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Twelfth Congress of the All India Peoples Science Network

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ON December 20, 2008, the streets of Ranchi reverberated to the sounds of Jan Vigyan Zindabad, AIPSN Zindabad as over 2,500 activists of the All India Peoples Science Network marched to mark the opening of the twelfth All India Peoples Science Congress. The twelfth congress of the AIPSN also marked its 20th anniversary, after its formation in 1988 in Cannanore. Participants in the rally included over 600 delegates who had congregated in Ranchi from 24 states in the country, representing over 30 organisations and over 5,00,000 activists that are part of the AIPSN. It also included over 2,000 activists who had come to Ranchi from different parts of Jharkhand, led by an over 1,000 strong contingent from Dhanbad.

HARNESSING SCIENCE FOR THE PEOPLE

The rally culminated in the open session at the Gossner College grounds of Ranchi, that marked the opening of the congress. The session was conducted by Ashim Sircar, secretary of Jharkhand Gyan Vigyan Samiti, the hosts of the twelfth congress of the AIPSN. Welcoming the delegates, Amit Sengupta, general secretary of AIPSN, said that the congress was being held in the backdrop of several challenges that are starting to affect the lives of common people across the world. The world food crisis a year back has been followed by a global economic meltdown. While countries try to bail out big business and capitalist banks, global capital will try to pass on the burden of the crisis on to the people. He said that this crisis has been brought about due to the pursuance of neoliberal economic policies across the globe and had been predicted by many, including the Peoples Science Movement. As the crisis deepens, more and more people are being forced to compete for less and less, thus creating conditions for communal and fundamentalist forces to divide people on the basis of religion. The challenge for us today is to help maintain the unity of the working people on one hand and to pose alternatives through the use of advances in Science and Technology, that address the real needs of working people.

M P Parameswaran, former president of AIPSN, in his address retraced the route of decentralised democracy in India and spoke of experiments in decentralisation in the three Left led states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. While speaking of the experience of Peoples Plan Campaign in Kerala, he lamented the total absence of the same in Hindi heartlands of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan. He appealed to the Peoples Science Movement to take forward to much larger constituencies its experience on decentralised planning and peoples participation. Prabir Purkayastha, from the Delhi Science Forum, spoke about the need to define development in terms of its ability to make a real difference in the lives of common people. He said that the agenda of development has been hijacked by global capital, and today it means immense prosperity for a few and increasing misery for the vast majority of people. He warned against creating a false contradiction between science and technology on one hand and inclusive development on the other, and said that the former needs

to be harnessed in a way so that its full potential can be controlled by people and utilised in their own interest.

The session was also addressed by J S Majumdar, one of the founders of the All India Peoples Science Network in 1988, as the then general secretary of the Federation of Medical Representatives Association of India (FMRAI). He spoke about the special needs of Jharkhand and its unique situation. Jharkhand is one state in India where whole families continue to migrate to other regions to look for work. While Jharkhand is one of the best endowed in the country in terms of mineral and natural resources and the presence of heavy industries and science and technology institutions, it is also one of the poorest in the country. He spoke about the need to challenge the entrenched feudal structure in the state as a fundamental requirement to change the conditions of the people. He also spoke about the need to understand and address the genuine concerns of adivasis and other working people, who are opposing a model of development that leads to further pauperisation and displacement of the local people. The open session was also addressed by veteran trade union leader of Jharkhand, A K Roy, and Dayamani Barla, activist and leader of adivasi struggles in the state. C P Narayanan, president of AIPSN, in conclusion, said that the Peoples Science Movement is uniquely placed to bridge the gap between the promise of science and its present situation where it is largely used as an instrument of power by the ruling classes. He expressed the hope that the twelfth congress would help the AIPSN chart out a course that would be designed to do this work. The cultural troupe of the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS) also presented a colourful skit titled Gyan Vigyan ki Rail which depicted the need and the potential to use the power of learning to change the circumstances and the conditions of ordinary people.

Interactive Discussions □ Sharing of Experiences

In the next two days of the congress, over six hundred delegates divided themselves into separate sessions that deliberated on the eight sub themes of the congress: science popularisation; health; rural technology, enterprises and self help groups (SHGs); exclusions and marginalisation; agrarian crisis and sustainability; education and literacy; decentralised governance and entitlements; and environment and climate change. The discussions were structured into eight short sub-plenary sessions where presentations focused on the AIPSNs perspective, experience and future strategy in the respective areas. These were interspersed with 30 interactive workshops, in which specific issues related to each sub-theme were discussed in detail. A special feature of this congress was a focus on concrete experiences within the AIPSN and their sharing with others. More than 50 written papers were submitted, and the AIPSN shall compile them for distribution among member organisations. Those presenting in the sessions prepared written papers, thus also initiating the work of documentation of the rich experience that the peoples science movement has gained over the past two decades. Another unique feature of the delegate sessions was that each session was preceded by a choral song prepared by the Kala Jatha group of the Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti. Each song was specially prepared to express the thematic content of that particular session.

Senior activists and experts who spoke at the different plenaries and workshops included Suneet Chopra (All India Agricultural Workers Union), T Jayaraman (Tata Institute of Social Sciences), Raminika Gupta, V Venkatachalam (director general, CAPART), Vijender Sharma

(Democratic Teachers Front), Ashok Aggarwal, Sabyasachi Chatterjee (Indian Institute of Astrophysics), K K Krishnakumar, Amitava Guha, D Raghunandan, Asha Mishra, T Gangadharan, M K Prasad, Aniruddha Das, R S Dahiya, Dinesh Abrol, K Sashidharan, Manoj Kulkarni, Vinod Raina, Vivek Monteiro, etc.

The different sessions deliberated on the movement's diverse experiences and attempted to evolve some future directions. A wide range of discussions were held in packed halls and classrooms on diverse topics such as: the Right to Education Bill; the National Rural Health Mission; Medicines and Patents policies; strategies to diversify and deepen work with SHGs and in setting up of rural enterprises; experiences of the SAMATA network of the peoples science movement; the AIPSN's nationwide campaign on climate change and global warming; experiences within the movement on working with marginalised sections such as dalits, adivasis and minorities; experiences in different states in conducting anti-superstition programmes and in publishing science magazines; the proposed campaign in 2009 on the International Year of Astronomy; experiences in peoples planning and decentralised governance etc. The way the congress was structured allowed a large number of activists to present their experiences and suggestions making the congress perhaps the most participatory and interactive ever.

The venue reverberated in the evenings to the sounds of cultural presentations. One day was devoted to performances from Jharkhand while the second day saw performances by different member organisations of the AIPSN. The performances captured the rich cultural and social diversity of the country and depicted the ability of the peoples science movement to capture this diversity.

The venue was also dotted with colourful stalls where member organisations displayed their publications, products made by SHGs and rural enterprises and exhibited the work that they are involved in. Exhibitions were put up all around the venue and an exhibition on science films ran continuously in one hall.

A Memorable □ Congress

Kashinath Chatterjee conducted the closing plenary of the congress, which, while bidding farewell to all the delegates, expressed the resolve to take forward the work of the peoples science movement. The congress resolved to strengthen the ideological bonds that bind the partners of the AIPSN together by forging common programmes and by increasing the capability within individual organisations to intervene in diverse issues that now form part of the mandate of the AIPSN. The congress committed itself to building and strengthening the ongoing campaign of the AIPSN on Planet Earth, Development and Sustainability. Delegates at the closing plenary were also introduced to the new office bearers of the AIPSN. A 21 member executive committee was elected by the general council, which also re-elected C P Narayanan as president, Amit Sengupta as general secretary and D Raghunandan as treasurer. Also elected were Sabyasachi Chatterjee and Komal Srivastava as vice presidents, and Satyajit Chakravarty and Joginder Walia as joint secretaries.

Three resolutions were adopted by the congress. The first was an appeal from all delegates to the Jharkhand government to immediately initiate measures to hold Panchayati Raj elections in

the state. The second was a resolve to carry out a countrywide campaign against the practice of sex-selective abortions. Finally, the congress resolved to build a national programme that explores the multi-cultural heritage of our country, including the heritage of science and technology that has drawn and nourished itself from a large diversity of sources.

Delegates returning from the congress took back two abiding memories. The first was the participation of over 2000 activists from different districts of Jharkhand in the opening rally and open session. They came to the congress after traveling all through the night, in harsh cold and foggy weather. Yet they brightened up the congress with their slogans, their traditional cultural performances and their commitment to the movement. Their presence showed that the AIPSN is on the right path in trying to build a peoples movement. Finally, delegates will take back the memory of numerous volunteers from Jharkhand BGVS, helped by some volunteers from other states, who ensured that the congress functioned with clockwork precision. It was a huge challenge to organise the congress in Ranchi amidst financial and organisational constraints. Ranchi was chosen as a venue as it was the state capital, though the organisational strength of BGVS Jharkhand lay in other parts of the state like Dhanbad. The admirable conduct of the congress is a tribute to the hard work and dedication of activists of the state.