

**Part I**

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS  
AND DEMOCRATIC ASPIRATIONS

## Micro-Movements in India: Toward a new Politics of Participatory Democracy

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Just when the global discourse on democracy has become one-dimensional, purveying the neoliberal model of market democracy as the only universally desirable model, and when the Indian state has linked itself to the vertical hierarchy of global economic and political power, significant countervailing processes have emerged in the form of political and social movements at the grassroots, making new, provincial and national-level alliances aimed at countering the state's policies of globalization. Led by small groups of social activists, these movements have been active in different parts of India for over three decades, working on disparate issues, albeit all concerning the struggles of the economically marginalized and the socially excluded, poorer populations. In the 1990s, many of them came together and joined larger, worldwide alliances and forums protesting against the hegemonic policies of the institutions and organizations representing global economic and political power.

In this process of opposition to globalization, the micro-movements have begun to raise a new discourse on democracy and to invent political practices, expanding the arena of politics beyond the representational institutions of elections and political parties. Thus, although the micro-movements had been fighting politically on several issues concerning the poor long before they joined the debate on globalization, it is the challenge of globalization that has brought many of them together on common political platforms at the provincial and national levels, making issues of participatory democracy a part of their ongoing struggles. It is in this emergent context of globalization that this chapter analyzes the discourse and politics of micro-movements and their role in reinventing participatory democracy as a form of social action and political practice, creating new spaces and infusing deeper meaning into democracy in the globalizing world.

## MOVEMENTS AND GLOBALIZATION

## The micro-movements

The micro-movements in India represent a varied and complex phenomenon. They are variously referred to as “grassroots movements,” social movements, non-party political formations, social-action groups, and movement-groups. In this chapter I shall use these terms interchangeably but the reference is specifically to a particular genre of social movements that became visible and acquired political salience in the mid-1970s and that have since been active on a variety of issues which, in their own perception, are—directly or indirectly—related to what they see as their long-term goal of democratizing development and transforming society (Kothari, 1984; Sethi, 1984; Sheth, 1984). These movement organizations differentiate themselves self-consciously and sharply from the welfare, philanthropic and such other non-political NGOs. Although there is no systematic survey, compilations made from different sources by researchers and guesstimates provided by observers in the field suggest a figure in the range of twenty to thirty thousand such movement groups in the country (Kapoor, 2000).

In order to understand the terms by which the movement groups conceive and articulate the idea of participatory democracy, it is important to know the context in which they emerged and the challenges they confronted in the initial phase of their formation. A large number of them existed as fragments of the earlier political and social movements that had their origins in the freedom movement but were subdued and dispersed soon after independence when the liberal, modernist, English-educated ruling elite began to dominate public discourse in India. These were the groups that had their lineage in the Gandhian, socialist, communist and social reform movements but, by and large, had stuck out as groups of party-independent social and political activists (Sheth and Sethi, 1991). They worked in small, stagnant spaces available to them at the periphery of electoral party politics. But within three decades of independence, new social and political spaces opened up for them as well as for several new groups of social activists. This became possible, ironically, with the decline of institutional politics, which began in the late 1960s, giving rise to several mass-based movements of protests (Kothari, Rajni, 1988b). The issues of these protests varied from rising prices to corruption. The protest movements, however, acquired increased momentum in the mid-1970s, the largest and, politically, highest-intensity movement among them being the one led by Jayaprakash Narayan (popularly known as the J.P. movement). Seen in this context, what we recognize today as movement groups emerged and were consolidated in spaces made available to them by the decline of main-

stream institutions of representative democracy: the legislatures, elections, political parties, and trade unions. Although the decline had begun in the late 1960s, it became visible when the Emergency was imposed (1975–1977) by Mrs. Indira Gandhi (Rajni Kothari 1989).<sup>1</sup>

The role of political parties in inducting new groups into politics by waging struggles for their legal and political rights was considerably reduced. Their ability to politically process issues arising in the economy, society, and culture greatly declined. They also ceased to attract young, idealist youth to mainstream politics. The parties, having failed to convert the economic demands of the poor and the deprived into effective political demands, often tended to take recourse to ethnicizing and communalizing economic issues for electoral gains. The result was that the political process, which in the 1950s and 1960s had worked for the inclusion of an increasing number of new groups in electoral and party politics, was halted in the mid-1970s, keeping large sections of ex-untouchables, tribal peoples, the occupationally marginalized and economically extremely poor groups from among the ritually low-ranking Hindu castes, as well as the other poor and landless among the minorities, on the periphery of the mainstream of Indian politics. Of course, this did not affect their electoral participation, but it did reduce their political sense of citizenship, since their struggle did not find articulation in the representational arena of politics. The populations involved in this process of political alienation, however, were dispersed and fragmented in many dimensions besides that of class. For that reason their struggles did not find a political language, even in the discourse of the left parties. They were seen simply as unorganizable masses with unaggregable votes. In sum, the political parties—having prematurely given up the “movement” aspect of their activities soon after independence—increasingly became electoral machines operating with makeshift arrangements at the grassroots level at election time. The consequence was, among other things, the emergence of a mobilizational politics by popular movements outside the institutional politics of representation, often having recourse to direct-action politics in order to register their demands with the government (Kothari, Rajni 1988b).

The trade unions, which to begin with were like labor wings of the political parties, with little autonomy of their own, became virtual bargaining counters between people of the same class, supposedly representing different interests. The unions showed a complete incapacity to expand their activities in the growing informal and unorganized sector of the economy. Workers in the unorganized sector had little to offer, either electorally or in membership fees. Tired after long years of struggle, the union leadership had got used to a cushy lifestyle and to a mentally non-taxing bureaucratic mode of functioning (Pansay, 1981). The result was the formation of many new activist groups championing the cause of workers in the informal sector of the economy. They addressed not only the issue of wages but also problems

of health, education and childcare for workers' families, their larger objective being to raise in them the awareness of their rights and build organizational capabilities to fight for their realization.

The legislatures, too, reflected the decline in wider politics. Gone were the days when a socialist leader such as Ram Manohar Lohia could raise and sustain a protracted debate on poverty in the Indian Parliament. The political discourse in the legislatures began to be increasingly dominated by narrow legalistic positions held by the executive, and often endorsed by the law courts, rather than being informed by issues emerging from democratic politics. The Indian Constitution, which was conceived not only as an instrument of governance but also as an agenda for independent India's social and political transformation, was now treated as a document sanitized of the flesh and blood of movement politics, which represented the democratic aspirations of the people. It is in this context that, in the decade following the emergency, several movement groups began to take recourse to public-interest litigation and to provide free legal-aid services to citizens whose rights were being violated both by law and order and development administration—in the process, infusing activism even into the law courts.

One important, if unanticipated, consequence of the decline of institutional politics was the revitalization of the old social movements, with some of them aiming their politics directly against the Emergency regime. The anti-emergency movements gave rise, especially in the period between the mid-1970s and 1980s, to thousands of *new* micro-movements in the country. These movements were led by young men and women, quite a few of whom left their professional careers to join. They took up issues and constituencies abandoned by political parties and trade unions, and those ill served by the bureaucracy. The organizational form they evolved for themselves was not of a political party or a pressure group. It was that of a civil-associational group, leading political struggles on issues articulated to them by the people themselves. The key concept they worked with was democratizing development through the empowerment of the people (Sethi, 1984).

#### The discourse of globalization

In the early 1990s, the grassroots movements confronted an entirely new set of terms justifying the hegemony of the newly established post-Cold War global order. Earlier, until the end of the Cold War, a significant section of grassroots movements in India were active in protesting against the exclusionary, elite-oriented development model that was conceived and sought to be made uniformly and universally applicable the world over, by the post-Second World War Bretton Woods institutions and their sponsor countries. These protests, however, were articulated largely in the context of the discourse developed by new social movements in the West where the nuclear

and environmental threats produced by the Cold War, were more poignantly felt. It was through this process that the idea and the campaign for "alternative development" grew in the West. Although this idea had been propagated and practiced in India for a long time by Gandhian activists, after independence it was marginalized within the development discourse dominated by India's modernist ruling elite.

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 in the new social movements: appropriate technology, small is beautiful (*à la* Schumacher), pedagogy of the oppressed (*à la* Paulo Freire), eco-friendly lifestyles, limits to growth (*à la* the Club of Rome) were but 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 *a*-political, Westernized ones, for whom it had almost an emancipatory effect. It gave cultural meaning to their activism and even helped them rediscover their own alternative, M. K. Gandhi.

The idea of alternative development found new votaries even in the consumerist core of Western societies during the Cold War, when the threat of nuclear holocaust loomed large and access to the world's fossil-oil resources was threatened by what was then described as the "oil crisis." Concerns were expressed in world policy forums about "Third World poverty." Strange though it may seem today, deep anxieties were felt and expressed about the growing consumption habits of the middle classes in these countries. For it was feared that they, combined with the hunger and poverty of their masses, might lead to state policies resulting in rapid depletion of the world's natural resources. 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, effecting a large rupture in the (global) politics of discourse. And this, just when the idea of alternative development was about to acquire wider acceptability and had even begun to inform policy processes at the national and global levels. A new discourse descended on the scene, engulfing the political spaces that the new social movements in the West and the grassroots movements in India had created for themselves through working for decades on such issues as peace, and pro-poor, eco-friendly development. The new discourse made its entry rather dramatically as a triumphalist grand-narrative that, among other things, subsumed within it the old idea of Development (Wallgren, 1998). Its immediate, if temporary, effect was to make protests of the grassroots 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 globalization. Conceived and led by the victors of the Cold War, it claimed to establish a new global order that would put an end to the old one that had kept the world “divided”—economically, culturally, and politically. In its place it not just promised but communicated a virtual experience (as if that world was upon us!) of the world becoming *one* economy, (possibly) *one* culture and (eventually) *one* polity! Such a world could do, globally, without the messy institutions of representational democracy, even as such institutions were to be made mandatory internally for every individual country. It assured that this new global order would be managed by a set of global institutions (served by experts and freed from the cumbersome procedures of representational accountability), which, being set-up and controlled by the world’s few “self-responsible” and “advanced” democracies, would guarantee peace and order to the whole world. Moreover, since the monopoly of violence (including its technology) would be withdrawn from a large number of individual and often “irresponsible” nation-states (whose *natural* location is in the South) and be placed collectively in the hands of a few nation-states, which also are “responsible” and “civilized” democracies (whose *natural* location is of course in the North), it not only will eliminate international wars but alleviate poverty wherever it exists. These outlandish ideological claims of globalization, made and propagated globally by the world’s most powerful (G-8) countries, have been lapped up by large sections of the Indian middle class and by the media, as if they represented a policy package offered by some really existing and democratically legitimate World Government!

#### The counter-discourse of movements

The grassroots movements took quite some time to recover from the ideological onslaught of globalism and to 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, with each group fighting its own little battle independently. Quite a few had lost the élan of social transformation, having acquired for themselves a fairly stable and comfortable financial base. Much larger quantities of funds were now made available to them by the international donor agencies that had their own agenda for influencing the politics of discourse in peripheral countries. Most movement-groups had thus become routinized in their activities and functioned as NGO bureaucracies. In short, in the early 1990s, the scene of grassroots movements in India was marked by a widespread feeling of 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 it out and kept fighting their battles for rights and socio-economic reconstruction at the grassroots, thus tenaciously retaining their character as *movements*. They, however, did not function at their earlier high levels of energy and remained starved for funds.

All this changed, almost suddenly, in the mid-1990s, when protests against globalization led by the few movement groups that 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 globalization’s adverse impact. It got a big fillip as many more groups responding to the pressures at the grassroots 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 globalization. It revitalized the entire spectrum of grassroots movements in the country, giving rise to a new discourse *and* politics aimed at countering the forces of hegemonic globalization (Sheth, 1999; Kothari Smitu, 2001). What follows is an account of the terms in which the movements view and resist globalization.<sup>2</sup>

First, activists of grassroots movements see globalization as an incarnation of the old idea of Development (with a capital D), but as politically representing the institutions of global hegemonic power more explicitly and creating new forms of exclusion socially. Globalization thus has intensified and expanded the destructive forces of Development—forces that disrupt communities, cultures and livelihoods of the poor without offering them any viable and dignified alternative. Similarly, globalization, like the Development Establishment during the Cold 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, particularly those who were relatively *a*-political but active in the alternative development movements earlier, have become acutely aware of the role that the *politics of discourse* plays globally and nationally, in influencing policy choices of governments and international organizations. Consequently, some of them now are participating actively in shaping the terms of discourse globally on such issues as biodiversity, global warming, the construction of big dams, regulations concerning international trade and intellectual property rights and so on. In this process, they have become active in a variety of global “conventions,” forums, and campaigns opposing the policies of the global power structure as well as in building more durable transnational alliances with similar movements in other countries, both in the South and in the North. In performing this “global role” they often explicitly articulate their long-term objective in terms of building and sustaining institutional processes for global solidarity. Put differently, their aim is to create global politics of popular (civil

society) movements with a view to building an alternative institutional structure of global governance, based on democratic principles of political equality, social justice, cultural diversity and non-violence, and ecological principles of sustainability and maintaining biodiversity (Sheth *et al.*, 2002). Leading this discourse globally, a group of Indian activists interpret global solidarity in terms of the ancient Indian principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (Earth is one family) and link it to Gandhi's vision of *swaraj* (self-governance) and *swadeshi* (politics of establishing people's own control over their environment—economic, social and cultural) (Pratap, 2001). It is in this context that the movements differentiate between the two types of politics they engage in: politics of establishing global solidarity and of opposing contemporary globalization, a distinction that conceptually has been aptly captured by Boaventura de Sousa Santos as hegemonic vs. counter-hegemonic globalization (Santos, 1997).

Third, another type of movement, representing largely the left and social democratic strands referred to earlier, see globalization as intensifying further the already existing economic and social inequalities in the country (Sainath, 2000). Thus, while the votaries of globalization celebrate the growth of the middle class, the social activists see this phenomenon quite differently. In their view, the programs of economic reform being implemented as a part of the globalization package have consolidated and enriched the old middle class. The "growth" of this class, in their view, largely represents the rise in the purchasing power of the small middle class that emerged during colonial rule and expanded during the initial four decades after Independence, covering largely the upper and middle strata of the traditional social structure. The Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP), implemented in the name of economic reforms—the recipe dispensed by the global financial institutions across the world—far from improving the living standards of the poor, have pushed them further down the social and economic ladder, and below the poverty line (Kumar, 2000). Indeed, some fragments of the traditional lower social strata have entered the "middle class," but this has been due to long-existing social policies of the State—like affirmative action. In fact, with the state shrinking in the process of globalization, there has been a reversal of this process.

The few avenues of upward mobility that the policies of the Indian state had opened up for the disadvantageously located populations in the traditional social structure are now narrowing. The market is increasingly becoming the only avenue for upward mobility, and that too is monopolized by the upper strata of caste society, using their traditional status resources. Thus, economic globalization offers ever increasing standards of living to those entering the market with some entitlements usually available to members of upper castes, given their resources: land, wealth, social privilege, and education. For large segments of the population outside the charmed

circle of the market, and disadvantageously located in the traditional structure, it means malnutrition, semi-starvation, disease, and destitution. This relationship of the traditional social structure and globalization is emphasized by the movements but is, strangely, ignored in the academic debates on globalization.

The movement activists thus find it astounding that the colonial-type exploitation of primary producers (the vast populations of tribals, artisans, small and marginal farmers and landless labor) by a small urban-industrial elite, and their cognate groups of upper-caste rural elite persists, even thrives, in the so-called open economy of the market. In brief, in India the market economy, instead of making a dent in the iniquitous social structure, is being absorbed by it.

Fourth, the movements reject the claim of the Indian state that, in the process of globalization, it has been playing a positive role for the poor, giving a "human face" to economic reforms. Far from enabling the poor to enter and find places in the market, the state undermines their rights to hold on to whatever sources of livelihood that are still available to them. 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). The result is that a vast population affected adversely by the market-led model of economic globalization is today unable to make a forceful enough demand in mainstream politics for their survival, let alone "development." As the market moves from the fringes of the polity to its center, democratically conceived political authority is giving way to new notions of economic and political "order" that are being derived from principles of corporate organization, which by their very nature are not in accord with the democratic principle of representative accountability.

Fifth, the combined impact of the retreat of the state and of the globalizing 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 pathway 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 that the bureaucratic-socialist state at least theoretically conceded. In short, the social-systemic nature of their exclusion continues under globalization as it did under Development. State policies that, until recently, aimed at removing the structural barriers facing the poor and bringing them in the mainstream of political economy are now being discarded as "market-unfriendly."

Finally, the new ideology of globalization 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. In effect, the agencies of hegemonic globalization have been able to produce *new* terms of justification for the old Development project, i.e., of retaining the political and economic hegemony of the few rich and militarily powerful countries globally and of a small metropolitan elite within the country. The result is, today, unlike during the Cold War, development is seen and measured in terms of the extent to which a country can “integrate” (read subjugate) its economy to the world economic (capitalist) system.

### The 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 globalization seeking, simultaneously, to depoliticize 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 grassroots movements in the earlier paradigm of alternative development. For example, the issue of the environment is no longer seen as the one involving a political process (and movements) for re-organizing the economy and social-cultural life locally and globally on the basis of *primary* ecological principles. Instead, ecological issues are being recast in constantly shifting terms of “tolerable limits” and “admissible costs” of environmental damage that is expected to occur in increasingly higher proportions with escalating rates of economic growth—which also are expected and considered desirable. If any “politics” is involved in this redefinition, it is about transferring environmental costs from one sector of the economy to the other or, even worse, from one region of the world to the other.

The issue of human rights is being viewed in terms of economic and foreign policy considerations of the rich and powerful countries. These considerations pertain not only to establishing their oligopolistic rule over the world, but also to guaranteeing the “smooth” functioning of the multinational corporations in the peripheral countries. This is to be achieved by compelling governments of the peripheral countries to yield to conditions and terms that the MNCs dictate and think are necessary for such functioning. In the process, the multinationals have emerged as powerful global actors, often more powerful and wealthy than many nation-states, that often

undermine the fundamental human rights (the rights to livelihood, habitat and culture) of the poor in peripheral countries, but remain unaccountable to any agency of global governance or a nation-state.

Even some “international” human rights groups today seem to act as political pressure groups on behalf of the hegemonic global forces, seeking to prevent the peripheral countries from making certain policy choices in areas such as land-use, labor legislation, exports and so on. Although this is done in the name of universalizing human rights, the selectivity of issues and the targeting of particular countries often betray their particularistic nationalist (Western) bias. The result is that 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. Poverty is increasingly seen as the failure of poor people to create wealth, not as an issue of the rights of the poor. It is no longer seen as a moral issue. In other words, the global discourse on human rights has ceased to be a discourse regarding social and political transformations; it has, instead, become a discourse about possible conditions that the powerful, “developed” countries can impose over other countries, ostensibly for bringing about a global-legal regime of rights.

In this discourse on rights, it is conveniently assumed that the institutions of *global civil society* endowing global citizenship (political equality) to all, and the mechanisms of global governance ensuring accountability of transnational organizations and the rule of law in international behavior, have already evolved and are *in situ*. Such an assumption 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. It is a measure of their dominance over the global culture of protests that, despite practicing such double standards, the global hegemonic powers are able to claim “commitment” to universalization of human rights and, at the same time, keep transnational corporations outside the pale of the global human rights regime.

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 organization like the WTO to function without reference to any principle of transparency or of representational accountability, as well as autonomously of the United Nations institutions, even when it sits in judgment on issues that fall under the purview of international law and representative bodies such as the ILO. The institutions of global governance thus are supposed to be *self*-responsible, not accountable outside their own ambit. They are “accountable” only to their sponsors who are often the few militarily and economically powerful nation-states.

In global feminist discourse, sensitivity about the social-structural, economic and cultural complexities faced by women in poor countries in securing their rights has vastly receded; in its place the legalist and metropolitan concerns about women's rights in a consumerist society have acquired prominence. Thus, grassroots activists have come to believe that hegemonic globalization is bent upon monopolizing the global discourse of protests, with a view to legitimizing the hegemonic global order and undermining the processes of social and political transformations.

In this globally homogenized 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. To them, such campaigns often seek to undermine the country's national sovereignty and, in their global articulation of issues show insensitivity to the historical and cultural contexts in which the issues are embedded. As a result, these groups often even refrain from articulating their opposition to the Indian state in terms and forms that, in their view, may delegitimize the role of the state in society. 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.

In short, movement activists in India view globalization as a new, post-Cold War *ideology* justifying the rule of a hegemonic *structure of global power* seeking to establish the monopoly of a few powerful countries over resources of the whole world. As such, they find globalization to be inimical to basic democratic and ecological values: liberty, equality, diversity and sustainability. To them, its impact on poorer countries has been to produce new and more dehumanized forms of exclusion and inequality—worse than those created by the Cold War Development model, or even by colonial rule. They are particularly concerned about its adverse impact on democracy in India. For, while the poorer classes have found a 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 globalization as undermining and delegitimizing institutions of democratic governance. They see it as a force that seeks to undo India's democratic revolution.

#### THE NEW POLITICS OF MOVEMENTS

Based on such an assessment of globalization's adverse impact both for development and democracy, the grassroots movements conceive their politics in the direction of achieving two interrelated goals: (a) re-politicizing development and (b) reinventing participatory democracy.

#### Re-politicizing development

The main effort of the movements today is to keep the debate on development alive but also to recast it in terms that can effectively counter global and national structures of power. They are thus formulating old issues of development in new political terms, although their objective remains the same as before, namely, those at the bottom of the pile find their rightful place as producers in the economy and citizens in the polity. Accordingly, they now view development as a *political* struggle for the people's participation in defining development goals and devising means to achieve them. Their view of development is thus a non-hegemonic, pluralistic process, in articulating which they use insights inductively arrived at and criteria that have evolved through their own struggles. In this process they increasingly relate the globally debated issues such as feminism, ecology and human rights to the economic, social and cultural specificities of India in which these issues are embedded. Consequently, their politics is about making development a bottom-upward process, directly relevant to and an edifying experience for the poor and the oppressed. 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 grassroots 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. Although that kind of critique still remains a hobbyhorse of some esoteric activist groups and academic clubs, it finds little resonance in the changed aspirations of India's poor. Thus, at one level, movement groups see the power elements of the old Development model being encoded in the hegemonic structure of globalization that they oppose. But at the level of national politics they see the idea of development as representing the political and economic rights of the people who have been denied access to it because of their disadvantaged locations in the power structure. Hence they problematize development, seeking to create a politics for changing power relations in society. This change in perspective was effectively articulated by a well-known social activist, Aruna Roy, when she left a development NGO in the mid-1980s to found a movement group. According to her, the need of the time was to "redefine the paradigm of development—to see the whole process of development from a different perspective." And such a change in perspective would, she held, enable social activists to see development for what it really is, i.e., a political process. In her words: "Development is politics and there can be no development without political will [...]. In fact all acts of social and economic living are determined by the nature of politics" (Roy, Aruna, 1996a).



Second, the change in perspective was also a response to the change in the post-Cold War global politics of development. Movement groups in India now have a better understanding of the global politics of development. With the global development establishment having openly and officially given up its old promise of universalizing development for *all*, they are now able to see the real face of global hegemonic power. 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 that aims at the dispersal of state control over the economies of the peripheral countries on the one hand, and the centralization of global political and military power in the hands of the world's already rich and powerful countries on the other. They see this as forming the basis for global hegemony today, through which these countries seek to maintain international economic and political stability under the continuing, and rather intensifying, conditions of inequality among and within nations.

This awareness has led some movement groups to form transnational alliances aimed at democratizing 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 organizations at the grassroots level to identify and oppose specific policies, programs, and legislations meant to expand hegemonic global power.<sup>3</sup>

Third, all types of grassroots groups today, including even some conventional development NGOs, articulate basic issues of development in the framework of rights. For example, they no longer view poverty purely as an economic problem. 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 are imprisoned in poverty (the world constituted of vulnerabilities and exposures to exploitation for its politically unorganized and economically marginalized inhabitants). They do not, however, perceive the division between the two worlds in the one-dimensional terms of polarization between two economic classes. Their mobilizational strategies, therefore, focus on the new social-political formations that combine the categories of class, caste, ethnicity, and gender.

Let me illustrate this point briefly with reference to the human rights, the ecology, and the women's movements. The issue of human rights as viewed

by the activists of several human rights groups is not limited to the conventional legal notion of civil liberties; it extends to situations in which individuals and groups are denied satisfaction of their basic needs. It is in this context that they articulate the issue of poverty in terms of rights and entitlements (e.g., the right to work) that the poor must have as citizens and as human beings. The politics of micro-movements, therefore, lies not merely in fighting particular infringements on the legal rights of citizens but in creating and expanding new political and civic spaces for them by converting the survival and development needs of the poor and the deprived into struggles for their economic, political, and cultural rights, and these not only of individuals *qua* individuals but of groups and communities surviving on the margins of the civil society. In the process, these movement activists link rights of access to and benefits from the development process with the issues of ethnic identity and human dignity, and view the satisfaction of material needs as a pursuit not detached from the spiritual and cultural aspects of human existence. This is why several social-action groups whose self-image is not of being human rights groups almost routinely take up issues of rights and cooperate with larger human rights movements.

Similarly, the ecology movements at the grassroots do not view ecology as merely a cost factor in development, as some development specialists do. Nor are they interested in specifying the tolerable levels of ecological destruction necessary for achieving higher levels of economic development, as do the policies of hegemonic globalization. Instead, they view ecology as a basic principle of human existence, which, if reactivated, can yield higher level principles for reorganizing the economy in a humane way and refocus development in terms of well being, in which, to use Gandhi's well-known phrase, "everyone shall have enough to satisfy one's need, but not greed."

The activists of the women's movements lately have been defining their problem not merely in terms of achieving equal benefits and access for women in the present system. They self-consciously take up such issues mainly for finding entry points to the submerged world of Indian womanhood; but their long-term goal, as they put it, is to change the working of the gender principle itself in the economy and society, such that both society and the economy become more just and humane. They find the ecological worldview of the movements more aligned with the feminine principle. The fusion of the ecological and gender principles, they argue, is conducive for a more humane economic and political organization of the society than that of Development, which, in their view, is founded on the principle of male domination over all aspects of human life and nature (Shiva, 1988). Their project, often working in tandem with the human rights and ecology movements, is thus to change the forms of organization and consciousness in society.

Guided by this broad perspective, movements are often able to forge links with each other in fighting for issues at the grassroots. It is not accidental

that ecology movements such as the Chipko movement have a large participation of women, and that in the Bodhgaya movement for the rights of the landless in Bihar, women play significant leadership roles. Women are in the forefront of the movements fighting for the rights of the population displaced by development projects, especially in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Similarly, human rights organizations often team up with women's organizations on issues of dowry, *sati*, rape, and equal wages. Similarly, activists in women's groups play an active role in mobilizing and assisting the victims of the Bhopal chemical disaster. At no time in independent India, in the movements led by the parties and trade unions, was there ever such a high degree and such a sustained level of participation by women as one witnesses today in the non-party political movements at the grassroots.<sup>4</sup>

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 things, led to greater interaction and building of new organizational linkages between the city-based and village-based social-action groups. Further, the movements now realize the inconsequentiality of the established wisdom of "inputs" serving as a major factor in rural development. This, in their view, only represents a partial and lopsided understanding of the problem of rural development. For making "inputs" available to poor farmers is more of a political than an economic problem. The experience thus far is that it has not helped a large majority of the poor who lack the economic and organizational capacity to receive and use inputs such as credit, seeds, fertilizers, irrigation, and so on. 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.

Thus, by redefining issues of development in *political* terms, the groups working separately on different issues such as gender, ecology, and human rights, or in the areas of health and education, are now conceiving their activities in more generic terms, as a form of social and political action aimed at countering hegemonic power structures at all levels—locally, nationally, and globally. An important consequence of this change in perspective was that the grassroots movements, which were in a state of fragmentation and low morale at the end of 1980s, began to regroup and arrive at common platforms on the issue of globalization. In the mid-1990s this led to the launching of several new nationwide campaigns and to the formation of organizationally more durable coalitions and alliances. Among many such initiatives the most effective and widespread in recent years has been the campaign for the *right to information*—a series of local-level struggles for securing correct wages for laborers working in public construction works for drought relief, culminating in a successful nationwide campaign for the right to information. The

older, ongoing movement of the 1980s, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, got a new boost and gave birth to a broad-based alliance of a number of social movements and organizations active at different levels and in different parts of the country. This alliance, known as the National Alliance for People's Movements (NAPM) has been launching, supporting and coordinating several campaigns on a more or less regular basis, protesting against programs and projects of the government and the MNCs representing the policies of hegemonic globalization. There have been many more such initiatives, but more recent ones among them include: A Campaign for People's Control over Natural Resources comprising several organizations active in rural and tribal areas covering about thirteen Indian states; the movement called There Is An Alternative, led by, among others, two previous prime ministers of India; The Living Democracy Movement for linking local-democracy decision-making to maintaining biodiversity; the movement for nuclear disarmament called the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace, and so on. Although some of the above movements will be described in some detail in the next section, the point of mentioning these here is to show how the challenge of globalization has politically revitalized the scene of social movements in India which, by the end of the 1980s, was losing both momentum and direction, and, more interestingly, how it became possible for these movements to sustain their politics at a higher level of intensity, in the process recovering the hope of initiating a long-term politics of non-cooperation and a withdrawal of legitimation from the dominant power structures.

To sum up, the politics of different groups and movements, which began to converge in the mid-1990s, have acquired a common direction and a fairly durable organizational 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 globalization and to depoliticize development. For, in their view, it is only through the politicization of the poor that they can counter the negative impact of globalization and make development a just and equitable process and a collectively edifying experience. Thus, by establishing, both conceptually and in practice, linkages between the issues of development and democracy the grassroots movements have begun to articulate their politics in terms of participatory democracy.

#### Reinventing participatory democracy

In theoretical discussions and in the practice of representational politics, participatory democracy has been treated, respectively, as a para-political idea and a peripheral political activity—a desirable but not an essential characteristic of a modern democracy. It is in the politics of grassroots movements, where the scope of democracy is being actively searched and expanded through their everyday political struggles, that participatory democracy is

conceived as not just desirable but a necessary organizational form and political practice. Under the conditions of globalization, where the national-level institutions of representation are being subordinated to hegemonic global power with the structures of political and economic decision-making becoming more remote—even alienated—from people, the movements' continuing politics of participatory democracy has acquired a new relevance.

#### Participatory democracy and political theory

In contemporary democratic theory the notion of political participation is articulated in terms of political obligations and the legal-constitutional rights of citizens with respect to electing representative governments and ensuring their democratic functioning (Almond and Verba, 1963; Milbrath, 1965). By conceiving participation in the passive terms of limiting citizens' roles and activities to the institutional arena of elections, parties and pressure groups, the theory secures (or at least seeks to provide justifications for securing) the decision-making procedures of representative governments from the high-intensity politics of mass mobilization and direct action, which the occasionally surfacing popular movements generate in a representative democracy.

This indeed has succeeded to a large extent in lending institutional stability and political legitimacy to liberal representative democracy, making it appear as if it is the only natural form that democracy can have. But it has, at the same time, bogged down the theory's political imagination to pragmatic concerns of the old, "actually existing" democracies of the West. In the process, it has pre-empted options of the new and growing democracies to evolve and experiment with institutional alternatives for deepening democracy and choosing forms appropriate to their own respective cultural and historical contexts. Even more, the theory, by persistently treating liberal representative democracy as the ultimate form of democracy, has encouraged the view that in it, humankind has achieved the highest state of political development beyond and outside of which no democratic possibility exists. This even emboldened a North American political thinker to see the arrival and universalization of liberal democracy as heralding the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992).

This high-intensity discourse sustained throughout the Cold War has, ironically, produced an array of theoretical arguments that has succeeded in keeping representative democracy at the level of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos aptly describes as low-intensity democracy—which probably also suits the contemporary politics of hegemonic globalization (Santos, 1999). This, however, has resulted in a major theoretical casualty: that of pushing—if not altogether discarding—the concept of participatory democracy on to the margins of democratic theory.

Keeping democracy a low-intensity national-level operation may be conducive to the integration of the world (capitalist) economy, for it helps the national governments of peripheral countries to disperse and dispel popular democratic movements opposing the implementation of structural adjustments and other policies handed down to them by the global power structure. But it is precisely for this reason that peripheral countries of the world undergoing globalization need to create a strong infrastructure of democracy at the grassroots, without which their democracies cannot survive at the nation-state level; worse, it may even endanger the very survival of their poor citizens.

Two moves made by the theorists of representative democracy have made it possible, on the one side, to incorporate the concept of participation within the theory's structural-functional paradigm (i.e., participation conceived as a particular form of political behavior of citizens through which they elect governments and are expected to keep their functioning on a democratic track by working through their representatives), and, on the other, to treat participatory democracy either as an archaic form of governance or an impractical ideal that, if actually practiced—or even experimented with—is fraught with dangerous consequences for democracy itself.

The first argument is elaborated through historicizing democracy in linear, evolutionary terms. It traces the history of democracy from its origin in the Athenian city-state, where it functioned as a direct, participatory democracy, through the successive forms it assumed, until it acquired a complexly evolved form of representative democracy—making it possible to function at a much larger scale, such as that of a nation-state (sometimes the state of a continental size). This transmutation has in its view equipped representative-liberal democracy to function even at a global scale and to carry out a plethora of programs and policies pertaining to every aspect of lives of its citizens (Dahl, 1989: 1–24).

The point of this exercise, it seems, is to show that the beliefs and practices historically associated with the participatory democracy of a city-state have no relevance today for a democracy located in the nation-state and even less for tomorrow, when it is likely to encompass the whole globe as its territorial domain. Participatory democracy, the theory concedes, is indeed a noble idea and some of its elements ought to be functionally incorporated in representative democracy. But it is a regression to think of citizens directly controlling and participating in governmental decision-making and may even turn out to be a recipe for disaster in today's world. In the derivative theoretical discourse of Indian democracy, this fixing of participatory democracy to the dead and gone past of the West has delegitimized any historical-theoretical exploration premised on its existence in India's past. Hence the idea of democracy as symbolized in the concept of the village republic is treated by the Indian political theorists as an atavistic idea, not deserving any serious theoretical discussion.

The other argument—unlike the previous one, which views democracy's history in structural-functional terms—is made in normative-analytical terms. It seems to be based on the fear of romantic appeal (utopian images) that the idea of participatory democracy evokes. In the view of those advancing this argument, propagating the ideal of participatory democracy often promotes simple, populist ideas about democracy. They further argue that the proponents of participatory democracy fail to recognize the fact that modern governments have to routinely depend in their decision-making on specialists and professional experts; the issues involved are so complex and technical in nature that they are beyond the grasp even of elected representatives, let alone ordinary citizens. Concepts such as direct or participatory democracy only serve as a distraction to the theorization of democracy for the globalizing world (Schmitter, 1999). A section of Indian elites, who believe that meritocracy provides a better form of democracy and good governance, has always sought political support for their position in this argument. They vociferously argue that for preserving institutional norms of representative democracy it is necessary to strictly limit, procedurally and structurally, the powers of elected representatives through the legal-rational institutions of bureaucracy and the judiciary. In their view, giving legitimacy to the idea of participatory democracy would only further expose representative institutions to majoritarian and populist pressures, often making for bad and irrational decisions that are not usually in the public interest. It was the dominance of this discourse in India during the initial decades after independence that allowed the consolidation of the hegemonic rule, albeit democratically consented, of a small social-political minority consisting of urban and English-educated members of the upper castes. They occupied a large number of positions in different sectors and institutions of the state, especially higher in the bureaucracy and judiciary, for over forty years after Independence. What had become an established, common sense view of governing India, however, began to be challenged by the end of the 1970s, when the movements of subaltern classes gained strength both in electoral politics and in civil society (Sheth, 1995).

#### The movements' politics of participatory democracy

The idea of participatory democracy was central to Gandhi's political thinking and practice, and inspired many activists of the freedom movement. He articulated this idea through the concepts of *swaraj* (self-governance) and *swadeshi* (community's control over resources) and by invoking the imagery of the "village republic" (*gram swaraj*) as representing India's democratic tradition.<sup>5</sup> These formulations were, however, stoutly rejected and virtually banished from mainstream political discourse after independence as representing Gandhi's impractical idealism. The idea of participatory democracy

has, however, not only been kept alive but has developed conceptually and in practice by a section of grassroots activists who draw liberally on Gandhi's economic and political thinking—although many of them may not want to wear the Gandhian badge (Bakshi, 1998). In a different political and ideological context, M. N. Roy had critiqued representative form of democracy and pleaded for participative democracy. Based on his vision of participative democracy, Roy had prepared a detailed proposal for Constitution of Free India (Roy, M. N., 1960). These proposals, which did not receive any serious response in the then prevailing nationalist politics, have now been revived and reformulated by some activist groups in the changed context of globalization (Tarkunde, 2003).

The first comprehensive and politically effective proposal on participatory democracy for Independent India, however, came from Jayaprakash Narayan (J.P.). A popular socialist leader of the independence movement, J.P. joined the Gandhian movement about five years after independence. He raised the political profile of the movement high when, in 1954, he made a public pronouncement of dedicating his whole life to the movement, in his words, to "the Gandhian way." The issue of deepening democracy was central to his agenda for the movement, without which, he believed, only elite rule will perpetuate in the name of democracy.<sup>6</sup> This concern found a lasting expression in his treatise on non-party democracy in 1959 (Narayan, 1959). He critiqued the idea of representation by political parties and argued for a more participative and comprehensive form of democracy constituting a broad democratic base from which the power will flow upward to units using power allocated to them by the units below, on conditions of accountability and transparency. The amount and kind of power to be allocated to a higher unit will be as per the requirement of the unit. J.P.'s thesis, however, made little impact beyond Gandhian circles. It in fact drew sharp criticism from the liberal democratic theorists as well as the party politicians who saw it as a naïve exercise of an idealist, unaware of its dangerous consequences for democracy itself (Kothari, 1960). The document was virtually "withdrawn" from public discourse, but within two years J.P. came up with a politically more potent and comprehensive statement on the issue of participatory democracy (Narayan, 1961). Here J.P. rebutted the arguments of his critics and elaborated his basic thesis by theoretically and historically establishing the need for a comprehensive democracy, where both economic and political power is primarily held *and* exercised directly by the people from the base of the polity. It did not take very long for his vision of democracy to find a powerful political expression. He launched a massive movement in the early 1970s with the aim of, in his own coinage, restoring people's power (*lokshakti*) in democracy (Narayan, 1975). This idea of people's power fired the imagination of many young women and men, which, besides upstaging the government in Delhi, gave rise to a new genre of micro-movements,

celebrated and characterized by theorists as the “non-party political process” (Kothari, 1984). This genre of movement groups that emerged from what became known as the “J.P. movement” has since been working at the grass-roots. They articulate participatory democracy in terms of the empowerment of people through everyday struggles for their rights as well as through harnessing their collective efforts to developing local resources for collective well being.

The most remarkable in this genre was the movement launched by Chhatra-Yuva Sangarsh Vahini in 1978, known as the Bodh Gaya Movement. It has since served as a source of inspiration nationally for many movement groups. This movement succeeded in seizing about ten thousand acres of land from the religious establishment in Bodhgaya, a district in Bihar, through non-violent direct action. The land was legally redistributed among families of tillers who were attached to the land for generations. In the course of redistribution, legal entitlements to land were given equally to women and men. More important than its outcome in the form of land redistribution was the process of change through which the movement’s larger objectives and values of political and social transformation were kept alive, communicated, and partially institutionalized, affecting the lives of about three thousand participant households in the area. In fact the movement group ensured that the *dalis* (ex-untouchables), for whose land rights the movement was launched, remained in the forefront and among them the women performed crucial leadership roles. The movement created a new hope among social-action groups all over the country about the efficacy of using non-violent militancy as a means for social and economic transformation.<sup>7</sup>

Another, and equally significant, movement of the same genre in recent years has been the one led by Tarun Bharat Sangh. It is known to the outside world through its Magsaysay award-winning leader, Rajendra Singh. He joined and has revitalized the organization through his work since 1985 in the villages of Rajasthan. He and members of his group started work with a deep conviction that the people have the knowledge and the capacity to develop and manage their affairs collectively for their own well-being (that is how he saw J.P.’s message of “power to the people”), provided they stop looking to the government for help and become motivated to work on their own. In Singh’s own words: “our fight [is] against the state for communities to have a say in their development. [...] Administrative system [...] tries to foist its own vision of development on communities, without bothering to find out what people need. In fact, it is a myth that development is for people, it is actually anti-people [...]. Schooled in the ideals of Jayaprakash Narayan and Acharya Vinoba Bhave working for social change was an obvious choice [for us]” (Singh, 2001).

Beginning their work in the mid-1980s, this group of social activists was able to establish, in the course of a decade and a half, a self-governing system

of land and water management in about seven hundred villages in the perpetually drought-affected and poverty-ridden villages of Rajasthan. This was achieved through reviving the recessive knowledge and skills of the people themselves of building water-harvesting structures known locally as *Johads*. In this process the villagers not only went ahead and built a network of check-dams and small reservoirs without government help but took decisions, bypassing the government, on land use in the area, built boundary walls around common lands and afforested a huge, barren landmass. This became possible due to the social confidence that the people could recover with the water becoming available to them by their own efforts. The old forms of economic interdependence and social cooperation were now recovered and imbued with new economic and democratic political meanings. In Singh’s eyes, this is a small, perhaps a short-lived, achievement. He sees a long political battle ahead for achieving real democracy for the people. In his words: “Unfortunately, the state in India does not appreciate communities trying to help themselves. If people start participating in development and questioning the money that ostensibly is being spent on them, it makes it difficult for those who run the system. For a bureaucracy schooled in the colonial tradition of ruling rather than working with people, grassroots democracy is an alien concept. So instead of development being a collaborative effort between people and the state, it is actually people versus the state” (Singh, 2001).

But the government saw all this quite differently, as an encroachment on its territory and a usurpation of its functions. The administration slapped hundreds of legal cases on the movement group and the villagers and threatened them with demolition of the dams, since they were built without the government’s permission and the guidance of experts (“civil engineers”). Here is where the grassroot group’s politics of mass mobilization and joining larger alliances helped: it became possible for the group, along with the villagers, to withstand the pressure and ultimately get the government to endorse the mode of self-governance they had evolved through their political struggles on the ground. Again, Rajendra Singh sees this as a temporary reprieve obtained by the winning of a battle, not a war. In his words: “Unless the communities are empowered and encouraged to develop stakes in development, winning the war is going to be difficult” (Singh, 2001).<sup>8</sup>

In the process of countering hegemonic globalization, the movements have added another dimension to their politics. This is about making law an important site of social and political action/struggle. In the course of implementing the structural adjustment programs and other globalization-related policies, the state has been actively assisting the Indian and multinational corporations to acquire land and other resources of the villages at a nominal cost. This involves withdrawing constitutional guarantees given to tribals regarding the alienation of their land and, in effect, extending such guarantees to MNCs as making land, water, and forest resources available to them

cheaply, but at a great cost to the livelihood of the people and the ecology of the area. The enactment or implementation of such legislation and government orders are now challenged by the movement groups not just in the law courts but in the larger arena of civil society. The proceedings of public interest litigations, which earlier had remained by and large confined to the courtrooms as contentions between the state and social-legal activists, have now become matters of direct concern and involvement for the people themselves, constituting everyday politics of the movement groups.

In the process, new participatory forums have been evolved, such as documenting the effects of specific government policies and legislation on the people through participatory surveys and studies carried out jointly by social activists (including some professionals among them) and the people themselves, and disseminating results to the wider public, including the media. The most effective and innovative mode of consciousness-raising and of political mobilization developed in this process, and which has now become a common practice for movement groups all over the country, is organizing big walkathons (*Pad yatras*). The *Pad yatras* are usually organized by activists representing organizations from different parts of the country that share a common perspective on and concern for a particular issue that they together wish to highlight for mobilizing public opinion. They walk long distances along with the people drawn from different locales who face a similar problem in a specific area—for example, a threat posed to their livelihood by a project of the government or an MNC. In the course of the walk they stop in villages and interact with people, show films, and stage plays that highlight the issues.

One among many such cases is the movement against bauxite mining in tribal areas of Vishaka in Andhra Pradesh. In 1991 a walkathon known as the *manya prante chaitanya yatra*, a consciousness-raising walk for an area facing ecological destruction, was organized by a couple of movement groups active in the area, SAMTA and SAKTI. Over fifty other social-action groups joined the march and prepared a report on the ecological destruction that they saw and experienced during the march. The report described how the region had come under a severe threat to its ecology and to the livelihood of people inhabiting it and how if the damage was not controlled it could cause ecological disaster for the entire peninsula of south India. The report also spoke of the displacement of 50,000 tribals, the massive deforestation and the problem of flash floods and silting that resulted.<sup>9</sup>

This *Chaitanya yatra* has since served as a basis for a decade-long and continuing movement for legal and social action in the state of Andhra Pradesh. During the last five years it has expanded widely, covering many other similar issues and movement groups working on them from different parts of the country. What is of interest here is the kind of politics the movement has developed for expanding its activities and sustaining itself for so long. At one

level, through taking the issue of a threat to people's livelihoods to the law courts, it has created a nationwide alliance of similar movements, thus garnering a wider support base for its activities. Working through the alliance it has been able to project its work in the national media and contribute to building solidarity among movement groups. At another more crucial level the movement, through its mobilizational and consciousness-raising marches and myriad other activities, has been able to motivate people of the area to build their own community-based organizations, which now assert self-governance as a right and as the preferred way to protect and develop the means of their livelihood and culture.

The participative methodology of preparing and disseminating reports, which involved self-reporting by members of the affected communities as well as technical and financial input from well-known NGOs, movement leaders and reputed activist-professionals, succeeded in drawing nationwide attention to the usurpation, ostensibly by legal means, of tribal lands by corporations, which deprived the people of their livelihoods, identity, and culture.<sup>10</sup>

It was in the background of the sustained struggles, which the groups in the area carried on for about a decade, that it became possible for one of them, SAMTA, to go to the Supreme Court of India with a plea to close the calcite mines in the area because they threatened to uproot the local population and endangered the ecology of the area. Because the tribals were protected by Schedule Five of the Constitution against the alienation of their lands, and the mine threatened to destroy their livelihoods and, even more, violated their fundamental right to life given by the Indian Constitution to all citizens, SAMTA pleaded that the mine should be closed. Largely accepting the SAMTA plea, the Supreme Court of India gave a 400-page judgment in 1997, outlining the steps that needed to be taken to make the tribals *partners in the development* of scheduled areas (i.e., constitutionally protected areas populated by tribals). The court ruled that all private and public sector organizations functioning in these areas should give not less than 20 per cent of their jobs to local people and an equal amount of seats to their children in educational institutions. The court also stipulated that each industrial unit in the area part with 20 per cent of its profit and make it available for the kind of development that would be in the interest of the local people.

In essence the court recognized the local people as legal stakeholders in the development of the area in which they live. It made the people's participation in development necessary, and their claim to a share in the benefits of development legitimate. This landmark judgment, known in India as the SAMTA judgment, has since become a rallying point around which many struggles are now waged jointly by action groups in the country: first, to secure implementation of the court's mandatory rulings as well as its recommendatory provisions; second, to test and expand legal and juridical meanings

of the judgment for wider application; third, to use it politically for creating a bulwark of resistance to prevent implementation of the government policy that, as a part of the globalization package and under pressure from multinationals, seeks to withdraw guarantees given by the Constitution to the people under its Fifth Schedule.

In the course of the six years since the Supreme Court's judgment on this, a number of marches, demonstrations and conventions have been held in different parts of the country, on a more or less regular basis by social movement groups. One remarkable example of how the SAMTA judgment energized the micro-movements, which had struggled for a long time without making much headway in securing the ecological rights of the local (tribal) communities, is the case of the Adivasi movement in the Rayagada district of Orissa. The movement, aided and assisted by the National Committee for Protection of Natural Resources (NCPNR), itself a network of over forty social-action groups, succeeded in highlighting the plight of the Rayagada tribals and the injustice done to them by forcibly acquiring their lands for bauxite mining. The movement effectively used the SAMTA judgment in making the government officials aware of their obligation to implement the Supreme Court judgment in Orissa (Hiremath, S. R., *et al.*, 2001).

Different from the above campaign for preventing the government from enacting certain kinds of legislation, another movement seeks to compel the government to implement its own rules and regulations honestly and efficiently. Its politics center around holding public hearings and people's courts with a view to creating political and social sanctions for the local government administration to compel it to observe and make public the rules and regulations by which it is governed in its implementation of development programs. It began as a struggle launched by a mass-based organization in a village in Rajasthan founded by Aruna Roy, who gave up her job in the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) "to work with the people." The organization, named Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS [Union for Empowerment of Peasants and Workers]), addressed the problem most acutely felt by the people themselves—government officials were cheating laborers working on government construction sites by not paying them minimum wages fixed by the government.<sup>11</sup> Besides being underpaid, the people in the area did not get enough work through the year, because sanctioned development programs often remained on paper with the allocated money being pocketed by government officials and elected leaders. Since all this was done with the knowledge of the "higher-ups," no amount of petitioning helped; only direct democratic action by the people was seen as a possible remedy. In December 1994, several public hearings, Jan Sunvai, were held by MKSS, where the workers were encouraged to speak out about their problems with the bureaucracy—especially narrating specific details about

the underpayment of wages and unimplemented development schemes—in the presence of local journalists and people of surrounding villages from different walks of life. It took several public hearings to persuade some among the accused parties—the contractors, engineers and local elected leaders—to accept the MKSS invitation asking them to avail themselves of the opportunity of their self-defense by responding to people's charges of corruption. All this had little impact on the administration and for people outside the local area until a marathon 40 day sit-in, a *dharna*, was organized in the nearby town of Beawar in 1996, followed by another series of public hearings, demonstrations, and processions. This compelled the Rajasthan government to amend the Panchayati Raj Act, entitling citizens to get certified copies of bills and vouchers of payments made and the muster-rolls showing the names of laborers employed (payments were often made by forged bills and shown against fictitious names of people who never worked on the site). This grew into a state-level campaign demanding that the Rajasthan government pass comprehensive legislation granting citizens and organizations the right to information. This culminated in organizing a nationwide campaign—the National Campaign for People's Right to Information—which prepared model legislation for the Right to Information. By extensively canvassing a model bill, the campaign succeeded with about half a dozen state assemblies passing similar legislations. Eventually, the Parliament too was forced to pass such a bill, though in a vastly diluted and truncated form. As might be expected, about eight months after its passage, it still has not been publicly notified for implementation. But that is a different story.

In short, the innovative politics of the MKSS—as well as of many other such organizations not reported here—working explicitly on the principle of making democracy participatory and responsive, has initiated a larger and long-term political process by which people can effectively participate in making laws by compelling legislators at the local, state, and national levels to formulate legislation the people want—in some cases even making the legislatures adopt drafts of laws prepared by the grassroots movements based on the information and insights gained through their own struggles and through wider consultations on different civil-society forums.

There are numerous other cases of the movement groups articulating different elements of participatory democracy in the course of their struggles for democratizing development (Smitu Kothari, 2000b). For lack of space, only brief mention can be made of a few. For example, there are city-based movement groups such as SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) in Ahmedabad, with a long and formidable record of work among self-employed women for their economic and political empowerment and social emancipation (Rose, 1992). There are two other recently founded organizations in Delhi: the Manushi Forum for Citizen Rights and the Jan Parivahan Panchayat of Lokayan. These organizations have been running

campaigns for protecting the economic rights and expanding the freedoms of the self-employed urban poor, such as street-hawkers and rickshaw-pullers (Kishwar, 2001b and c). As part of the campaign, film shows, photographic exhibitions, and marches are organized in different localities in the city. The media campaigns, on the whole, demonstrate how the implementation of economic reforms blatantly discriminate between the rich and the poor and how the rules are often used to prevent people from exercising their right to make a living (Kishwar, 2001a; Lokayan, 2002). Public hearings are held revealing the harassment of street-hawkers and rickshaw-pullers by government officials, which focus not so much on the implementation of rules as on collection of corruption money. Similar movement groups fighting for the rights of the urban poor have been active in Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Calcutta, and other cities, whose work is equally, if not more, important. The short point is: a new civil-society politics—different from conventional trade union politics—has emerged in the cities, focusing on the rights of the urban poor in making livelihood choices and use of urban spaces.

Similar new movements addressing issues of livelihood and the use of common spaces have emerged in the rural and tribal areas. They aim at empowering the *gram sabhas* by making them self-governed and participative decision-making bodies managing the affairs of their own villages (Kothari, Smitu, 2000a). One such movement, for example, explicitly conceives of participatory democracy as an “antidote to globalization.” Its politics is about giving organizational shape to Gandhi’s ideas of *swaraj* and *swadeshi* at the grassroots level. Led by an activist trained in the J.P. movement, Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, the movement has motivated people to establish their own governance of, to begin with, forests in the area. Today, the villagers themselves maintain the forest ecology and make judicious use of forest produce. The self-governance movement is now being expanded to many more villages, covering other areas of collective life. The movement’s credo is: *we* are the government in our village and there shall be *our* government in the region, the nation, and the world. Interestingly, this movement group has also theoretically worked out a “blueprint” for the organizational structures required for a participatory democracy from the village to the global level, specifying the long-term objectives and values by which they should be informed.

#### Conclusion

The distinctive feature of movement politics is, thus, to articulate a new discourse on democracy through sustained political practice. This is done at three levels: (a) at the grassroots level through building people’s 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 levels through launching nationwide campaigns and building alliances and coalitions for mobilizing protests on larger issues (against “anti-people projects and policies”) and creating organizational networks of mutual support and of solidarity among movements; (c) at the global level, by a small section of movement activists who in recent years have begun to actively participate in several transnational alliances and movements for creating a politics of counter-hegemonic globalization. In all this, the long-term goal of the movements is to bring the immediate environment (social, economic, cultural, and ecological) that the people live in within their own reach and control.

Such politics of movements, however, often brings them into confrontation with the state, the bureaucracy, the law and order machinery, the local power structures, and now increasingly with the multinationals penetrating the rural and tribal spaces in India. The micro-movements sometimes come into conflict also with political parties and established trade unions. The activists of movements, however, view such confrontations as an aspect of the larger, long-term struggle for political and social transformation, and not as means of competing with political parties in the arena of representative politics for acquisition of state power. They thus view their everyday struggles as a process of expanding political spaces trans-locally through raising people’s consciousness and building their own organizations. In the process, in the areas they have been active, they contribute to creating a political culture of participative democracy.

The movement activists have developed their own critique of the prevalent macro-structures of political representation as well as a view of local politics. Their critique is not theoretically derived; it has emerged from the experience of day-to-day political struggles on the ground.<sup>12</sup> In their view, the representative institutions have imprisoned the process of democratization in the society. The way out from such an 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 the “reconstruction of the state” rather than of the “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 that, 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 who are experiencing the common situation of disempowerment caused by mal-development and



contemporary forms of governance that are imperiously distant, yet close enough to feel their coercive edge.

Thus viewed, the long-term *politics* of movements is about the withdrawal of legitimation from the hegemonic and exclusionary structures of political power and horizontalizing the vertical structures of social hierarchy by 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. Although I have no penchant for coining new terms, I think it will be more appropriate to characterize this new politics of movements as “societics.”

All this, however, does not mean that grassroots actors and organizations 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 the social consciousness of people and democratize 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 (that is, 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 (that is, 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.

#### Notes

1 In June 1975, a state of internal emergency was imposed on India by Mrs. Indira Gandhi as a stratagem to continue in power after she had been disqualified from her membership in the Indian Parliament after being found guilty of electoral malpractice by a High Court judgment delivered on 12 June.

During the emergency, which lasted for two years, the constitutional rights of citizens, including some fundamental rights, were suspended. The emergency regime was stiffly resisted by several political parties and social activists. For an account, written during the period, of how constitutional rights were undermined by the emergency regime, see Kothari, Rajni (1989).

- 2 The following account is based on my close and continuous association and interaction with activists of several movement groups throughout the country since 1980. I also have extensively used the materials they regularly produce and disseminate in the form of booklets, pamphlets, leaflets, and newsletters, which do not easily yield to the academic style of citations. As such, it incorporates parts of my earlier writings on grassroots movements, cited here. The activists and movements appearing in this chapter by their names suggest my greater, often accidental, familiarity with their work, inasmuch as the absences suggest my ignorance—and the lack of space—but in no case any lack of their salience in the field.
- 3 For example, witness the activities of a network of grassroots organizations founded by the leading activist of transnational ecological movements, Vandana Shiva; the network is known as Jaiv Panchayats—The Living Democracy Movement (Shiva, 2000).
- 4 It is significant to note in this context that major popular movements in India today, such as the campaign for Right to Information, the campaign for Saving the River Narmada (Narmada Bachao Andolan), the movement for the rights of self-employed women and of street-hawkers and rickshaw-pullers in cities, and the Campaign for Maintaining Biodiversity and against intellectual property rights are all led by women.
- 5 For a concise and pointed exposition of these concepts see M. K. Gandhi (1968a, b, c, d, e).
- 6 For a perceptive, cogent and authentic account of J.P.'s life and work, see, the introduction to his selected writings, edited by Bimal Prasad (1980).
- 7 For a detailed history and political account of the movement, see Prabhat (1999).
- 8 Report by P. Sivaram Krishna of SAKTI (mimeo); also reported in *Neustime*, 13 March 1991.
- 9 All quotes are from the leader of the movement, Rajendra Singh (2001). For a comprehensive account of the contribution made by this movement, see Kishwar (2001b).
- 10 Surveys and studies carried through participatory-action research has, by now, become a common practice for the movement groups. There are special groups of activist-academics, such as the Alternative Survey Group, that regularly carry out studies and publish their findings. Such studies are devised, self-consciously, to counter the politics of positivist knowledge that privileges experts and excludes people from decision-making on matters of vital interest to them (Sheth, 1999).
- 11 The MKSS almost ideally fits the concept of “micro-movement” explicated in this chapter. The campaign it initiated for the right to information has

become a nationwide movement. It has built a large network of movement groups, human rights organizations, media leaders, intellectuals, and professionals. Unfortunately, I cannot do justice to some innovative political concepts and practices developed by this and other such movements in the space available here. For a detailed account of the MKSS movement and the vision of its founder see the following: Bakshi (1998); Aruna Roy (1996a and b); Aruna Roy and Nikhil De (1999); Roy Bunker (1999); and Dogra (2000).

12 In the course of the last five years, the issue of participatory democracy has received more serious and focused attention from the leaders of micro-movements. Several pamphlets, booklets, newsletters, and articles have been prepared and disseminated by them for wider discussion and, possibly, for future campaigns. The basic principles and concepts were, as we saw earlier, enunciated by Gandhi and Jayaprakash Narayan. Some activist-thinkers in recent years have incorporated these in their politics and have renewed the debate through their own writings. For example, see Aruna Roy (1996); articles in the special issue of *Samayik Varta: Loktantra Samiksha* (July–August 2000), especially those by Patnayak, Yadav, Bhattacharya and Pratap; Pratap (2001); Kumar (2001); and Tarkunde (2003). My presentation here of the movements' conceptualization of participatory democracy is largely based on the above-mentioned materials.

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