



Have People's Movements influenced research priorities in India? Illustrative Case Studies

Padma Prakash, Padma Deosthali, Sangeeta Rege

This paper

- Explores the abundance of social research emerging outside the academe within the realm of people's movements.
- Contends that this research has not impacted on the content of ethos of research within the establishment and tentatively suggests why this may been the case.
- Points out why there must be systematic efforts to build dynamic pathways for knowledge transmission between the movements and the establishment

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We use the term people's movements to broadly describe those movements that have challenged state-led or state-sponsored developments questioned systems and ideologies. Not all these movements have/ had wider emancipatory or transformative potential; but they began as movements challenging existing systems and ideas. We do not include here the large number of social movements such as the tribal and caste movements or movements for statehood etc.

In this presentation



- We start with a brief on the status of social science research as assessed by the Indian Council of Social Science Research both in the academia and the civil society organisations.
- We then look at research production in the people's movements and their pathways.
- We look at a little more closely at this process in two cases
- We end with making a case for a systematic effort to build bridges \between research in the movement and that in the more formal univeristy and government institutions.

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Trajectories of knowledge formation



Research in academe – adds to knowledge bank---may or may not influence policy---eventually contribute to knowledge formation in the discipline

Socio-political/economic issues/ problems---movements for change---simultaneously policy impact and research---may or may not impact on knowledge formation in the academe

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In the industrialised countries of the North the process of knowledge formation has developed over a long period where the relationship between society and the academe is well defined and the pathways by which systematic knowledge influences social change are fairly well determined. In post colonial societies, the process of knowledge formation has been historically interrupted. Reestablishing this process in post independence environment has been a somewhat artificial exercise, a system imposed from above. So while institutions were established the trajectories of how research would contribute to policy have been ill defined. Even worse has been the case for disciplinary knowledge formation.

Over the last 30 years have emerged networks and pathways on the margins of the academe and the establishment that are beginning to influence policy and content of social research.

Research objectives



- According to ICSSR research is driven either by a search for knowledge or 2. the practical need of policy makers.
- Research in the people's movement is driven largely by the needs of the movement and its objectives.

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Research priorities tend to be set by the interests of the government of the day---health-related subjects, history, were not among the focus of the 417 institutions listed by ICSSR in 2007.

This also gets reflected in the money spent---with the largest sums going to large-scale social surveys that are data gathering exercises, albeit much needed and impressive.

Funding for research using the data from these surveys is harder to come by.

Research in the movement feeds the information needs of the campaigns and as such, in the first instance, it may sometime be very narrow focusing on immediate issues.

Quality of research

- The general perception is that overall the quality of research in the academia has deteriorated notwithstanding occasional breakthrough studies.
- There has been no systematic survey of NGO research that includes research in the movements. The general opinion is that they do not stand up to critical assessment.

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People's movements in India



India saw a number of movements from the 1970s.

- The fisherfolk movement against the use of mechanised trawlers in Kerala a state in the South.
- Kishore Bharati and the movement for reform of education, especially science education and developed into the People's Science Movement.
- The Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada movement) that questioned the building of large dams on the river Narmada, submerging entire villages along the banks.
- The broad-based health movement that has coalesced many focused agitations and campaigns
- The women's movement, that grew to impact Indian society and structures in fundamental ways.

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Social movements have to negotiate their pathways among many actors---the state, market, polity and the people. In India while there is as yet no definitive theory of social movements, these movements of the 1970s arose in the environment of disenchantment with the relatively new state and government. Many of these were labour mobilisations outside the realm of conventional labour unions; some were protests challenging the state's usurpation of people's rights and people's wealth; others were campaigns to secure legitimate and promised services and rights. A few were of larger significance posing ideological challenges with transformatory potential. An important and common characteristics of these movements that they were either led or drew in large numbers, the educated middle class youth charged with idealism and a belief in evidence-based responses to development challenges. It is not surprising then that they should see data gathering and systematic problem analysis as the basis for campaigns.

Saving Narmada



In 1970s and 80s India's development plans focused in a big way in expanding irrigation and water availability. The conventional solution was to dam rivers and divert water to water-scarce agricultural land and water to burgeoning cities. The Narmada river system, an extensive one offered the scope for a series of dams to be built with a bouquet of benefits. The Plan that emerged piecemeal in the 1980s comprised 30 large dams and thousands of middle and small dams over the 1312km course of the river. The downside was that it would inundate several productive and culturally rich villages. To begin with, this conventional wisdom was accepted with villagers agreeing to move to new locations. But in time there grew a resistance to this forced displacement that would not in any way benefit them.

At this stage the local agitations attracted the attention of several young educated youth, charged with the desire to contribute to the country's development. In order to make the campaign of the villagers against displacement, they began to research the project, its technical and feasibility reports. Even as this research produced questions on feasibility of the designs, larger questions of alternative means of harnessing rivers began to emerge. These young scholar-activists began to write extensively not just in popular media but in scholarly journals of sociology and engineering.

All this has progressively led to a new understanding of river dams, their utility, and most importantly on the uneven benefits to people of large-dam based systems. To some extent the questions raised by the movement have now been incorporated into other river valley plans elsewhere and via the World Bank globally as well.

What ails the delivery of health care to the people?

medico friend circle

- Bridging the social and cultural gap between people and the medical professions
- Unethical practices of pharma industry
- Recognising and reasserting socio-economic roots of medical conditions
The case of neurolethyrism.

- Jan Swasthya Abhiyaan



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Here's another example of how young educated people disenchanted with India's slow progress in ensuring welfare and equity became involved in grass roots issues. The MFC was formed as a thought current and a platform for debate on issues of health care. Spearheaded by a group of young doctors of diverse ideological backgrounds, the group began to find that problems that were apparently seen as medical and treated as such were indeed an outcome of the socio-economy. One such case was of neurolethyrism a disease that resulted in neurological damage of the limbs and untimely death. It was found to afflict particular groups of people in contiguous regions of central India. Early investigation had pointed to the consumption of a poisonous seed, lathyrus sativus mixed in an cheap variety of pulses. Further investigation revealed that the seed, that the FAO classified as 'poison seed' was grown as a middle crop for the express purpose of adulterating pulses and for making payments to bonded agriculture labour. Expectedly, nerolathyrism was an epidemic of sorts among bonded labour but did not affect the richer classes of the region.

This study, further substantiated by an independent epidemiological study sponsored by the Indian Council of Medical Research led to policy changes in agriculture in the state and to the banning of the cultivation of the poison seed.

MFC also organised and conducted the first survey of the survivors of the Bhopal disaster well before the government agencies did.

Today, it is one among other organisations comprising the indian circle of the global People's Health Movement, the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan

Women's movement

- Spearheaded by young women lawyers and others the movement coalesced around the case of a young tribal woman who had been raped in custody. The courts disallowed rape citing that the woman was 'habituated' to having sex and there was no proof of rape.
- Review of the laws relating to rape and the processing of cases of rape. Led to a change in that section of the law prompting several more comprehensive campaigns for change and modernisation of these laws.
- Also led to the recognition of the gender biases and the patriarchal grounding of institutions of law and order and to an upsurge of several initiatives for change.

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It is hardly momentous to say that the women's movement shook every institution in the country. Uniquely it is in this area where research from the movement has paralleled inquiries within the academia---and this is because early on, women academics who had been active in various for a of the women's movement created the Indian Women's Studies Association bridging the two arenas of research. Soon after the state initiated the setting up of women's studies centres in all public universities. The IWSA has played an important role in changing the contours of research related to women. In this field much of the research that is used by the movement is generated under funded projects of the universities and inversely academics have played leading roles in the women's movement and campaigns in the country. Unfortunately this isn't the model prevalent elsewhere and there has been a tension between the research output in the movement and that produced in academic institutions.

In sum

Alternative knowledge streams generated by movements and their institutions have

- ▣ Posed a challenge to state and market eg the questioning of pharma practices
- ▣ Produced evidence to challenge existing paradigms of development eg big dams
- ▣ Filled wide gaps in knowledge to counter the deliberate silences of the establishment as in the aftermath of the Bhopal disaster
- ▣ Informed policy --- as in health care initiatives and in recognising the role of health care institutions in responding to violence on women.
- ▣ Helped to ground science in social policy as evidenced in the transformation of science education in some states
- ▣ Contributed to the formation of alternative perspectives, the most evident example being in the women's movement.

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Case Study: Addressing domestic violence

- The context: The 1980s women's movement led to the formation of several organisations set up as centres for women in distress. The Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW) in Mumbai was among the earliest such institution.
- The research and why: First ever study, a qualitative one, of the nature of domestic violence and its incidence and spread.
- Meanwhile the critique of the gender bias in the care provided to women in public health institutions was building up. One such area was the treatment meted out to women survivors of violence..
- Recognising the health system as the first point of reference for women victims of violence, the setting up of hospital based support for survivors of domestic violence.
- Symptomatology of violence victims drawn up. Training of hospital staff to recognise sympathetically the signs and symptoms of women victims coming to the hospital.
- The sexual assault kit for scientific collection of evidence developed.

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FAOW brought into the public domain for the first time the issue of male violence on women especially within their homes. FAOW study blasted the myth that domestic violence is a feature of the poor and working class homes or that it prevailed only in certain communities and castes. With this evidence of the widespread and often hidden nature of domestic violence, the women's movement sought to redraw it as a public issue and not a private matter.

The treatment of women in public health system had come up in the movement in numerous ways: experience and accumulating evidence showed for instance, that forensic investigation in the case of rape and sexual assault and violence was rudimentary and based on a general assumption that the woman was somehow at fault. This led to the acquittal of the perpetrator even in the small number of cases that came to court on the ground of poor evidence. Other studies today show that a woman who is repeatedly abused at home is more prone to suicide. Helping her address the violence in the early stages is imperative



Case Study: Who pays for health care?

- By the mid late 1980s there was a growing concern about the visible deterioration in public health care services. Many young doctors saw a relevant role in setting up care institutions in relatively unreachable areas, as a means of extending public services and preventing the exploitation of the poor by private for-profit hospitals and nursing homes.
- There was a total lack of information on whether the government spending on care was adequate or whether people were buying expensive care. If the latter how expensive was health care?
- The Foundation for Research in Community Health (FRCH) an NGO research institution conducted the first ever study of out-of-pocket expenditure on health care.
- Several attempts were made to discredit the study.

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The results were stunning. While government spending on care had barely risen, private household expenditure almost 8 per cent of all consumption expenditure. Given that almost 60 per cent of Indian households lived at subsistence levels, this was a shocker.

Other findings

- Following this CEHAT undertook several studies on financing and health expenditure.
- The results of these studies amassed evidence to show how government policies had systematically encouraged expensive private care and whittled away at state-sponsored public care.
- All of this work is almost entirely in the Movement associated NGO institutions.

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This large body of work on health care has led to the health movement's campaign to ensure that the state does not withdraw from providing care to its citizens, It has also put pressure on the government and its bodies to develop regulatory machinery to monitor the quality of care and the fees charged.



By way of a conclusion

- People's movements and their organisation have also witnessed debates and explorations of new concepts and methodologies of research. This has led new theoretical understanding that informs later research.
- Unfortunately, typically movements do not systematically document these discussions.
- Clearly not all campaign related research will stand academic scrutiny.
- On the other hand, the vibrancy and the freshness of approach in movement cannot be denied.

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Going back to our earlier point

- Research in the academe follows a trajectory where it eventually contributes to knowledge formation and the growth of a discipline.
- But it may or may not influence and enrich policy
- Research in the movement has as its first objective, policy change. This it oftene does in functioning democracies.
- But they may or may not be integrated into the knowledge base of social science disciplines.
- We need to create bridges such that each influences the other and is influenced by it.

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Some ideas

- In the field of women's studies academic research within institutions and the research in the Movement has almost from the start worked in tandem and cooperatively.
- This model needs to be replicated.
- Further, investments need to be made to ensure that research in the movement reaches its full potential. Inputs in terms of methodology and in academic writing need to be made seriously and periodically.
- Other ideas: schemes to facilitate the participation of research students in the universities in campaigns .
- An innovative idea tried out in Brazil was to set up regular brainstorming sessions comprising research students and civil society activists to assist students in choosing topics for research.

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