

Social Movements in India: Role of Caste and Religion

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Abstract

Social movements are thus clearly different from historical movements, tendencies or trends. Social movements primarily take the form of non-institutionalised collective political action which strives for political and /or social change. While India has witnessed many such movements over the centuries, it is only recently that scholars have begun to study them in depth. The term 'social movement' gained currency in European languages in the early nineteenth century. This was the period of social upheaval. A social movement is a deliberate collective endeavour to promote direction and by any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution or withdrawal into 'utopian' community. Social movements are thus clearly different from historical movements, tendencies or trends. It is important to note, however, that such tendencies and trends, and the influence of the unconscious or irrational factors in human behaviour, may be of crucial importance in illuminating the problems of interpreting and explaining social movement.

The present paper attempts to assess the social movements and Indian citizens the excluded population and its performance in creating durable and sustainable movements in the country.

Keywords: Social movement, Social change, Community, Human Behaviour, Violence

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INTRODUCTION

A social movement's commitment to change and the raison d'être of its organization are founded upon the conscious volition, normative commitment to the movement's aims or beliefs, and active participation on the part of the

followers or members. This particular characterization of social movement in terms of volition and normative commitment is endorsed by something approaching a consensus among leading scholars in this field. Heberle, for example, conceives of these belief-systems as an

expression of the collective will of the people among whom they are accepted. He is emphatic that it is the element of volition that makes the beliefs socially effective. It is the conscious volition of individuals acting collectively that brings about the embodiment of ideologies in social movements.

Objectives, ideology, programmes, leadership, and organisation are important components of social movements. They are interdependent, influencing each other. However, Ranajit Guha's warning needs to be kept in mind. He points out that though these components are found in all types of movements or insurgencies, including the so called 'spontaneous' rebellions, their forms vary—from very unstructured to well organised. He challenges the contention of some historians who opine that peasant insurgencies were spontaneous and lacked political consciousness and organisation. Such insurgencies lacked, 'neither in leadership nor in aim nor even in some rudiments of a programme, although none of these attributes could compare in maturity or sophistication with those of the historically more advanced movements of the twentieth century'.

More often than not, political scientists and sociologists do not make a distinction between 'social' and 'political'

movements. Sociologists assume, and rightly so, that social movements also include those movements which have a clear objective of bringing about political change. Two volumes on social movements (1978), edited by the sociologist M. S. A. Rao, include two such studies: the Naxalite movement which aims at capturing state power, and the backward caste movement for asserting a higher status. Rudolf Heberle (1951) argues that all movements have political implications even if their members do not strive for political power. Political scientists, too, are not inhibited in using the term 'social movement'. The book on social movements by Wilkinson, published under the series *The Concept of Political Science*, is suggestive of this approach. It may also be mentioned that the Committee of Political Science on the trend report (constituted by the ICSSR), commissioned this study on 'social movement'. This indicates the approach of political science towards the subject.

In the mid-1960s, a group of political scientists addressed themselves to the question: Why has India witnessed an explosion of violence on such an unprecedented scale (Aiyar 1966). They disapproved of agitations. One of them argued, 'One can understand, if not justify the reasons which led the people in a

dependent country to attack and destroy everything which was a symbol or an expression of foreign rule. But it is very strange that people should even now behave as if they continue to live in a dependent country ruled by foreigners' (Phadke 1966: 52). They blamed the opposition parties, leaders and trade unions for instigating the masses to direct action (Aiyar 1966; Srinivasan 1966).

ROLE OF CASTE AND RELIGION

The effect of this deliberate assumption of weakness, distance or avoidance, was to induce in the agent of authority temporary powerlessness. Essentially, by using these rituals of avoidance, the structural positions of the 'strong' authority and the 'weak' community it governed were temporarily reversed. Furthermore, these ritual reversals occurred not necessarily at calendrical transitions but when groups felt that 'disorder prevailed', when groups had a grievance against an authority, or when there was a crisis of relations. What these groups were doing by adopting a weak position was to create a field, a kind of ritual zone which enabled the protesters to reorder relations to their liking.

there is an ongoing difficulty in organising at the local level, seemingly impossible obstacles of uniting people across caste lines to confront hitherto unchallenged rich farmer dominance, entrenched both in

open crude form which gives them the power of police plus goondas to beat and kill those who challenge them and in more sophisticated ways in which the powers and patronage of sugar cooperatives, village societies, educational institutions and family-caste ties are used to tempt, corrupt and split efforts to unite against them.

TRIBAL MOVEMENT

In recent years, with the rise of the international movement of indigenous people in the post-modernist phase, the focus has shifted to self-determination or self-management of the resources, identity, and ethnicity. The environmental movement has focused on communities in situ, their relationship to resources, their rapport with nature, their worldview. Therefore with the growing concern for environment, particularly bio-diversity, pluralism, ethnicity, and identity—all are now interrelated—the tribal movements are assuming a new character. They are all now becoming more and more identity-based movements, with various issues concerning control over resources etc. being considered as ramifications of this central issue.

The real tragedy of the tribal people of this area was that their chiefs, alienated by their conversion to Hinduism, and the English administrators, horn and bred in

the tradition of tribal ownership of land or idea of peasant proprietorship. That was why the former brought in non-tribal settlers and the latter complex administrative machinery run by an unsympathetic society. Against these the tribal people found no remedy except unrest and violence. It becomes clear that from two sides their traditional society was being undermined: custom was being undermined by contract, a barter economy by a money economy they had not yet learned to handle, divisions of the land determined by tribal custom were replaced by a landlord-tenant relationship, and tribal solidarity was being destroyed from within by the pressures of the British raj.

Several Adivasi groups have demanded more and more welfare programmes including reservation of jobs in government offices. They submitted memoranda and issued press statements, but there has been no mobilisation of tribals on a large scale. These issues attain prominence in elections (Mathur 1982, 1983). However, we have to examine the reasons why such efforts have not succeeded in sustaining political movements.

At least those who led the rebellion foresaw in victory not only economic relief but increased political power and an opportunity to improve the rank of the

Santal. The goal of rank improvement is suggested by a number of ritual practices emulative of Hindu customs which accompanied the rebellion, such as putting on the sacred thread, ritual use of sun-dried rice and oil and vermilion, and purification with cow dung.

The Adivasi Ekta Parishad (AEP), which formally came into existence and became active after the Rio Summit in 1993, was led by Adivasi intellectuals from the four western states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. AEP seeks to assert Adivasi identity through a cultural revival movement for 'self-respect' and 'self-esteem'

DALIT MOVEMENTS

The SCs constitute 16 percent of India's population. They numbered around 1,680 lakh in 2001. Thirty-six percent of them are workers. Among the workers, 48 per cent are agricultural labourers. Many of them are engaged in traditional occupations, such as, flaying, scavenging. The SCs are scattered all over the country, though their number is insignificant in the predominantly tribal states of the northeast frontier. They are not concentrated in very large numbers in particular districts or talukas either.

It is more likely that the theory of a separate racial origin of untouchables in the various simultaneous 'Adi' movements

was derived from British ethnographic classifications and notion that the caste system originated through encounters between Dravidian and Aryan races. These radical theories had gained widespread publicity, especially with the various censuses. Acquaintance of the urban untouchables with Christian missionaries, who were propagating the concept of the original races of India and the theory of the genesis of the caste system among an Aryan minority, was another significant source of these ideas.

A major anti-untouchability movement was launched by Dr. Ambedkar in the 1920s in Maharashtra. This has continued in different forms till today. Though the movement is primarily rooted in Maharashtra, it has spread to different parts of the country and acquired an all-India character. Dr. Ambedkar emerged as the leader of the untouchables of the country. During the 1920s, the Mahars launched unsuccessful satyagrahas against untouchability in Maharashtra. Ambedkar saw the possibility of advancement for the untouchables through the use of political means to achieve social and economic equality' with the highest classes in modern society.

For most rural members of the Scheduled Castes who participated in it, the Adi-Dharm was an entirely novel form of

association. It presented a complete contrast to the closed and parochial society they had always known, and as such it stimulated hopes and generated allegiance. But it contained a fatal flaw. For, although its ideological vision spoke of a united *quam*, the organisational reality gave evidence of sharp differences between the movement's educated progressive leadership and the illiterate traditional following, between *jullunder*, *Hoshiarpur*, and *Lyallpur* regions, and between the *Chamar* and *Chuhra* castes. The organisational structure was firm enough to obscure these differences during the initial years, but in time the tensions increased, and the precarious unity showed signs of breakage.

BACKWARD CASTE/CLASS MOVEMENTS

The main form of political mobilisation is the electoral process. Because of their numerical strength they have successfully increased their position in the state assemblies. Christophe Jaffrelot calls their rise 'India's silent revolution' (2003). The backward castes rarely resorted to large-scale direct action for asserting their demands. Many of them undertook social reform which generally did not involve confrontation with the higher castes, though in a few cases social reform did lead to clashes with the higher castes. They

asserted their demands for higher social status by submitting memoranda and petitions to the census commissioners.

Various backward castes organised caste associations for social reforms and the struggle for political power (Rudolph and Rudolph 1960). The Yadavas formed not only district-level but also state- and all-India-level caste associations (Rao 1979). It was the same with the Marathas and the Malis of Maharashtra (Omvedt 1976), and the Kolis of Gujarat (Shah 1975). These associations were loose and ad hoc. They organised conferences, passed resolutions and occasionally submitted memoranda.

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

The International Women's Decade, 1975-85, has provided an impetus to the growth of social science literature on women in general—their status in society—and issues related to gender-based discrimination and inequality in particular. Gender studies are now on the priority agenda of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the University Grants Commission (UGC). A number of important universities have Centres for Women's Studies.

Ideologically, cultural imperialism has introduced the notion of female inferiority which had no part in Indian culture, where female power and its containment were stressed. Although females were

segregated in the upper castes into the domestic sphere, this separation did not imply an inferior evaluation of the domestic, since that arena was crucial to the maintenance of caste purity. The inferiority notion adds a derogatory component to the gender ideology, serving to worsen women's position. It also makes for a degraded position for women abroad when added to the imperialist ideology of Western racial superiority; for, the context of imperialism creates a notion not only of women's inferiority to men, but also of Indian women's inferiority to Western women.

The effort to give women a new sense of identity beyond family, caste and religion needs to grapple with the problem of cultural identity and continuity. It is comparatively easy to point out what has been oppressive and destructive of women in our cultural heritage. But what the protest values and the humanist values of our cultural traditions are, also need to be answered if shallowness is to be avoided.

SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS AND WOMEN

The role of the AIWC in the struggle for the liberation of women is negative. In fact, through its programmes the Parishad (AIWC) strengthens the traditional role of a woman as a wife, housekeeper and mother. And despite wishful thinking of

the moderate thinkers like Gandhi, woman's role as a wife is not considered to be equal to man's by women themselves. She is asked to perform some of the functions outside the four walls to assist her husband rather than to raise her head, to develop her dignity as a human being.... They [such women's organisations] have become instruments in spreading an ideology which assigns inferior role to women. They strengthen revivalist values which are oppressive to women. These organisations have lost the zeal even to fight against oppressive social customs.

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

When women's groups condemned the State and society they were, in fact, saying that it is not nature but human society, its laws and institutions which have created hierarchies between men and women, class and caste, that rape is not a random unpremeditated act but a form of violence by the powerful on those who are powerless, poor and disadvantaged'

As long as the attitudes of the establishment remain anti-poor, anti-minority and anti women.... The laws which have been given for the asking and which confer excessive powers to the state need serious requesting. Perhaps the movement has been short-sighted in

raising such demands in the first place and falling right into the manipulative schemes of the government. The women's movement is too insignificant at this moment to monitor the implementation of these laws and prevent their misuse.

CONCLUSION

In fact, the development of the labour movement in India suggests that the origins and development of trade unions in general calls for political, rather than a specifically social or cultural, explanation. The development of trade unions was largely conditioned by, perhaps dependent upon, the willingness of employers and the state to tolerate them. It neither signified the development of a particular stage of class consciousness nor did it anticipate the rise of socialism. The quotient of capitalist tolerance for labour organization has usually been determined by the outcome of the changing relations between workers, trade unions and the state. Significantly, it has depended upon the political leverage which workers were able to gain upon state power, and thereby, through political pressure and negotiation, to raise the threshold of capitalist tolerance.

It is evident that in the absence of formal recognition the unions have to continuously use the strike to assert their

right to exist. Only a close observer can detect this function of the strike. Since concrete issues are invariably picked up by the union to fight for recognition, these issues can easily be attributed an importance they do not possess, and the real basis of the struggle missed out. This explains why official statistics do not attribute even a single strike to the struggle for recognition.

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