

Political and Social Movements



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Introduction

Social movements are universal found in all societies in the past and present. Their nature, scope and frequency vary. In the early period of political formations social movements shaped the state – its functions, responsibilities as well as accountability and also its political boundary. They also played an important role in distribution of power among various segments in society. In modern times they have played a very important role in challenging the Church and feudal authority, foreign rules and authoritarian regimes. French and Russian revolutions, Indian freedom movement, various peasant movements have profound impact on our life. The fascist movement in Germany, Islamic movement in Middle east, Hindutva movement in India or Tamilian movement in Sri Lanka have not only influenced political system but also value system of the people. Their legacies influence us all in a variety of ways. In the contemporary times their occurrences are in all the states. They often though not always play decisive role in all political systems – democratic and authoritarian. They make and unmake political institutions, norms of social and political behaviour and also nature of regimes. Social and political conflicts as well as expectations of the people get reflected in movements. Understanding of social movements is important not only for all those who are dissatisfied with the present social and political order but also to those who

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are contented with the system to understand fragility of the political institutions and their future. Any socially sensitive person, no matter one is activist or academic, one is sympathetic or critic of the political system cannot ignore social movements of the time. Our understanding of nature of political institutions and their working, nature of Constitution, political decisions and legislation remain incomplete without understanding social movements. We will have a better understanding of the Directive Principles and Fundamental Rights of the Indian Constitutions, if we carefully analyse political processes which affected Indian freedom movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Similarly various land reform legislations of the 1950s have antecedents in peasant movements in different parts of the country. In short our understanding of political institutions and processes remain incomplete without the understanding of social movements. The study of social movements offers “a way to blend humanistic and social scientific concerns. The humanist’s concern with historical understanding and values and the social scientist’s concern with using general principles to systematically order empirical data can be joined.” Factual knowledge of these events is required if we are to know how to interpret, order and compare them. In this unit objective is to understand the definition of social movements, their comparison with political movements, as well as the importance and components of social movements.

Meaning and Definition

In common parlance, media and political circles the term ‘social movement’ is often used loosely conveying different meanings. Sometimes it is used to show a historical trend like modernisation or urbanisation. The term is also used to indicate a set of activities undertaken by one or many organisations to bring ‘change’ in society such as education movement launched by the government department of education for starting schools and enrolling students. It is also used for collective action of a segment of society. The phrase social movement is in vogue among political leaders and social activists to camouflage their political activities.

However, the term ‘social movement’ gained currency in European languages in the early nineteenth century. This was the period of social upheaval. Church and authority the absolute power of the monarchs were challenged. People were demanding democratic rights and asserting for freedom and equality. The political leaders and authors who used the term ‘social movement’ were concerned with the emancipation of the exploited classes and the creation of a new society by changing property relationships. Their ideological orientation is reflected in their definition. Hence there is no one definition of ‘social movement.’ Scholars and social activists have different ideological positions on political system and expected social change. And even those who share the same meaning of social change often differ in their views on strategy and path to

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bring change. But one thing is certain among all conceptualisation of social movement i.e. collective action. It is about the mobilisation of the people for political action. However, collective action as such is not synonymous of social movement. Action of a mob in streets is though a collective behaviour, it cannot be called a social movement. For instance when a mob at the railway station stops a train for misbehaviour of railway staff or prefer to travel without ticket can not be called social movement. Nor riots between two ethnic groups or act of looting food grains from shops or destruction of public property can be called so. These acts by themselves are not social movements. They may be a part – one of the programmes of the social movement. We do not call these collective behaviour as social movements because they are often impulsive and do not aim at bringing social change. They are reaction to a particular situation. However, when they are engineered as a programme of the larger agenda for social change — challenging or even perpetuating power of a particular group for status quo — then rioting may become a part of the social movement. For instance those who desire to establish dominance of a community engineer riots to create insecurity and thereby ‘community consciousness’ against other community. In such a case riot is not an impulsive isolated phenomenon. Or in several cases social movements emerge from riots as they breed political activities to sustain emotion of the people. Collective action for bringing ‘social change’ is an important dimension of definition of social movements. Of course the collective action for maintaining or not disturbing social change as perceived by others is also social movement. Such collective action for status quo may be called counter-movement. Moreover, there is no one meaning of social change. This is evident from the following sample definitions of social movements used in social science literature.

- Paul Wilkinson defines social movement as “ a deliberate collective endeavour to promote change in any 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”.
- According to Herbert Blumer. “Social movements can be viewed as collective enterprises to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in the condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living.”

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- For Doug McAdam, social movements are “those organized efforts, on the part of excluded groups, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to noninstitutional forms of political participation.”
- Social movements are, according to Sidney Tarrow , “ collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities”.

Note three important elements of the above definition. They are:

- (1) collective action;
- (2) social change and
- (3) common purpose.

Strictly speaking, therefore, agitation or protests are not social movements. Because, they more often than not, do not aim at bringing social change. They do not conceive that. They are reaction to a particular situation. But at the same time, more often than not, a social movement develops in course of time, and it begins with protest or agitation which may not have conceived the notion of political change. For instance, when students of the engineering college in Gujarat protested against the Mess bill, it was a relatively spontaneous act. But that protest led to the Nav Nirman Andolan of 1974 in Gujarat. Moreover, a particular collective action may be only an agitation for some scholars, and a movement for others, depending upon the level of analysis and the perspective. For example, the collective action of a section of society demanding the formation of linguistic states in the ‘fifties was viewed as an ‘agitation’ by some and as a ‘movement’ by others. Similarly, though riots are not social movements, they are more often than not part of ongoing movements.

Social Movements and Political Movements

More often than not, ‘social’ and ‘political’ movements are treated more or less the same — except those collective efforts which are mainly and so far confined to personal salvation in relation to supernatural power and do not relate to social structure and within as well as inter-community relationship. But the same movement when it enters in the arena of social relationship affecting public domain it gets character of political movement. For instance community’s collective struggle for sanskritisation is though social movement, it also challenges existing power relationship as community asserts not only higher status but also compete with those who dominate. Backward caste movement is a case in point. Rudolf Heberle (1951) argues

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that all movements have political implications even if their members do not strive for political power. However, some scholars like Andre Gunder Frank and Marta Fuentes (1987) make a distinction between social and political movements. According to them, the former does not strive for state power. Social movements 'seek more autonomy rather than state power'. There is a difference between social and political power, and the latter is located in the state alone. According to these authors, the objective of social movement is social transformation. The participants get mobilised for attaining social justice. This thesis is problematic. Of course, society and state, and therefore social and political powers are not one and the same. But to differentiate between social power and political power in the contemporary world is to gloss over reality, and ignore the complexities of political processes. Politics is not located only in the political parties. The movements involving issues concerning the sense of justice or injustice have political implications. Social movement involves any collective struggle aiming at bringing social transformation questioning prevailing hegemony and dominance, property relations, power relations, assertion for identity against the perceived adversaries and resisting dominance; struggle for justice, involves capturing or influencing political authority, though it may not be on the immediate agenda. Therefore, in the present context, the difference between 'social' and 'political' movement is merely semantic.

Extra Constitutional or Non Constitutional Path

Social movements follow 'institutional' as well as non-institutional path. The former may be called constitutional and the latter is considered as extra-constitutional or illegal path. Extra-constitutional path is also called 'direct action' against the state or government. The action which is legally permitted and 'widely accepted as binding in society or part of society' (Johnson 1966) at a given point of time is institutionalised action. Such actions include petitioning, voting in elections, and fighting legal battles in courts of law. They themselves are not called as social movements as they are part of institutional mechanism and functioning. But when these methods are accompanied by other collective actions and are used as tactics they become a part of the movements. According to Rajni Kothari, 'direct action can be defined as an extra constitutional political technique that takes the form of a group action, is aimed at some political change directed against the government in power' (1960).

A line between legal and illegal or constitutional and extra-constitutional is very thin and ticklish. It is a matter of interpretation of law and constitution. Those who are in authority or

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support the status quo can interpret a particular action as illegal; but those who strive for social change may interpret the same action as legal. For many, violent means is illegal therefore not permitted. The term 'extra-constitutional' can be a matter of interpretation. Non-institutionalised collective action takes several forms, such as, protest, agitation, strike, satyagraha, gherao, riot, etc.

Importance of Social Movements

Many political philosophers and leaders conceive the ideal political system and social order. They plead for a necessity and sometimes inevitability of social movements including a revolutionary movement to oppose the 'present' political regime and the system and to establish the system which they consider 'ideal' and perfect capable to resolve the problems of society. So once the 'new' or ideal social order is established social movements have no place to exist. What at the most requires is changes in institutional mechanism to resolve conflict that may arise. They find social movements not only redundant but also detrimental in the ideal social order. Often such movements are looked upon either as 'counter revolutionary' and reactionary and/or impulsive, and naïve and/or irresponsible. In this view dissent is not appreciated and even not tolerated.

This is what happened in soviet Russia after the October Revolution in 1917. During the 1950s and 1960s not only several leaders of the ruling party but also political scientists in India looked down strikes, demonstrations and mass movements as disruptive and therefore 'illegal'. 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'. The assumption that the ideal political system is ipso facto capable of resolving all conflict in society is simplistic. Such view is dangerous for democratic social order. There is not, and cannot be an end of history; the final destination and fool proof system. This is not a static concept of political system and society. Each society has its own contradictions. The system may resolve some issues but also can generate new areas of conflict among different segments of society. The leaders and the members of their class or social group leading the movements are likely to occupy seat of power and reap benefits. That situation generates conflict between the beneficiaries and the deprived. Moreover, those who dominate and occupy seat of power tend to claim to have ultimate and all wisdom for the 'good

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of society'. There is a tendency among the political leaders not to step down from power. Sometimes they feel that without them others would harm society. Such a tendency leads to intolerance towards dissent and opposition. Dissent is a spirit of democracy. And social movement is one form of organised dissent.

Social movements provides a possibility for articulation of grievances and problems. They bring pressure on the state, keep check over the authority needed for healthy democracy. Social movement is way of people's/segment's collective politics to express their aspirations and priorities. Without understanding politics of the people we cannot understand complexities and dynamics of political system.

Components of Social Movements

Social movements have five main components: Objectives, ideology, programmes, leadership, and organisation. They are interdependent, influencing each other. As discussed above emotional outcry of group of people in the form of crowd is not social movement.

Social movement is related to social and political change. So it has an immediate and long term objective. The immediate objective may be to resolve a particular issue or protest against the decision of the authority. But that collective action does not end there. It takes up other issues and proceed to a long term objective of changing authority, power relationship, dominance and political system. For the long term objective the movement evolves strategy for action. It gives priorities to certain programmes over others, and also focuses on a particular direction, mobilises certain groups. The path of action is closely related to or get evolved with the notion of the desired social change.

It involves a set of ideas, propositions and values that enable to perceive in particular manner social reality. The set of ideas and ideals form ideology. The ideology is not necessarily well-knit, nor always preconceived. In some cases ideology directs the movement and in other cases ideology gets evolved and directs the movement. Leadership plays important role in articulation of ideology and evolving strategies for action. Social movement involves mobilisation of people who in course of the process identify with the objective of the movement. They share values and begin to share perception of common understanding of social reality. For their mobilisation and to sustain their participation, the leader(s) evolve different programmes. This also requires some kind of organisation. The organisation may be loose or well formed with centralised or decentralised decision-making system for launching programmes.

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Neither of these components are a priori and static. They evolve. Their nature and function vary from movement to movement. In some movements they are found in rudimentary form whereas in others they are fairly well developed. These components — leadership, organisation and also ideology do get changed in the course of the movement. In some cases, even the objectives change and move in different direction than the earlier ones.

Conclusion

The term social movement evolved and began to be used during the early nineteenth century. It was a period of social unrest. There is no precise definition of social movement. But all scholars who have studied social movements do emphasise collective action and mobilisation of the people. Social movements strive for social change. Objectives, ideology, leadership, programmes and organisation are the major components of social movements. They are the spirit of democracy and dynamics of society.