this month, the event was obstructed, and prevented from performing in some places, by activists of the ABVP (the student-wing of the BJP), Muslim League and Christian church managements of some schools by a variety of means including physical intimidation. But a more organised and perhaps more powerful attack has recently been launched by the Catholic clergy. Through a press statement on December 8, 1988, the Kerala Catholic Bishops Conference (KCBC) charged that KSSP is propagating atheism and hence KCBC is going to oppose it openly. It further threatened that KSSP units working in schools under its management will be taken over thereby posing an indirect threat to those teachers who are activists of KSSP.

The above incidents underscore one important point: that when science is used for social activism to critically examine contemporary social and economic problems, those representing religious orthodoxy, from different religions, have not hesitated to oppose it by all available means. Although Kerala has not witnessed major communal conflicts or violence since independence, it is not devoid of the power of organised communal groups. In fact, communalism has an institutional face in Kerala: in politics, cultural organisations and educational institutions. However, the organised power of secular forces is also as strong, if not more, as those of communal organisations. Therefore the struggle for broadening the secular base of mass support has to continue. In several other parts of India, religious communalism has often been the cause of violence and unnecessary bloodshed. In the country as a whole, the con-

cept of secularism has suffered serious reversals during the last two decades compared to the first two decades. The power of religion as a segmenting force in society seems to have gained considerable strength. Progressive social reform movements witnessed as part of the independence movement not only seem to have taken a back seat but regressive forces seem to acquire greater power. These trends affect particular sections such as women and depressed classes much more harshly than others. The use of religion in politics has not merely generated further conflict and bloodshed among people but also helps to divert attention from tackling the basic socio-economic problems afflicting our society.

The external environment has also contributed to this resurgence of religious fundamentalism in politics. In many countries, religion and politics are so intertwined that one is unable to separate the two. In many others, conscious attempts are being made to marry the two by regimes which have no legitimacy and are oppressive in character. Scientific, technological and economic achievements *per se* are no guarantee for a secular polity. Even in western democracies such as Britain, the state zealously clings to its proclaimed religion. In the midst of much talk of freedom of expression, questioning the state religion is still considered blasphemous and therefore punishable under the law in these countries. Therefore, even in the international context, India has to follow its own path of secularism by striving to separate the realm of religion from the realm of politics and law. No single group or movement can hope to achieve this. The only way is a broad alignment of forces representing various movements with a secular outlook—people's science, civil liberties, women, cultural, environmental and trade union movements along with those political parties which are committed to building a secular basis for Indian polity.

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