

## Approaches to Social Movements



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### **Introduction**

Social movements mainly take the form of non-institutionalised collective political action which struggle for political and /or social transformation. In India, these movements occurred since past time. The phrase 'movement' is often used differently by different social activists, political leaders and scholars. Some academics use the term 'movement' interchangeably with 'organisation' or 'union'. Other social researchers use it to mean a historical trend or tendency. Some claim to launch movements by issuing press statements on public issues.

'Social movement' grown in European languages in the beginning of nineteenth century. This was the period of social disturbance. The political leaders and writers were concerned with the

liberation of exploited classes and the creation of a new society by changing value systems as well as institutions and/or property relationships. Their philosophical orientation is reproduced in their description. Nevertheless, since the early 1950s, various scholars have provided detail account of the notion of social movements. According to social theorists, 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.

Facts do not speak for themselves. They have to be collected, arranged, categorised and interpreted. One collects particular kind of 'facts' and another observer collects different kinds of 'facts' of the same event. Both give different meanings and arrive at different conclusions of the same event. There is no one way of looking social facts and processes. The same movements can be constructed and interpreted in many different ways, depending upon theoretical perspective from which one looks at the phenomena. Theoretical perspective or approach guides the selection of facts, their arrangement, classification and interpretation. One gets better understanding of the process with more systematic and rigorous perspective than casual and unsystematic way of looking the phenomena. There are different approaches to study social movements. But at the same time we should remember that empirical processes are not neat to fit into any one approach. Social and political processes are complex and have their own logic. Moreover, no approach is in pure form. There are variations among the followers of the same theoretical perspective. There are different perspectives among the Marxists and also among the liberals. What is provided here is a broad framework, as guide of a particular approach.

## **Marxist Approach**

Scholars following the Marxist approach to analyse various social movements and those who are involved in social movements claiming to be Marxist are primarily interested in bringing about revolutionary change in society. According to the Marxist approach conflict is the central core of social movements. There are different kinds of conflicts in society. Some conflicts are between individuals for personal power, style of functioning, between the communities—social, ethnic, religious, regional etc.— and other conflicts are around material interest and domination of one over the others. The nature of the non-class conflict varies from society to society and can be resolved through negotiations and institutional mechanism. Sometimes though not always such conflict is in a garb of 'class'/economic conflict. That is, economic conflict of different classes belonging to separate communities take the form of ethnic conflict. Class conflict is located in economic structure of society, in-built in the production and distribution system. It is around

domination and subjugation between the classes. Those who own means of production dominate social and political system. In all forms of class society specific form of production predominates, which influences other forms of social relations. Ralph Miliband observes, "Class domination can never be purely 'economic', or purely 'cultural': it must always have a strong and pervasive 'political' content, not least because the law is crystallized form which politics assumes in providing the necessary sanction and legitimation of all forms of domination. In this sense, 'politics' sanctions what is 'permitted', and therefore 'permits' the relations between the members of different and conflicting classes, inside and outside their 'relation of production'."

Those who own and control the means of production take away the surplus from those who produce. They accumulate surplus for their end and expand and perpetuate their control over the society. The former may be feudal lord in feudal system or industrial bourgeois in capitalist system. Antagonistic interests between the propertied and labour classes are inherent in a class-based society that generates contradictions. The former use the coercive as well as persuasive power of the state, and also other institutions, including religion, culture, education, mass media etc, to perpetuate their hegemony in society and to control the exploited classes. The latter resist, protest and occasionally revolt or launch organised and collective action against the dominance of the propertied classes. It is their effort to bring about revolutionary political change by overthrowing the dominant classes in power. In short, class struggle is the central driving force for resistance. Such collective actions take the form of social movements.

Though to Marxists, structural causes of conflicting economic interests are central, number of Marxist scholars have begun to pay attention to ethnic, religious and other cultural factors. Some of them have begun to analyse the nature of the consciousness of exploited classes. According to Marxist scholars, members of the same class not only have common interests vis-a-vis other classes, but also share a common consciousness regarding their position in society that they share common interests. This facilitates their collective action against the ruling classes and state.

They assert that the parliamentary democracy in capitalist state protects the interests of the haves and facilitates exploitation of the labour. Hence the conflict between the haves and have-nots cannot be resolved through institutional mechanism. A.R. Desai argued in the 1960s that civil and democratic rights of the underprivileged were increasingly violated in capitalist system. The state failed to provide basic human rights of the vast majority of the exploited classes. The have-nots in rural areas were deprived of their livelihood natural resources of land, forest and water. People resist against anti-people measures of the state and dominant classes. Through various organised and unorganised struggles the poor demand for the protection of their basic rights. He asserted, "The parliamentary form of government, as a political institutional device, has proved to be inadequate to continue or expand concrete democratic rights of the people. This form, either operates as a shell within which the authority of capital perpetuates itself, obstructing or reducing the opportunities for people to consciously participate in the process of society, or is increasingly transforming itself into a dictatorship, where capital sheds some of its democratic pretensions and rules by open, ruthless dictatorial means. Public

protests will continue till people have ended the rule of capital in those countries where

it still persists. They will also continue against those bureaucratic totalitarian political regimes where the rule of capital has ended, but where due to certain peculiar historical circumstances Stalinist bureaucratic, terrorist political regimes have emerged. The movements and protests of people will continue till adequate political institutional forms for the realisation and exercise of concrete democratic rights are found (1965).”

For Marxists, social movements are just not a protest and expression of the grievances. The exploited classes are not interested in reforming this or that institutions though they do fight for incremental rights to strengthen their strength. For instance working class fights for more wages, regulation of work, social security and also participation in management. Through this they build up solidarity among the workers and expand their struggles. Ultimately their attempt is to crack the dominant political system so that in the process the struggles move in the direction of revolutionary changes in the ownership of means of production and over through the dominant state structure. The struggles of the oppressed are both violent and non-violent depending upon the strength and means adopted by the state and propertied classes for the oppression. They are not averse to violent path but it does not mean that they always follow the violent means. For them the means is not that important as the ends. They often highlight the violence and oppression of the state and the dominant classes against the exploited classes. In such a situation the latter are left with no choice to counter the adversaries with the same method.

There is a good deal of debate among Marxist scholars on theoretical and methodological issues. Recently a group of Marxist historians, the ‘Subaltern Studies’ group, has begun to study ‘history from below’. They criticise the ‘traditional’ Marxist historians for ignoring the history of the masses, as if the ‘subaltern’ classes do not make history of their own, depending solely on the advanced classes or the elite for organisation and guidance. It is argued that the traditional Marxist scholars have undermined cultural factors and viewed a linear development of class consciousness (Guha 1983). On the other hand, the Subaltern Studies historians are strongly criticised by other Marxist scholars for ignoring structural factors and viewing ‘consciousness’ as independent of structural contradictions. They are accused of being Hegelian ‘idealists’.

## **Structural Functional Approach**

There is a great deal of variation amongst the non-Marxist scholars, in their approach to the analysis of social movements. The ideological positions regarding a need for social and/or political change, and the role of movements therein differ. It is argued by several liberal scholars such as William Kornhauser, Robert Nisbet, Edward Shils and

others that mass movements are the product of mass societies which are extremist and anti-democratic. These scholars are in favour of excluding the masses from day-to-day participation in politics, which hampers the efficient functioning of the government. Some Indian scholars who approved of the agitation for independence from foreign rule, did not favour agitation by people in the post-independence period. They condemned them outright as 'dangerous' and 'dysfunctional' for 'civilised society'. Though some other liberals do not favour revolutionary change in the political and economic structure, they advocate 'political change' which is confined to change in government and political institutions. A few are for 'revolutionary' change but they differ from Marxist scholars in class analysis. They lay emphasis on political institutions and culture. In their analysis of the movements, some do not inquire into social and economic causes of conflict and collective struggles. Others differ in their emphasis on the causes responsible for the movements. Some emphasise individual psychological traits, some focus on elite power struggles and their manipulation; and some others emphasise the importance of cultural rather than economic factors.

The scholars who adhere to the theory of political development consider that the rising aspirations of the people are not adequately met by existing political institutions which are rigid or incompetent. As the gap between the expectations of the people and performance of the system widens, 'political instability and disorder' leading to mass upsurge increases (Huntington 1968). Rajni Kothari argued that 'direct action' is inevitable in the context of India's present-day 'parliamentary democracy'. 'The general climate of frustration, the ineffectiveness of known channels of communication, the alienation and atomisation of the individual, the tendency towards regimentation and the continuous state of conflict (which may remain latent and suppressed for a time) between the rulers and the ruled—all these make the ideal of self-government more and more remote and render parliamentary government an unstable form of political organisation' (1960). It is also argued by some that that public protests have a certain 'functional utility' even in a parliamentary form of government. David Bayley (1962) observes that before and after independence, a large number of the people felt that the institutional means of redress for grievances, frustrations and wrongs—actual or fancied—were inadequate.

## **Gandhian Approach**

Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of India's freedom movement has a far reaching influence on social movements in India during his life time and in the post-independent India. Though Gandhi did not offer systematic analysis on social system, its functioning and causes of conflict, he was a critic of 'modernity' as developed in the West under industrial revolution. He was against capitalist economic system. And, he had deep concern for the poor – poorest of the poor. Conflict in society, according to him is not because of conflicting economic and social interests among the communities/classes. It is because of different 'understanding' of interests and society; different moral and

ethical values on good and evil; or prejudices against each other. During his life time he led struggles not only against the British rule but also racial discrimination in South Africa, against untouchability and 'discrimination' to women.

"Purity of means" in social struggles and resolving conflict is the central concern of Gandhian ideology. According to Gandhi the means are as important as the ends in resolving conflict. For that he strongly advocated ahimsa i.e. non-violence. Violence he believed, was not only wrong, it was a mistake. It could never really end injustice, because it inflamed the prejudice and fear that fed oppression. For Gandhi, unjust means would never produce a just outcome. "The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree," he wrote in 1909, "and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree... We reap exactly as we sow."

Gandhians advocate a need for resistance of those who are the victims and suffer against injustice. The method of resistance was satyagraha i.e satya (truth) and agraha (instance, holding firmly). Bondurant (1988) has called this approach the "Gandhian dialectic." Satyagraha was a dialectical process where non-violent action (antithesis) engages existing structures of power (thesis) in a truth-seeking struggle leading to a more just and truthful relationship (synthesis).

In this technique the victims oppose unjust law and also the act of the oppressor/ foreign ruler/landlord/upper caste. They even break the 'unjust' law and in consequence suffer punishment imposed on them by the authority. Such peaceful resistance, Gandhi believed, would open the eyes of oppressors and weaken the hostility behind repression; rather than adversaries being bullied to capitulate, they would be obliged to see what was right, and that would make them change their minds and actions. But satyagraha soon took on a larger dimension, one that was less a function of its spiritual provenance than its feasibility. Gandhi recognised that there were limits to the exemplary value of personal sacrifice: even the most committed resisters could absorb only so much suffering, and the pride and prejudices typical of entrenched regimes could not be dissolved quickly. If satyagraha was to become a practical political tool, Gandhi realised, it had to bring pressure to bear on its opponents. "I do not believe in making appeals," he emphasised on moral force of the opponents.

The potential of satyagraha to change an opponent's position, Gandhi believed, came from the dependence of rulers on the co-operation of those who had the choice to obey or resist. While he continued to argue that satyagraha could reveal the truth to opponents and win them over, he often spoke of it in military terms and planned actions that were intended not so much to convert adversaries but to jeopardise their interests if they did not yield. In this way he made satyagraha 'a realistic alternative' for those more interested in what could produce change than in what conscience could justify.

The method of satyagraha is often called as "passive resistance". But Gandhi made the distinction between the two. In 1920, he argued that they were not synonymous. Passive resistance is generally practice by the weak and non-violence is not their credo. Sometimes it has narrow self-interest which fail to reach out the opponent. But it is no so in satyagraha, "... passive resistance does not necessarily involve complete adherence

to truth under every circumstance. Therefore it is different from satyagraha in three essentials: Satyagraha is a weapon of the strong; it admits of no violence under any circumstance whatever; and it ever insists upon truth.”

David Hardiman calls Gandhi’s method as “dialogical resistance.” For Gandhi the adversary was not an enemy. “It is a breach of satyagraha to wish ill to an opponent or to say a harsh word to him or of him with the intention of harming him.” He believed in changing heart and reasoning of the enemy through persuasion and dialogue. But he did not rule out other methods to build pressure on the opponents. “He knew that in many cases, reason by itself would not win an argument. This was where self-inflicted suffering, such as fasting, could be important...additional political pressure was often needed, entailing mass demonstrations, non-co-operation, tax refusal, hartals and like.”

Wehr (1979) has termed Gandhi’s approach to conflict as a self-limiting one. Gandhi was challenging a number of political and social conditions in British India, most notably colonial rule, caste and religious discrimination, and exploitation of workers and peasants. He had to confront these “opponents” but he had to do so without unleashing the enormous potential for violent upheaval existing in the India of that time. His moral and political philosophies found practical form in methods he used to inhibit runaway responses. To prevent proliferation of issues, for example, Gandhi was careful to focus each satyagraha campaign on a single, clear issue around which agreement might be reached. This helped to keep the conflict within bounds. His practice of maintaining good personal relations with his opponents during a campaign prevented the shift from disagreement over an issue to personal antagonism. His policy of complete openness in both interpersonal and media communication reduced the threat and suspicion that secrecy and unpredictability introduce into a conflict.

## **Resource Mobilization Theory**

Resource Mobilisation theory is an outcome of rational choice theory. It is based on the assumption that individuals’ actions are motivated by goals that express their preferences. They act within the given constraints and available choices. It is not possible for all individuals to get all that they want; they must make choices within the available possibilities at a given point of time. Rational choice theories argue that individuals must make a rational choice regarding what is the best for them in a situation; and accordingly anticipate and calculate the outcome of their actions. “Rational individuals choose the alternatives that is likely to give them the greatest satisfaction”.

Some of the proponents of this theory argue that social movements for revolutionary changes by the marginal sections is out of impulse and emotion. Therefore, they do not sustain for long and fail.

It was called resource mobilisation theory because the theory purported to show that the success of a movement depended on the resources available to be used. These resources arose from inducing individuals to participate and contribute to the cost. Individuals participate because they see the benefits to be derived from joining. Success also depends

on the movement being able to link to other networks of groups and organisations. The resource mobilisation theory's stress was wholly on the strategy to make the movement succeed in demanding for a change in government policies or legislation. Thus it is sometimes said that the theory focused on political action, or the realm of politics rather than on civil society.

Jenkins and Perrow argued that protest and movement formation only occurs when the necessary resources are pumped into it. According to them struggles by powerless and poor groups only take place when rich benefactors take an interest in their struggle and pump resources into it. In the case of the farm workers, Jenkins and Perrow argue that their struggle only got going, properly, when middle class liberals (in the 60s) decided to champion their cause.

Resource mobilisation theory (RMT)

- Reacts against the older view of social movements (e.g. Communism, Nazism) as an irrational protest of the marginalised and as tending to “extremism” (and so illegitimate and “not really political”)
- Sees social movements (e.g. black civil rights, environmentalism) as individually rational attempts to mobilise resources in pursuit of “politics by other means” - hence driven by people with resources, embedded in stable networks (and so legitimate political actors!)
- Tends to reproduce professional organiser's perspective (e.g. Greenpeace, Amnesty): tackling the “free rider” problem to build strong and effective movements (Freeman) through organisation and selective incentives for participation

The theory emphasises entrepreneurial skill of the leaders of the movements. They mobilise resources — professional, finances, moral support and networking- from within and outside to sustain their struggles. The leaders of the successful movements have skill to create organisation and mobilise people. In the process common goals are articulated and consensus is created so that all the participants accept the goals.

Rajendra Singh summarises the major assumptions of RMT. They are:

- a) social movements must be understood in terms of conflict model of collective action;
- b) there is no basic difference between institutional and non-institutional collective actions;
- c) both institutional and non-institutional collective actions contain conflicts of interests built in the system of institutionalised power relations;
- d) social movements involve the rational pursuit of interests by competing groups;
- e) goals and grievances, conflicts and contestations are inherently present in all relations of power, and as such, they themselves cannot explain the formation of social



movements;

f) the formation of social movements, therefore, is determined by the changes in resources, organisation and opportunities for collective action;

g) success and effectiveness of collective action is understood in terms of material benefit or the actor being recognised as a political person; and

h) finally, as Jenkins visualises, the mobilisation of men in contemporary social movements involves the use of large-scale, advanced communication techniques, bureaucratised organisation and utilitarian drives and initiatives.(2001)

## **Relative Deprivation Theory**

The theory of relative deprivation developed by American scholars (Gurr 1970) has also guided some studies on agitation and mass movements.

Relative deprivation is defined as actors' perception of discrepancy between their value expectations and their environment's apparent value capabilities. Value expectations are the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are justifiably entitled.

The referents of value capabilities are to be found largely in the social and physical environment; they are the conditions that determine people's perceived chances of getting or keeping the values they legitimately expect to attain. Gurr writes: "The frustration-aggression and the related threat-aggression mechanisms provide the basic motivational link between Relative Deprivation and the potential for collective violence". Gurr also links three other concepts to relative deprivation, namely dissonance, anomie and conflict. The second of these, anomie is important in its effect to value opportunities. There are three models as to how the differentiation of value expectations and value capabilities has impact on relative deprivation. Incremental deprivation model describes the situation where the expectations are stable but capabilities declines. In aspirational model the capabilities remain the same but the expectations increase. The last model, J-curve or progressive deprivation model, fits to the situations when expectations and capabilities first increase hand in hand but then capabilities stop to increase or decrease while expectations still go on.

Those who perceive deprivation and as a result experience a feeling of frustration become aggressive. They are 'jealous' of those who have more. They protest or revolt against those who have more. They do not deal with the sources of deprivation. For Gurr, 'deprivation' is primarily psychological; therefore, he does not deal with the socio-economic structure which is the source of deprivation. If such sense of deprivation is confined to an individual against another individual it leads to crime. When it becomes collective perception – deprivation of region, community or caste – it takes the form of collective action. But it is not accompanied with ideology for the social system, it remains a protest or rebellion and hardly takes a form of social movement. They become 'temporary aberrations' rather than as 'ongoing processes of change'. Relative deprivation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for protest movements. M.S. A. Rao argues, 'a sufficient level of understanding and reflection is required on the part of the participants,

and they must be able to observe and perceive the contrast between the social and cultural conditions of the privileged and those of the deprived, and must realise that it is possible to do something about it'

## **Conclusion**

Approach or theoretical framework help us to understand social movements in more meaningful way. They are useful to give meaning to the facts and also valuable guide to those who are active in movements. Among all the most important approach is the Marxist perspective. It is also called classical approach or old approach. The list of approaches given above is not exhaustive. There are also approaches like behavioral, cognitive, multilevel and on. But they are not widely used by the scholars to study social movements. Within each approach there are different shades for analysis.