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## Politics Of Social Movements: A Theoretical Understanding

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### Abstract:

*Ever since German sociologist Lorenz Von Stein formulated the concept of social movements, they have been transformed in dimensional phenomena. While old social movements centre on the larger political domain, new ones essentially focus on social or cultural dimensions. German sociologist Jurgen Habermas strongly believes that the old social movement have been hijacked and one major cause is the 'colonization of the lifeworld by the system.' In the blur between the domains of state and public sphere, social movements lose their potency. In the context of India, social movements have been evolving taking various facets in different phases and one such profound movement is the Dalit movements. Plethora of literatures, intellectuals are afloat to underpin the movements. This paper attempts to analyse the conceptual fluidity inherent in understanding social movements. This also examines certain anomalies in contextualising the western notion of social movement in non-western societies.*

**Key Words:** State; Class; Power; Society; Authority

### Introduction

#### The Conceptual Fluidity of Social Movements: Nature and Significance

There is visible complex fluidity in conceptualising social movements in terms of its clear definition. Social movement is understood as any collective group action that seeks to bring change or resist change in society. Social movement is a collective that emerge as a response to some phenomena or occurrence, perceived to be unjust, affecting the larger interest in society. As Su H. Lee puts it that 'social movements are contentious interacting actors, organised in more or less uniform efforts to bring or resist change in the shared social order mainly through sustained non-institutional or semi-institutional actions' (Lee, 2010: 34). Alain Touraine argues the inexactitude in conceptualising social movement in a singular concrete way while defining social movements as conflicts around the social control of the main cultural pattern (Touraine, 1985: 760). Social movements are mobilised against the authority or government with certain objectives to achieve for the larger groups in society.

Social movements are not alike with a protest or strike. A social movement usually has organisational structure, leadership, long term goals and shared values. A protest or a crowd may be for a specific, singular issue which may be temporary in nature. Whether a social movement and political movements are alike is a complicated question to answer, and it depends on the level of analysis one applies. As a matter of fact, it is more difficult to hair split between social movements and other major movements as there are semantic differences. In the more general understanding, social movements do not aim to overthrow any existing governments; it rather seeks to improve conditions within the existing regime. In this sense, social movement is not a prototypical political movement. It is also seen that national movements which seeks for independence from colonial rule and catholic movements, besides labour movements, are the earliest forms of social movements (Heywood, 2005: 283).

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Generally, every social movement takes two forms: transformative social movements and reformative social movements. The transformative social movements seek to bring total or complete change in society. This form of social movement is often associated with violent means to pursue the goals. The violent left movement which aims at bringing radical change in society is the example of this form. On the contrary, reformative social movements seek to bring partial change in society. They are carried through peaceful or violent methods. But it must be also kept in mind that there is no universal nature of social movements.

John Wilson categorises social movements into multiple kinds based on the nature and purpose today: (a) Transformative social movement which seeks to change the total social structure often by violent means; (b) Reformative social movement that aims at partial change; (c) Redemptive social movement that seeks the total change of an individual for personal betterment; (d) Alternative social movement which is oriented towards the rejection of materialism and development of unconventional lifestyles (Wilson, 1973: 14-29).

Social movements do emerge as the responses to certain factors. One forceful cause for the social movement is the political ideology that give new ideas and possible changes in society. According to the changing needs, people feel the need to make new ideas operationalised because they feel disillusioned, hopelessness, powerlessness against the ruling authority. People then organise social movements to redress their discontentment. More importantly, new changes occur and they do not bring benefits in equal level in society. There are some sections in society who feel alienated and who lag behind others whenever new reforms or changes take place. They nurture the feeling of governing authority being indifferent to their grievances and thereby prolonging all injustices towards them. The sense of injustice and uncertainty lay the fertile grounds for the people to resort to social movements.

There are certain significances of social movements. Social movements are the key agents to bring about changes in society through various means. In short, they are the cause of social change essential for the changing need of the time. In many ways, social movements can be seen as the vehicle to install justice in society. It means that they help in democratising the social and political structure in society. As Nick Crossley rightly argues that through social movements, the working nature of broader political structure can be gauged (Crossley, 2009: 9). Through social movements, awareness about the working nature of political nature can be diffused to people. Social movements can be deemed as the people's democratic right to express their viewpoints.

### **Emergence of New Social Movement: Reasons and Contradictions**

In the wake of 1960s, new forms of social movements have emerged and they are termed as 'new social movement.' Some of the examples of new social movements are environmental movements, feminist movement, animal rights movement, peace movements etc. These new social movements are not similar with the old social movement and there are some pertinent reasons that led to the emergence of them. The first reason is that societies today have outgrown by and large, and they are not what Karl Marx had envisioned about capitalist society. In simple words, today's societies are not exactly conformed to what Marx had outlined about the capitalist society. In the ideological front, there are overwhelming literatures that staunchly advocate the ultimate triumph of liberalism over communism around the world. This line of thinking is majestically orchestrated by Francis Fukuyama when he argues that the end of twentieth century begins to establish the ultimate victory of liberal democracies over other alternatives and it marks the end of human history. As liberal democracy settles most of the fundamental political and economic questions, the position expounded by Karl Marx about the end of history with the establishment of communist society by and large is negated (Fukuyama, 2006: xii-xvi).

Going by the classical notion of social movement, they are largely economic and class-based movements against the ruling class. But new issues and problems have emerged today which are not based on class conflict. Many of the new issues and conflicts that people encounter today are far beyond the spectrum of class antagonism. The classical

scheme of social movements does not fit to overcome these new problems. And another most important factor is that the workers are economically better off today; they have narrowed down their revolutionary focus. With various reformations taking place in the work front from time to time and with the introduction of welfare state policies, workers today have compromised on their zeal for radical movements. In fact, workers have co-opted in the political system, in the sense, they form their own political parties and they become part of the ruling class (Crossley, 2005: 197). But this has not solved the newly emerging problems today. With workers not more representing as the frontline leaders of social movement, new agents of new social movement have become so proactive from several spheres.

The next prodding hunch is about the nature of dichotomy between the old social movements and new social movements. As a matter of fact, there exist subtle differences between them on some aspects. The old social movement largely seen to be confined to dominant political system, in the sense they are mobilised against the political authority (Cohen and Rai, 2011: 5). The instances of civic rights movements and workers' movements are within the political domain. However, new social movements are beyond the political structure. They are active in wider domains such as cultural and social. Secondly, the reach of old social movements is limited as they tend to operationalise within the national or local level; in contrast, the reach of new social movements is global as the scope of the new issues bears international character. With the use of advanced technology, the audience of new social movements cut across the national borders.

New social movements have wider participants such as students, housewives, scientists, public sector workers, transgender etc. The traditional social movements operate in industrial society which is characterised by the use of heavy machines and mass scale manufactured productions; while new social movements operate in the contemporary post-industrial society whose economy is based on knowledge and information to create wealth. To illustrate the distinction further, the old social movement is the typical working-class movements against the wealthy capitalist class; whereas the new social movements represent the types of environmental movements, anti-nuke movements and gay-lesbian movements which are not necessarily economic class based movements. Nevertheless, there is still an ambiguity regarding the differences between the old and new social movements. It can be seen that many of forms of new movements occur within the larger social movements. However, it would be obviously an overstatement to say that traditional social movement has been completely replaced by new social movement; in fact, both exist side by side in the present era.

### **Theoretical Foundations: Lorenz Von Stein and Jurgen Habermas**

Lorenz Von Stein, German Sociologist, initially used the term social movement in his book *Social Movement in France*. (Stein, 1964: 79-93). For Stein, in all societies, there are two major classes. The capitalist class own capital and the proletariat own labour power. Their class relation was harmonious and interdependent. Over the period of time, the amount of capital accumulation determines the status or personality of capitalist. They expanded their capital continuously and the surplus value that exceeded the cost was the profit. That led the capitalist class to monopolise wage by keeping at low rate. It is because, for Stein, the growth of the capital results from labour and the wage is the main factor. So the capitalists are compelled to keep the wages as low as possible. When the wage is kept low, higher profits grow for the capitalist. This process prevented workers from acquiring capital and that process disturbed the original class relation. The social order of property owning and non-property owning became rigid and distinct. The needs of the labour and capitalist become contradictory. But workers have education and they cultivate the idea of social equality: equality for the opportunities of acquiring material goods.

As the capitalist class would not allow the non-owners to have equality, it could not be fulfilled. Then what was the way out? They had the option to establish either communism or socialism. But both the system has internal faults. Under communism, community works through individuals who control the distribution and labour. And under socialism, the private property is to be abolished. But the whole class of property owners oppose this idea and they attack socialism. Then the workers realised the need to align with state power.

But the state was under ruling class and it cannot help them directly. So, workers conceive of having a state constitution that allows universal suffrage and under which all individuals will have the equal opportunity in determining the state legislation. In this stage, it can take two forms: social revolution and social reform. In the first form, the non-owning class will form a community called proletariat and they will use sheer force to rule. Their rule will be weak and temporary; the capitalist class will overthrow them. There will be social turmoil and out of that a state power remerge which is detached from all social classes. It is an independent state which assumes the dictatorship form and it rules by itself. Under the second form, laws, institutions, activities aim at creating opportunities for workers to acquire capital. Any reform must be based on the interest of all in society. This is how, according to Stein, social movements started when workers demand for social independence.

Another theory about social movement is expounded by Jurgen Habermas. Habermas has abandoned the hope in the potentials of social movements. Habermas's pessimism about the social movements can be traced back to his theoretical explanation of the decline of the public sphere. Public sphere is a space, located between the spheres of private individuals and the state, in which individuals come together to discuss public issues of common interest. For Habermas, public sphere emerged in Europe in late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when individuals engaged in reasoned discourse over important public matters. But there has been decline of public sphere from twentieth century onwards owing to some reasons. First reason is the increasing blur between state and society. The state upon assuming the form of welfare state has intruded in private lives of individuals and they are compelled to depend more on the state. As the result, individuals compromise on their freedom to take part in effective public deliberations as they become the client of the state assistances. The state is also infiltrated by the private interest as interest groups have occupied their place within the structure of the state. In Habermas's terminology, there is simultaneous 'societalisation of the state and stateification of society' (Habermas, 1991:142). Secondly, press, one of the preeminent institutions of the public sphere is hijacked as the space for selling goods through advertisements (ibid). Media is commercialised and is under the control of the big business houses and it does not serve as the space for public debate. As there has been a decline of public sphere, the space for genuine public participation in the political matters has shrunk.

Today, state is so powerful and extensive that it permeates in all the private lives of individuals. State determines individual actions and there are more surveillance and regulations on individuals. The world of individual leisure, sports, personal relationships are increasingly commercialised. Moreover, technology and advertising agencies have invaded the realm of public debate. Public opinion is generated not by people through discussion, but by pollsters and image consultants. According to Habermas, new social movements emerge as the result of the intrusion by the state and the market into the areas of private life which he calls as the 'colonisation of lifeworld by the system.' Colonisation of lifeworld is a process in which society as a lifeworld is constantly intruded by society as a system which leads to the loss of individual freedom and autonomy (Edgar, 2006:17). So new social movements come as the response to the colonisation of lifeworld and cultural impoverishment. They generate public debate about matters of public morality, social organisation and so on. And new social movements constitute new public spheres and they have the potentials of emancipation.

### **Major Approaches to Social Movements: Marxist and Primordial Approaches**

Approaches to social movements can be broadly categorised as western centric Marxist approach and non-western approach. Going in this line, western approach to social movement is based on Marxist ideology which is a class based approach. In this kind of approach, social movements are typical labour movements, which became notable theoretically in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Besides, it is applicable in the western European societies. According to this approach, the root cause of social movement lies in the economic structure in society. The propertied class has state, religion, education, media at its disposal

to prolong its hegemony over the working class. So it is the natural struggle of the working class to revolt against the capitalist class so as to bring an egalitarian society.

In the non-western approach, it is not class based approach. This approach is primordial approach specific to societies. The interesting fact here is that there are inherent difficulties in trying to contextualising the western approach to non-western approach. Several movements witnessing in India such as tribal movements, peasant movement, dalit movement, subaltern movement do not fit into the format of classical Marxist approach to social movement. To put it bluntly, western approach to social movement is not applicable to non-western Asiatic societies and more so in India context. There are several factual accounts to prove this point clear. In India, we had Non Brahmin Movements in 1950s not least in Tamil Nadu spearheaded by Periyar. It was essentially the movement that sought to unseat the Brahmin hegemony in all spheres of Hindu life and thereby redeeming many rights to non-brahmins (Veeramani, 2005: 136).

Similarly, the instance of Satya Shodhak Samaj led by Jotiba Phule in Maharashtra was to bring changes in the realm of education, caste system, brahminism, vedic tradition etc. It must be noted that Phule's tirade against caste system in Hindu society is based on his strong proposition that brahmins are not the original inhabitants of India and they came from outside India. They got attracted to the abundant wealth and rich productivity of India. There was fierce struggle between the aborigines and brahmins for the ascendancy in which the latter succeeded. In order to continue their subjugation of the aborigines, brahmins devised caste institution which was not there earlier (Deshpande, 2010: 27-29). In the contemporary times, we have dalit movements invigorated from the days of B. R. Ambedkar. For Ambedkar, Hindus are the sick men because of the caste system and he called for the complete dismantling of it. Some of the feasible ways suggested for the obliteration of caste hierarchy are inter-caste marriage, and destroying of Hindu sacred texts (Rodrigues, 2015: 288-89).

All these movements aim to ward off all the repercussions of caste hierarchy and the extremely distasteful system of untouchability prevailing in Hindu society. The demand is the overall emancipation of dalits from all caste thraldoms. So these are against the hierarchical social order. They are not class based movement where the antagonism is between the two classes per say. Moreover, take the case of women movement in India which has a long, long history. Albeit many causes, women movements are essentially against the practice of patriarchy and gender discrimination. Women movements against dowry harassment, liquor sale, bride burning, domestic violence are so rampant. For an ex colony, there is huge western influence in the larger spheres of day to day life. There are ample debates regarding women movements as to whether they are the product of western education or the result of the cultural tradition. But it is a safer inference that women movements in India can be seen as the product of both factors. Today, women movement wants to bring equal rights and liberties for women in all spheres which are not labour centric movement. Women demand new legislation or new changes in the existing laws so as to empower themselves. Women groups have demanded new legislation to ensure justice for women and prevent violence against them (Shah, 2004: 165).

### **Social Movement & Power: Multiple Spaces of Power**

There is an inherent relation between power and social movements even though social movements do not strive for power directly. Seizing power may not be the immediate agenda of the agents of social movements, but they generate some sort of power within. Power in general parlance is described as the ability to influence the behaviour of others. It is also defined as the 'ability to make people do what they otherwise would not have done' (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics, 2009: 425). Any change that social movements aim to bring in society involves capturing or influencing the political authority or those in power. It is also precisely because social movements involve the use of tactics of force and persuasion according to the given circumstances. Besides, every social movement has certain political implications in society. It is also undeniable fact that power is not centralised in any specific level though in a modern democratic set up, state and its machinery are seen to be holding the visible legitimate powers as they have people's mandate. This means power can spring from any sphere. Michel Foucault does not interpret

power as something concentrated in the hands of an individual or group over other. For Foucault, power is not the domination of one person or class over others. It means power functions in the forms of chain and individuals always exercise it (Foucault, 1980: 98). It must be also mentioned that Foucault expounds the idea that power relations extends far beyond the state and it cannot occupy the entire actual power relations (Rabinow, 1991: 64).

There is always tussle of power manifested or concealed among many actors in society. Social movements are often seen to be mobilised against some authority or political authority which is endowed with some powers. But social movements are not bereft of powers. They have the power to pressurise or revolt against the authority. Social movements have powers to resist any unjust acts in society. Women movements for the equal suffrage in many countries have manifested the powers within against any opposing powers. It is a plain truth that social movements have power constitutional and unconstitutional for protest, agitation and pressure in the pursuit of their goals. Even analysing from the Marxist perspective, it is quite understandable that proletariat are ultimately urged to seize state power by overthrowing the ruling class to establish an egalitarian society. In the transitory phase, dictatorship of proletariat, workers are to hold full control of the state powers. Class antagonism of Marx is also the power struggle between the two economically disharmonious classes. It is precisely because power is needed to push changes in society. This is also the reason why B. R. Ambedkar urged his followers not just to fight for reservations or concession here and there. Ambedkar asked them to capture political power and utilise them properly, if not they should continue to be enslaved. They must gain the power of law making because their salvation lies upon it (Keer, 2009: 235). What Ambedkar urged is that dalits must be a part of governing class by seizing political power. Hence, the overall argument is that social movements and power are interrelated and every form of social movement underlines the urge to grab power.

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