

Social Movements in India Towards Changing Economic Conditions and Development Process of Economy and Leadership

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Abstract

Social movements in India are changing. More and more people are joining non-partisan political processes, although institutional politics is still more influential than the former. This article is an analysis of the origin, background and structure of these political processes resembling participatory democracy and their role in Indian politics. The paper examines how social movements like National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), Ekta Parishad, Mazdoor Kisan Sakti Sangathan (MKSS), Tarun Bharat Sangh, India Against Corruption (IAC) etc. have galvanized the masses to join hands for a common cause or progressive idea. The paper also tries to find answers to the questions whether social movements create new class and gender forces/solidarities; they emancipate and empower the masses; result in new political organizations; they create checks and balances on existing political organizations; will result in increasing social fragmentation and destabilization, etc.

Keywords: Social Movements, Institutional Politics, Participatory Democracy, Political Process, India

Introduction

Since the 1970s and more specifically since the 1980s, there have been major changes in the issues, structures and composition of social movements in India. These movements no longer happen under the traditional leadership of any political party or their mass organizations such as trade unions or peasant organizations. Instead, they evolve from the masses or civil society with two goals: raising the problems of the masses and establishing a decision-making process at the lowest level of society. These are not typical welfare, development, philanthropic, non-political NGO movements; rather, these movements deliberately and consciously differentiate themselves from the NGO movement. However, when I refer to grassroots democracy, my intention is not to suggest that there is no standard relationship between democracy and civil society.

There is no doubt that India has developed; but this 'development' has not reached to the majority of Indians. They are neither the beneficiaries of the "Shining India", nor are the participants of this development process. The growing gap between economic growth and the condition of the masses, the failure of economic planning to take the benefits of the growth to the poorer section of the population, the failure of institutional politics, and the erosion of Left movements as well as the bureaucratization of trade unions have set the stage for spontaneous and community-driven social movements in India.

The issues of these movements range from access to livelihood, rising prices, corruption, state atrocities, women's rights, rights of the excluded (SCs and STs)¹, right to information, land grabbing, environmental protection, to increasing commodification and monopolization of natural resources such as water, land, and forest (*jal-jami-jangal*). The question of livelihood has always been central in social movements in India; but along with this, new movements are raising the question of rights and democratic justice as well as questioning the sustainability of on-going post-colonial developmental projects and their beneficiaries. These movements are also not just identity politics which is popularly called as New Social Movements (NSM) as against Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT).

These issue-based 'micro- movements', each one of whom brings forth distinct yet interrelated experiences, challenges, and strategies to deal with development. Different aspects of development were dealt in diverse ways and intensity, yet their diverse responses formed a loosely interrelated chain of policies and strategies, leading towards an undefined common approach, of which many movements themselves may be unaware (Sangvai 2007). The participants of these movements are landless peasants, marginal farmers, unorganized labour in rural and urban areas, *adivasis* (scheduled tribes), *dalits* (scheduled castes), displaced people, urban poor, small entrepreneurs, unemployed youth, and women's groups. Most of them have been active in different parts of India for almost three decades working on disparate local issues, albeit all concerning struggles of the economically marginalized and socially excluded poorer populations. In the 1990s, many of them came together and formed larger nationwide and worldwide alliances and forums to protest against hegemonic policies of the organizations and institutions which represent global economic and political power (Sheth 2004).

In this process of opposition to neoliberal globalization at local, regional, and national levels, these movements have started a new discourse on democracy and invented new political practices. In doing so, they have expanded the arena of politics beyond the representational institutions of elections and political parties, thus making issues of participatory democracy a part of their on-going struggles. In addition, although these movements have been fighting politically on several issues concerning the poor and marginalized, it is the challenge of globalization and its development policies that has brought many of them together on common political platforms at the regional and national levels (Ibid). In regard to approach, "... the counterhegemonic movements of the marginalized use the dual strategy of 'collaboration' and 'resistance' (Parajuli 1996).

Participatory Democracy in India

In modern India, there have always been three streams in its history of social movements: on one side, there is the moderate parliamentary politics, and on the other side the militant, violent politics; and in between these two, there has always been another stream, which is not associated with institutional politics, but with the people at the grassroots level. Scholars have termed these grassroots level movements in different ways. They are termed as *non-party political process* by Rajni Kothari, *pressure from below* by the subalterns, and

political society by Partha Chatterjee, who is also a subaltern. It is understandable why these movements may be described as *non-party political processes*, or *pressure from below*; however, it needs to be clarified why Partha Chatterjee uses the notion of *political society* in this context (Kothari 2005; Chatterjee 2008). Chatterjee's concept of *political society* radically challenges our understanding of the term *civil society*. Firstly, it highlights how the politics of *civil society* marginalizes the politics of the poor. Secondly, it offers up an alternative term, *political society* as a framework for understanding the popular politics of marginalized groups, which is not accommodated adequately by the notion of *civil society*. In reality, we would see that both *civil society* and *political society* work together at certain times and separately at others, despite having important similarities in their ways of establishing counter- hegemony. Some also have described this phenomenon as people's movements, or micro- movements.

This idea of peoples' power and the mobilization of masses through anti-emergency movement fired the imagination of many young women and men. This, besides upstaging the government in Delhi, also gave rise to a new genre of social movements, which was celebrated and characterized by political theorist like Rajni Kothari as the *non-party political process*. They interpreted participatory democracy in terms of empowerment of people through every day struggles for their rights as well as through harnessing their collective efforts to develop local resources for collective well-being.

The anti-emergency movements thus gave rise, especially in the period between mid-1970s and 1980s, to thousands of *new* micro-movements in the country. These movements were led by young men and women, quite a few of whom had left their professional careers to join them. They took up issues and constituencies abandoned by political parties and trade unions, and fought for those ill- served by the bureaucracy. The organizational form they evolved for themselves was neither of a political party nor of a pressure group. It was that of a civil-associational group, leading political struggles on issues articulated to them by the people themselves. The key concept they worked with was democratizing development through empowerment of the people (Sethi 1984). The failure of institutional politics / representative democracy thus paved the ways for upsurges in people's movement across all over India.

Some Selected Movements outside Institutional Politics in India

In order to understand the issues, structures, compositions, and impacts of these movements, this section will discuss six prominent participatory movements from the extensive list of contemporary social movements in India. The selection was based on the following criteria: the movements that were not organized under the auspices of any political parties; movement participants have direct involvement on regular basis; the issues are livelihood, rights, environment, and corruption; and finally the degree of impacts. Besides, the selection has also a historical time line. Thus among the selected movements, the Chipko Movement is one of the earliest movements in this category of social movements, while India Against Corruption is the recent one. Three movements were chosen which were evolved on the issues of three vital sectors of livelihood and environment: water, land, and forest, one on the question of self-help and development, one on the demand for the right to information, and finally one on the issue of corruption.

Chipko Movement (Hug the Trees Movement): It is one of the earliest and best-known participatory movements in India. The movement was centered on the issue on the right to forest and conservation of ecology. The name of the movement is derived from the act of embracing as the literal meaning of *Chipko* is ‘to embrace’ or ‘to hug’. It took place in 1973 in Reni, a remote village in Uttar Pradesh, situated on the foothills of the Himalayas. The movement sparked from a spontaneous incident, when a forest contractor came with a government license to log trees of the forest adjacent to the village. All the men of Reni village were away on that particular day. Thus the women alone of the village challenged the contractor to stop logging. To save from the loggers’ axes they embraced the trees. Unable to overcome this unique resistance, the contractor retreated.

To the villagers: ‘ecology is permanent economy’. Forest is a source of fodder, fuel, and medicinal plants to them. Thus, they want to conserve the forests as well as retain their right to use. While corporations/contractors log the trees for profit, the villagers use the forest products for their very subsistence. Thus the women of this region raised the vital question: ‘whose use is primary?’ Chipko movement achieved a major success, when the government was forced to negotiate with the local committees, mostly organized by women, and ordered a 15 year ban on logging in the forests of the Himalayas. The success of this resistance spread like a wildfire to other areas of this province and across India. Thus, “Chipko provided a blueprint for future participatory movements in India on the issues of livelihood and rights. It articulated the tensions between the state and the communities over the right to natural resources, and introduced new forms of mass action and organization, the most noticeable being the gender aspect inherent in its action” (Raina 2004).

Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement): During the 30 years of its struggle since its inception in 1989, *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (NBA), the protest against the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) on Narmada river, has been one of the most important milestones in the social movements in India. It has raised the issues of displacement, environmental and economic destruction, as well as the vital question: ‘who should sacrifice for whose benefit?’ The Narmada River is the fifth longest river in India, flowing through three provinces: Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. The Sardar Sarovar Project is one of the most ambitious multipurpose projects of Independent India for irrigation and electricity generation: 30 major, 135 medium, and 3000 small dams are to be built in this project. The Government of India claims that this multi-purpose project would irrigate more than 1.8 million hectares of land and generate 3,000 MW of electricity. However, according to NBA, this project would also submerge more than 37,000 hectares of forest and agricultural land and displace some 320,000 villagers, mostly from tribal communities, whose livelihoods depend on natural resource of this area.

The questions raised by the NBA are: Who will be benefitted for this project? Whose land would be irrigated, who will enjoy the electricity? And finally who are making the decisions? Of course, the answers to all of them are not the villagers, but the urban middle class and the rich. “If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country” - Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, speaking to the villagers who were to be displaced by the Hirakud Dam in 1948. Forty years after this speech was delivered, the NBA began

to raise questions of its validity. In the course of this debate, NBA received huge support from the various sections of Indian population: several intellectuals, writers, scientists actively supported this movement along with the general masses. It also received significant coverage from national and international media. Eventually the World Bank withdrew its financial support to this project, and established World Commission on Dams (WCD) in 1997. The commission gave a persuasive report: *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision- Making* in 2000. However, Government of India has come forward to finance the project in defiance of the movement and the WCD report. NBA was also able to spearhead the movement through their radical redefinition of ‘development’ itself and largely due to the efforts of the NBA, hundreds of movements working in the area of natural resources and environment are allied today under the umbrella of National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM).

Ekta Parishad (Unity Forum): Ekta Parishad evolved as a people’s organization in 1991 in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh. Prior to that, it had been a loose grouping of NGO training institutes that had created a large base of community development work. The Parishad first articulated the agenda of ‘people’s control over livelihood resources’ in 1996 in the process of consolidating its vision around the key issues of land, forests, and water rights. The majority of the people of this organization at the time of its commencement were tribals, who had been increasingly alienated from their lands because of continuous displacement for so called ‘development’ projects. They were also suffering due to being barred from entering adjacent forest areas—a result of the 1980 Forest Conservation Act. This problem was aggravated more with the hijacking of water resources for the use of industries and large-scale agriculture. So without access to land, forest, and water, these people (especially forest-dependent communities such as the tribal groups) could not hope to survive. This was the impetus that brought them into a larger social formation.

Parishad started mobilizing people on the issues of their rights over as well as proper utilization of natural resources. It organizes series of *padyatras* (long marches) to build awareness among the people and pressurizes government to ensure people’s rights over the land. One such long march was held in October, 2007 from Gwalior to New Delhi. 25,000 landless poor, tribal, poor women, bonded labourers, children, and the old across the country walked for 20 days to travel a distance of 350 km, demanding a national land reform policy. The Government of India conceded the demand and announced the formation of a National Land Reform Council with the Prime Minister as its chairman.

Mazdoor Kisan Sakti Sanghathan (Organization for the Empowerment of Workers and Peasants): Established in 1990 in Rajasthan, the *Mazdoor Kisan Sakti Sanghathan* (MKSS) has unearthed the potential of the right to information for food and livelihood security. This organization, started as a struggle for the rights of workers and peasants, soon realized that development interventions can be made more effective through a vibrant grassroots democracy by focusing on transparency and accountability of public expenditure; and to secure the rights of the poor and marginalized a battle was to be waged against government corruption and for that access to information was essential. It becomes the primary objective of the organization.

The movement, including Anna Hazare's hunger strike from April 5, 2011, forced the law makers of India to discuss and clear the bill in December 2011 in the lower house of the parliament (Lok Sabha), principally accepting three major demands of IAC: (1) citizen charter; (2) lower bureaucracy to be under lok pal through an appropriate mechanism, and (3) establishment of *lokyukts* in the provinces. But the bill did not get consensus in the upper house of the parliament (Rajya Sabha). In India, to pass a bill, consensus from both houses is necessary. There are also some alternative ways to pass a bill if consensus from both houses is not achieved. The bill was referred to the Select Committee, a committee of parliamentarians. The committee recommended 16 amendments. The Union cabinet gave its nod to 14 of these 16 amendments. Then after making certain amendments to the earlier Bill, it was passed in the Rajya Sabha on 17 December 2013 and in the Lok Sabha on 18 December 2013. Finally the Bill received assent from President of India on 1 January 2014.

Couple of issues deserves to be discussed in great details and right earnest in this context. Though the movement received huge support across India, however the support mostly came from the urban middle class. Another important point was that the movement was mostly centered on political corruption rather than corporate corruption. Later, few of Hazare's close associates broke away from IAC and formed the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in November, 2012, to participate in parliamentary politics. According to them:

The time for peaceful fasts and protests is gone. This is the time for action. Since most political parties are corrupt, greedy and thick skinned, it's time to bring political power back into the people's hands.... Our aim in entering politics is not to come to power; we have entered politics to change the current corrupt and self-serving system of politics forever. So, that no matter who comes to power in the future, the system is strong enough to withstand corruption at any level of governance (AAP website 2014).

National Coordination

A few umbrella organizations were also established to support, coordinate, and establish links among these discrete movements - here we will discuss two of them. The National Alliance of People's Movement (NAPM), a coalition of over hundred organizations and movements, started as a process in 1992 by NBA, and was finally established in 1996. The NAPM is based on commonly agreed minimum principles and programmes: opposition to communal fundamentalism and caste discrimination; resistance against the existing destructive developmental policy and globalization; and building and encouraging concrete alternatives have been the three minimum principles. It is an attempt towards building a people's political force outside the electoral politics that can counter the forces of destruction, inequality, and exploitation and realize the values of equity, justice, peace and nonviolence. The NAPM brings together various vibrant strands of ideology, combining the ideas of Gandhi, Marx, Lohia, Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar along with feminist and eco-socialist conceptualization into the emerging paradigm of sensible and sensitive development, justice, and peace. This new ideology strives for the radical changes in the production processes, technologies along with social-individual consumption patterns.

The other one is the India Resource Centre. The India Resource Centre works to support movements against corporate globalization in India. It provides timely information on transnational corporations to movement organizers in India, and educates and mobilizes key constituencies in the US and other countries to take action in support of campaigns in India. It is a project of Global Resistance, which works to strengthen the movement against corporate globalization by supporting and linking local grassroots struggles against globalization around the world. Its goal is to ensure that those most impacted by globalization are at the forefront of the movement against corporate globalization.

These discrete, small groups of masses have established connections beyond the national border through World Social Forum and People's Global Action, contributing to building up platform for international solidarity.

Thus, these movements are sometimes found to be in conflict with political parties and their trade unions. Even the left parties have been suspicious of these organizations, and has failed to distinguish them from the NGOs. However, some of the non-party left activists are very much active in these movements. The participants of these movements view such confrontations as an aspect of the larger, long-term struggle for political and social transformation, and not as means of competing with political parties in the arena of representative politics for acquisition of the state power. They view their everyday struggles as a process of expanding political spaces through raising people's consciousness and building their own organizations. From the 1950s itself, there has been continuous interface between party and non-party work. They believe involving people deeply in politics will in the long run change the terms of justification for the state to hold and use power. This probably explains their epistemic preference in articulating their politics in terms of 'reconstruction of state', rather than of 'acquisition of state power'. Many of these organizations also advise political parties in shaping their agenda.

State and Participatory Democracy: Such politics of movements often brings them into confrontation with the state, the local power structure, and with the Industrial class. Industries, including multinationals, now are increasingly engaged in land grabbing in India either in search of minerals, or for setting up industries. In most cases, local people neither were appropriately discussed, nor brought into this state-supported 'development' project. When they protested, the government saw it quite differently: an encroachment on its own jurisdiction and usurpation of its functions. The administration slapped hundreds of legal cases on the movement organizers and its supporters as well as using its repressive apparatus and extra-constitutional methods to suppress these movements. The attempts of the state to downplay the role of these movements in the democratizing process have been largely unsuccessful. The guarantees in the Constitution of India regarding civil and political rights like right to freedom of expression, freedom to join associations, and the freedom to assemble peacefully and without arms, coupled with the democratic energies of Indian polity, uphold the robustness of civil society's space. Nevertheless, the state has been able to narrow the space for the civil society organizations that seek legitimacy through state recognition.

What is the scope for these movements to impact the nature of Indian politics?

As expected, there are ideological differences among the political-theorists of India; however, be it Gandhi, Roy, or J.P, despite their political differences, everyone proposed a similar type of political process that should originate from within the masses. All of them, directly or indirectly, wanted, to go out of the bureaucratic process and render the decision-making process to the lowest level of society. At the same time, none of them, in practice denied the necessity of party-politics: Gandhi was the key figure of Indian National Congress; Roy, after coming back to India, briefly joined the Indian National Congress and then established the Radical Humanist Party; and J.P. was instrumental in forming the Janata Party.

If we see the present actors and organizations of the grassroots level movements of India, we would see that whenever possible, some of these groups have in different ways participated in elections, but within specific limits. It is true that they are yet to significantly influence the institutional power politics in India, but their influence is growing. First of all, these movements have been able to raise questions on the notion of 'development', environmental protection, people's rights, as well as the identities of the people of the 'development' sites among the policy makers, the investors, and the masses. Now, it has been many years that any new industry in India needed clearance from the Ministry of Environment, besides fulfilling other official formalities. The process of getting environmental clearance has become more rigorous now than ever before. The question of cultural identity of the 'development' site is also an important question in today's India. However, the most important and crucial issue is: *who are the beneficiaries of these projects?* Another significant contribution of these movements is the Right to Information Act, 2005. This is an instrument which could be used at a cost of only Rs. 10 (1/6th of a dollar) by any Indian citizen to get information on anything except on the issues related to national security.

The people's protest against the gang rape and killing of a medical student in December 2012 and the changed the rape law in India is deserved to be mentioned here. On December 16, 2012, a 23 year-old woman and her male companion were on their way home from a movie theatre., They board on a garage bound charter bus, what they thought was a public transport. As they got on, they noticed only six men on the bus. Almost immediately these men began to taunt the woman, making lewd comments about her male friend. The situation escalated quickly, and while the driver kept the vehicle moving, they battered the woman's companion with a tire iron. When she fought to protect him, the men dragged her to the back of the bus and gang-raped her. As the bus kept moving, the rapists changed places with the driver so he could have his turn. Behind the tinted windows, they used the iron rod to sexually violate her, causing such horrific internal injuries that she later died.

A mass protest for women's rights seemed to grow over night. Hundreds of thousand protesters joined the protest movement in Delhi, which was supported by the entire country. In response, the government commissioned retired Chief Justice J.S. Verma to recommend legal changes which might better protect Indian women. The 631-page report was released within 29 days of the formation of the commission in an

unprecedented record time. The committee had taken some 80,000 submissions before making sweeping recommendations which were startling in their scope. On the basis of these recommendations, the Government of India passed an anti-rape ordinance, and went beyond recommendations of the committee to provide the death penalty in cases of rape that leads to death of the victim or leaving her in a vegetative state. It also seeks to replace the word 'rape' with 'sexual assault' to expand the definition of all types of sexual crimes against women.

Conclusion

There might be multiple questions attached to these new social movements in India. Do they create new class and gender forces/solidarities? Do they emancipate and empower? Do they result in new political organizations? Do they create checks and balances on existing political organizations? Will they result in growing social cleavages and destabilizations? Probably, the time has not yet arrived to have full answers to all these queries. However, a look at the class composition of these movements tells us that it is not only the poorer sections, but the middle class is also participating in these movements, depending on the nature of the movements. While, poorer people are mostly taking part in the movements concerning livelihood and associated issues, the middle class is mostly visible in the movements against corruption. In all these movements, one very significant trend is increasing participation of women which shows the gender inclusiveness of these movements.

Democracy means power to the people. Thus, emancipation is not possible without empowering. There is no doubt that these movements are not only contributing towards growing awareness of their rights among the oppressed, but also initiating large numbers of people's direct and active participation. This is true that the local participants of these movements are often dependent on the outside leaders; their education, networks, charisma help to grow these movements. But this does not mean that the locals do not have any say. In fact, they do. However, there are some constraints like prevalence of English as one of the two official languages and its growing importance, complex laws and bureaucracy, as well as technicalities of the issues and so on. It is seen that the grassroots level activists are gradually catching up as Baviskar mentions in the context of NBA: "To a certain extent such a transfer has happened with three of the full time adivasi activists who have emerged as leaders in their own right" (Baviskar A. 2004).

It will take some time to manage their own affairs by themselves in a country with more than 200 years old enforced bureaucracy, inadequate infrastructure and communication facilities, extreme socioeconomic inequality, and ignorance. In this light, we may consider that the movement participants have significant inputs in the movement process. As we know now, these movements are not happening under the banner of any political parties or under their formal political authority, but they are certainly political in different ways. They want to reform the state, and for that their processes are different: they would do this not by taking over the state, but by demanding access and opportunities to livelihood, rights, and empowerment through people's movement. Thus the in the y give rise to a new kind of political organization with more inclusive contribution from the people.

recently has given three important judgments on electoral reforms in India. They are: the addition of the 'None of the Above' (NOTA) option in electronic voting machines (EVM), six national parties which have come under the purview of the Right to Information Act, and immediate disqualification of an MP or MLA who has been convicted in a crime. All these are examples how these movements have been influencing the political system of India. Above all, there is growing awareness about environment among all sections of the people of India, increasing questions about the neo-liberal developmental process, and about the rights of the excluded, though to a lesser extent.

The last concern, but not the least, is about the social cleavages and destabilizations. Indian society is already fragmented with different classes, castes, ethnicities, religions etc. One of the features of these movements is localization. By 'localization', I mean that these movements are mostly growing out of a local issue, and then getting bigger; some of them have come together and formed national organizations. But, at the organization level, almost all of them have still remained localized. Thus, there are instances of sharpening social cleavages and increasing tensions at the local level, but at the regional or national level, this is mostly absent. Overcoming this shortcoming is probably one of the most challenging aspects of these movements. And "perhaps we can then say that the non-party political space that emerged in the 70s has struck roots but it still a long way to go if it is to move out of issue based politics and towards building comprehensive strategies for social change" (Srivastava 2005).

Besides, we should keep in mind that the success of a social movement should not be measured on the fulfilment of some specified goals or demands, but also on its contribution to people's awareness, perpetuation of the movements, and the democratic process of the movements. Finally, I would like say that, all these events, though isolated in relative terms, are connected to one another in one aspect, i.e. empowerment of the marginalized, the poor, and the excluded. These movements are gradually generating consciousness among them and empowering these people. These are the two pillars of a true democracy; and this process is most likely a gradual move towards changing the culture of Indian politics.

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