

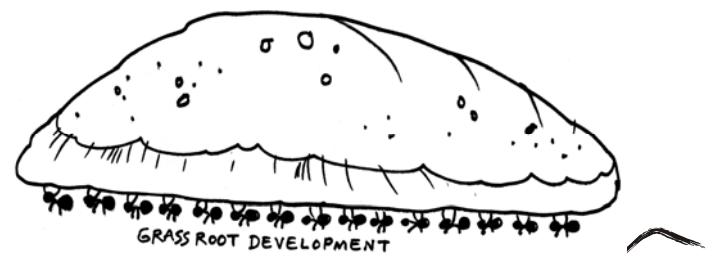
Redefining Politics


The constant refrain of the critics of the efficacy of grass-roots work has been its dispersed nature, and its inability to translate itself into a well-knit representative force at the regional or national level. It has remained a micro-level phenomenon.

Not so, says **D L Sheth**.

It's dispersed and seeming peripheral nature has been the singular feature of what he calls micro-movements. And this has been the source of its strength, and it has the potential to redefine politics and democracy from the grass-roots up, in such a way that it will influence, and in the long run, even define, regional national and international governance and politics.

It is already doing so through a process of horizontal linkages at the national and international level. This is in direct contrast to the centralized hegemonic politics of representative democracy at the national level, and more so in contrast to the absence of even token representativeness in modern international governance.



Globalisation and New Politics of Micro-Movements, *D L Sheth*, EPW 
Special Article, Jan 3, 2004.
<http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2004&leaf=01&filename=6672&filetype=html> [C.ELDOC6008857]

Globalisation and New Politics of Micro-Movements

D L Sheth

Discourse of Globalisation

The whole discourse on development suddenly changed, globally and in India, when the notion of alternative development was analytically formulated and propagated by the various global groups, clubs and commissions. Some concepts developed by these proponents of alternative development became buzzwords for activists of new social movements: appropriate technology, small is beautiful (a la Schumacher), pedagogy of the oppressed (a la Paulo Freire), eco-friendly life-styles, limits to growth (a la the Club of Rome) were only a few among them.

This discourse of the new social movements in the west found a great deal of resonance among the social activists in India – particularly for the apolitical, westernised ones, for whom it had almost an emancipatory effect. It gave cultural meaning to their activism and even helped them re-discover their own alternativist M K Gandhi.

The conventional argument for development was now made with several caveats, sourced from the theory of alternative development. Thus, sustainability became a key word and consumerism a 'challenge' to cope with. Saving energy and finding alternative energy sources became an important consideration for policy makers of development.

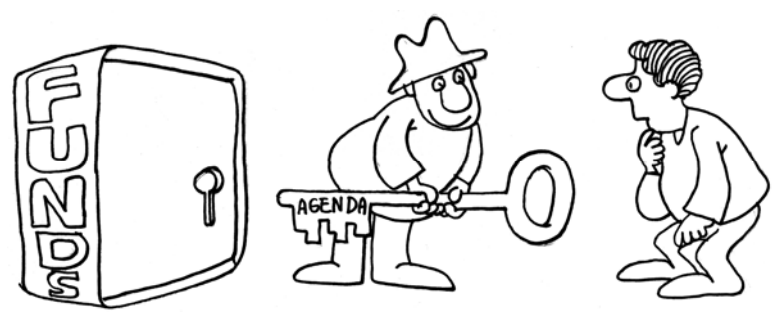
All this changed as the cold war ended, A new discourse descended on the scene engulfing the political spaces. Its immediate, if temporary, effect was to make protests of the grass roots movements against the hegemonic cold war model of development and their assertions for alternative development sound shrill and cantankerous, if not vacuous.

This was the discourse of globalisation.

Counter Discourse of Movements

The grass roots movements took quite some time to recover from the ideological onslaught of globalism and devise their own terms of discourse to counter it. This was mainly because by the end of the cold war and two decades after the emergency, the movement-groups were by and large fragmented into an almost isomorphic existence of each group fighting its own little battle independently.

Quite a few had lost the élan of social transformation, having acquired a fairly stable and comfortable financial base. Much larger quantities of funds were now made available to them by the international donor agencies, which had their own agenda for influencing the politics of discourse in peripheral countries. Most movement-groups had thus become routinised in their activities and functioned as NGO bureaucracies.



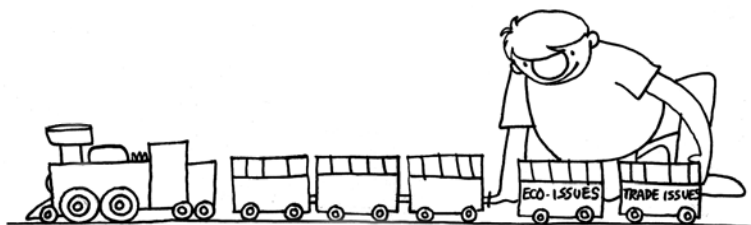
In short, in the early 1990s, the mood among grass roots movements in India was marked by widespread pessimism among the observers and participants of the movements [Kothari 1993]. There were indeed some groups, largely of Gandhian, Left and social-democratic lineage, who stuck-out and kept fighting their battles for rights and socio-economic reconstruction at the grass roots, thus tenaciously retaining their character as movements. They however did not function at their earlier high levels of energy, and remained starved of funds.

All this changed, almost suddenly in the mid-1990s, when protests against globalisation led by the few movement-groups, which had kept the tradition of struggles alive during the period of drift, acquired momentum, as different sections of the poor in India began to acutely feel globalisation's adverse impact. It got a big fillip as many more groups responding to the pressures at the grass roots, returned from their NGO existence to the fold of movements. This produced a high degree of convergence among different types of groups and movements on a wide range of issues concerning globalisation. It revitalised the entire spectrum of grass roots movements in the country, giving rise to a new discourse and politics aimed at countering the forces of hegemonic globalisation. [Sheth 1999; Kothari Smitu 2001] What follows is an account of terms in which the movements view and resist globalisation.

First, activists of grass roots movements see globalisation as an incarnation of the old idea of Development (with a capital D), but representing politically more explicitly, the institutions of global hegemonic power and creating new forms of exclusion socially. Globalisation thus has intensified and expanded the destructive forces of Development – forces which disrupt communities, cultures and livelihoods of the poor without offering them any viable and dignified alternative. Similarly, globalisation, like the Development establishment during the old war, works for the constituent elements of its power structure – the techno-scientific, bureaucratic, military, managerial and business elites and a small consumerist class.



Second, a section of social activists, and those who were relatively apolitical but active in alternative development movements earlier, have become acutely aware of the role that politics of discourse plays globally and nationally, in influencing policy choices of governments and international organisations. Consequently, some of them now are participating actively in shaping the terms of discourse globally on such issues as biodiversity, global warming, construction of big dams, regulations concerning international trade and intellectual property rights and so on.



Fourth, the movements reject the claim of the Indian state that in the process of globalisation, it has been playing a positive role for the poor, giving a 'human face' to economic reforms. In the view of leaders of some urban movements for citizen rights, the Indian state, in fact, systematically and blatantly discriminates between the rich and the poor in the implementation of economic reforms [Kishwar 2001a].

Fifth, the combined impact of the retreat of the state and the globalising economy, is that the poorest among the poor are neither able to become full wage-earners in the economy nor even full-fledged citizens in the polity. For them there is no transitional path-way in sight that can lead them into the market. Nor can they return to the old security of the subjugated, which they arguably had in the traditional social order. They have even lost the claims on the state which the bureaucratic-socialist state at least theoretically conceded.

Finally, the new ideology of globalisation has, in the view of the movements, made issues of poverty and social deprivation in the peripheral countries of the world ever more unintelligible in the global discourse. Even more, it has blunted the transformative edge of the new social movements, which were once (when they really were new) in the forefront of the alternative development movement in the west as well as globally.



Global Discourse of Protests

A significant shift has also occurred in the way the movements in India relate to the global discourse of protests. The increasing focus on issues of 'governance' in the current global discourse has in their view, reduced the importance of issues pertaining to social and political transformation. This has resulted in the agencies of hegemonic globalisation seeking, simultaneously, to depoliticise development and undermine democratic movements by co-opting, financially and politically, some protest movements in the developing countries and in the global arena. In the process such issues as environment, gender, human rights and even democracy are being redefined in terms radically different from those that were developed by the grass roots movements in the earlier paradigm of alternative development.

The issue of human rights is being viewed in terms of economic and foreign policy considerations of the rich and powerful countries.

In this new hegemonic discourse the thinking on human rights has been dissociated from concerns like removing poverty, fulfilling basic human needs and social justice.

This has made it easy for the global hegemonic powers to target some poor, peripheral countries 'not playing ball' with them for human rights violations, even as they ignore similar violations by governments of the countries pliable to their hegemonic designs.

In the discourse on democracy, the idea of global governance is gaining ground but, paradoxically, democracy still continues to be viewed as the framework suitable for internal governance of nation states and not for global governance. Hence it is not difficult for an organisation like the WTO to function without reference to any principle of transparency or representational accountability, and also autonomously of the United Nations institutions, even when it sits in judgment on issues that fall in the purview of international law and representative bodies such as the ILO.

In this globally homogenised culture of protests some movement-groups in India find it increasingly difficult to join international campaigns, even though they may share many of their concerns. This is done not so much for 'nationalist' considerations as for the fear that it would undermine the by now established democratic political authority of the state in protecting the secular and democratic institutions in the country. For, when the poorer classes have found long-term stake in democracy and have begun to acquire their due share in governance, the power of the state (elected governments) itself is being denuded and undermined by the global power structure in collaboration with the country's metropolitan elites. In other words, they see globalisation as undermining and delegitimising institutions of democratic governance. They see it as a force which seeks to undo India's democratic revolution.

New Politics of Movements

Based on such an assessment of globalisation's adverse impact both for development and democracy, grass roots movements conceive their

politics in the direction of achieving two interrelated goals: (a) re-politicising development and (b) reinventing participatory democracy.

Re-Politicising Development

They now view development as a political struggle for peoples' participation in defining development goals and devising means to achieve them. Thus, rather than altogether 'opting out' of development they now seek to change the power relations on which the conventional model of development is premised. In the process some new elements, essentially political in nature, have entered in the grass roots movements' thinking and practice of development.

First, the old post-colonial critique of development which invoked *pre-modern nostalgia has ceased to appeal* to a large section of these movements.

Second, the change in perspective was also a response to the change in the post-cold war global politics of development. They are, therefore, not surprised that it has dismantled the cold war structures of aid and assistance, and in their place a new global economic regime of trade and fiscal control has been set up. *The movements see this change as representing a new political agenda on the part of the global power structure which aims at dispersal of state control over the economies of the peripheral countries on the one hand, and centralisation of global political and military power in the hands of the world's already rich and powerful countries on the other.* This awareness has led some movement-groups to form transnational alliances aimed at democratising the global power structure. For example, quite a few movement-groups in India have been actively associated with such counter hegemonic global initiatives as the Convention on Biodiversity, Agenda 21, World Commission on Dams, Alliance for Comprehensive Democracy and so on. These initiatives are not just confined to the transcendental global space. They are concretely embodied in their activities at the national and local levels in the form of disseminating awareness and activating organisations at the grass roots level to

identify and oppose specific policies, programmes and legislations meant to expand hegemonic global power.

Third, all types of grass roots groups today, including even some conventional development NGOs, articulate basic issues of development in the framework of rights. They see it as a function of social-structural locations of the poor, because of which they are excluded from development (which is guarded by the legal, political and economic immunities it provides to its insiders) and imprisoned in poverty (the world constituted of vulnerabilities and exposures to exploitation for its politically unorganised and economically marginalised inhabitants). Their mobilisational strategies, therefore, focus on the new social-political formations which combine the categories of class, caste, ethnicity and gender.

Fourth, the movements now see more clearly that the roots of rural poverty lie in the pattern of urban growth in India. This has, among other thing, led to greater interaction and building of new organisational linkages between the city-based and village-based social action groups. Further, the movements now realise the inconsequentiality of the established wisdom of 'inputs' serving as a major factor in rural development.

These inputs are simply swallowed up by the upper stratum of the rural society. So, the focus of their activity is now on creating capabilities of self-development among the rural poor, even as they fight for their rights to create and secure resources for collective development.

To sum up, the politics of different groups and movements, which began to converge in mid-1990s, have acquired a common direction and a fairly durable organisational base. The convergence has been attained on the point of resisting the ongoing efforts of the bureaucratic, technocratic and the metropolitan elites to support policies of globalisation and depoliticise development.

Movements' Politics of Participatory Democracy

The distinctive feature of movements-politics is to articulate a new discourse on democracy through a sustained political practice.

This is done at three levels: (a) *at the grass roots level* through building peoples' own power and capabilities, which inevitably involve political struggles for establishing rights as well as a degree of local autonomy for people to manage their own affairs collectively; (b) *at the provincial and national level* through launching nationwide campaigns and building alliances and coalitions for mobilising protests on larger issues (against 'anti-people projects and policies') and creating organisational networks of mutual support and of solidarity among movements; (c) *at the global level*, by a small section of movements-activists who in recent years have begun to actively participate in several transnational alliances and movements for creating a politics of counter-hegemonic globalisation. In all this, the long-term goal of the movements is to bring the immediate environment (social, economic, cultural and ecological) the people live in, within their own reach and control.

The movement activists have developed their own critique of the prevalent macro-structures of political representation as well as a view of local politics. In their view the representative institutions have imprisoned the process of democratisation in the society. The way out from such impasse is the spread of their kind of politics – the politics of micro-movements. Movements, they believe, by involving people deeply in politics will in the long run, change the terms of justification for the state for holding and using power. This probably explains their epistemic preference in articulating their politics in terms of 'reconstruction of state', rather than of 'acquisition of state power'.

Although the movements usually work in local areas they invariably define local issues in trans-local terms. Theirs is thus a new kind of local politics which, unlike the conventional politics of local governments, is not linked vertically to the macro structures of power and ideology, either of a nation state or of the global order; nor is this politics parochially local. It expands horizontally through several micro-movements of people living in different geographical areas and socio-

cultural milieus, but experiencing the common situation of disempowerment caused by mal-development and contemporary forms of governance which are imperiously distant, yet close enough to feel their coercive edge.

Thus viewed, the long-term politics of movements is about withdrawal of legitimation to the hegemonic and exclusionary structures of political power and horizontalising the vertical structures of social hierarchy, through strengthening the parallel politics of local, participatory democracy.

In this process, the micro-movements address, on the one hand, the problem of making institutions of governance at all levels more accountable, transparent and participative and, on the other, create new political spaces outside the state structure, in which the people themselves are enabled to make decisions collectively on issues directly concerning their lives.

All this however, does not mean that grass roots actors and organisations define the politics of movements in direct opposition to the institutional framework of Indian democracy. In fact they view institutional democracy as a necessary, though not sufficient condition for pursuing their parallel politics of movements through which they seek to raise social consciousness of people and democratise the hegemonic structures of power in society. In that sense, their politics is about working around and transcending the prevalent institutional structures of liberal democracy – rather than confronting them directly with a view to capturing state power.

In a nutshell, the movements conceive of participatory democracy as a parallel politics of social action, creating and maintaining new spaces for decision-making (i.e., for self-governance) by people on matters affecting their lives directly. As a form of practice, participatory democracy for them is thus a long-term political and social process aimed at creating a new system of multiple and overlapping

governances, functioning through more direct participation and control of concerned populations (i e, of those comprising these governances).

It is envisaged that through such politics the almost total monopoly of power held today by the contemporary (totalist) state would be dispersed into different self-governing entities but, at the same time, the macro-governance of the state, albeit confined to fewer nationally crucial sectors, would be carried through democratically elected representative bodies, at one level overseeing the system of micro-governances and at another, being responsive and accountable to them.