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EDITORIAL

Revisiting Scientific Policy Resolution Debate

The Indian parliament passed the Scientific Policy Resolution, generally referred to as SPR, in 1958. Pt Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of a decade old yet the largest democracy, introduced the draft. As the 'Papers' were 'laid on the table' Nehru who also held the charge of External Affairs and Finance, began, "Sir, I beg to lay on the table a copy of Government of India, Scientific Policy Resolution No 131/CF/57, dated 4th March, 1958." He continued, "I shall read it out because we consider this resolution as an important one, defining our attitude to Science and Technology, generally". For him, the key to national prosperity, apart from the spirit of the people lay in three factors, technology, material and Capital. Pt. Nehru after introducing read the entire draft.

Importantly, he went on to emphasise that 'technology can only grow out of the study of science and its application.' While introducing the resolution Nehru articulated the aspirations and understanding of the political as well as scientific leadership of the newly born country: "The dominating feature of the contemporary world is the intense cultivation of science on a large scale, and its application to meet a country's requirement."

Pt. Nehru has been accused, by many scholars, of suggesting that propagation of 'scientific temper' is a 'passport to modernity' and a 'vaccine' against 'a wide variety of superstitions'. Rhetoric wrapped in an intellectual folio and dynamics of demagogy often blur the vision. Even if Nehru had suggested 'scientific temper' as a limited 'passport to modernity', it cannot be projected as a dreadful conspiracy against superstitions, which are held in high esteem by the scholars in the name of culture. Recent history shows that other leaders of the newly formed nations did not have even that 'narrow vision' to transform their societies.

Selective reading, to arrive at predetermined conclusions, distorts the discourse. Unfortunately, these scholars deliberately ignored all evidences of Nehru's deeper understanding of science-society relationship. For him science was not just an instrument to be used for material development or an eraser for removing superstitions. His understanding went beyond social or economic instrumentalism. Nehru believed that 'science has led to the growth and diffusion of culture to an extent, never possible before.' Here he refers to the pre-scientific-revolution era and points out that even in the West growth and diffusion of culture did not take place during that period and it was 'confined to a very small privileged minority of population'.

He was addressing the Parliament and, being the first prime minister of the country, which had been plundered for about 150 years by the imperial forces and was stripped of its riches, Nehru was concerned about providing 'services' for 'every member of the community' and it is out of a recognition of this possibility that the idea of welfare state has grown'. Of course it was his responsibility to 'radically alter man's material environment' which at that time in India was infested with drought, floods, poverty, epidemics, illiteracy, etc., but he was equally concerned about the existing 'worldviews' and therefore he added 'what is of still deeper significance, it (science) has provided new tools of thought and has extended man's mental horizon. It has thus influenced even the basic values of life and given civilization a new vitality and a new dynamism'. Nehru was conscious of the fact that propagation of science will cause clash of ideas, the same clash of ideas that French Revolution had caused in Europe.

The objective of SPR was to lay out a map for giving a new 'vitality' and 'dynamism' to civilization. It is remarkable that no dissenting note was moved by any members of the parliament. Instead the opposition endorsed it vehemently. During the discussion that followed, P K Nayar, on 1st May 1958, welcomed the resolution and said, "Sir, my object in raising this discussion is to focus the attention of the House on a matter of supreme importance for our country's future, namely, the necessity to pursue a correct and dynamic policy in regard to science and technology. The Scientific Policy Resolution of 4th March is,

indeed, very welcome. Although I consider that it is belated." There are not many examples when the opposition, in the house, used relatively more strong words in endorsing the papers laid by the ruling party. He went on to the extent of suggesting that the two five year plans failed to achieve the targets because the nation did not adopt SPR. He said, "Plans [five year plans] could not succeed to the extent desirable or to the extent we expected, because Government did not have a scientific policy on the basis of which they had to work the Plans".

Narayan Ganesh Goray another member of parliament welcomed the resolution and said, "I think that we are registering a break from this tradition [belief that this universe around us is an illusion) of irrational and unscientific thinking." Goray also raised the issue of comparative funding and asserted, "I do not want to quote figures, but if we compare the money that we are spending on various items, we shall have to admit that compared to what we are spending say on defence or other branches of the Government, what is going into the development of education and research is very meagre".

H N Mukerjee also began his intervention by endorsing the SPR, "Mr Speaker Sir, I welcome this Scientific Policy Resolution which has been placed before the house, and I welcome it even though I would have been happier if this kind of resolution had been formulated by the Government earlier. It is precisely worded, suggestive and important document, and we are happy that now there is a definite statement by the Government in regard to harnessing of science to the task of reconstruction of life and society in this country." Naushir Bharuch was apprehensive on a very different count and said, "It has been my experience that often resolutions are placed before the legislatures, which are very well worded and very good in their intentions, but subsequently nothing is done to implement them. I do hope that this resolution will not go the way so many other resolutions have gone".

The response of the opposition to the draft of the SPR was surprisingly supportive and thus Humayun Kabir of the ruling party concluded his speech with his remarks, "Finally, I would agree with my friends Shri Goray, Shri Mukherjee and Shri Nayar that we ought to have a more widespread scientific

outlook among the people". Goray in fact had made a forceful speech arguing that scientific pursuit was replaced in Indian culture with metaphysical exploration. Without mincing words he had said, "Having come to that conclusion [universe is not real], naturally, we considered that to go into the cause and effect of these surroundings of the material world was a futile effort, a futile pursuit. The intelligent and the wise people having withdrawn from this pursuit, the quacks and the charlatans had their day and that is why even today, when we are thinking in terms of this scientific policy resolution, we find lakhs of people gathering for the *Kumbh Mela* and the solar eclipse". These remarks if repeated today may create a considerable furore.

Remarkable as it is, the level of debate in the Indian parliament around the science and technology issues was intellectually rich, however, the silence of the anti-science lobbies was deafening. It cannot be argued that anti-science lobbies and groups did not exist in the country or they had withered away after India achieved independence. Such groups are not recent phenomena. Why was opposing SPR considered as 'politically incorrect'? The absence of opposition to SPR, during the parliamentary debate, could be attributed to three factors: firstly, the anti-science forces were politically very weak, secondly, they thought that well worded SPR will not have any impact on shaping the future society of the country, the social structures the consciousness and power balance will remain the same, and thirdly, reactionary forces do not have any problem with technology, they are selectively anti-science, and not all science. SPR had a strong undercurrent that promised technological development.

The debate that was triggered by SPR in the following decades was intense and multifaceted. It not only contributed to shaping the Indian society but also had a profound, acknowledged and unacknowledged, impact in other developing countries. In this context it is a proud privilege of the JST editorial team to carry a short message of former President of South Africa, Hon'ble Thabo Mbeki in this issue. For us it is an acknowledgement of contribution that India has made to generate a debate on Scientific Temper.

The editorial team has planned a number of special issues that will focus on status of science communication in developing countries. This special volume of *Journal of Scientific Temper* is devoted to documenting and analysing the contribution of Science Movements in India.

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GAUHAR RAZA