



SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA : PERSPECTIVES FROM HUMAN RIGHTS

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***Abstract:** Social movements has become crucial aspects of democracies around the world. Social movements can be categorized in to two groups as old social movements and new social movements. The old social movements were based on the class ideologies, new social movements raised voice for culturally and socially excluded groups and fight for equality and social justice for these excluded groups. There has been no agreed definition of a social movements in any societies across the world.*

India witnessed during both pre-independence and post-independence periods a number of significant social movements. The first set of movements are class – based movements including peasants and workers’ movements. The second set of movements are culturally and identity based movements like women’s movements and dalit movements etc.

With the passage of time, practice of democracy at the grassroots and their increasing connectivity with the regional and national politics have emerged a space for self-assertion of the marginalized groups including their diverse issues which contributed regional , ethnic and gender identities in a socio-political reality.

At this outset, this paper tries to explore different social movements in India and how its preserve the human rights of respective groups in the Indian democracy in the 21st century.

***Key words:** Democracy, human rights, social movements, equality, identity.*

Social movements are significant aspects in Indian democracy in the recent scenario. Social movements are two types such as old and new social movements. The culturally attributed and identity based movements are new social movements while class based social movements



are old social movements in Indian context. These two types of movement have been made impact in Indian democracy in various ways and particularly try to preserve human rights of respective groups of people. It has been seen that generally excluded groups are fight for their democratic rights under the purview of various social movements. Social movements are generally fought for equality, justice for hitherto excluded groups. So, we can say that social movements are relating to various issues of human rights.

There has been no agreed definition of a social movements. Various scholars define social movements according their own views and perspectives . If we go back the history of social movement has its origin in the literature of the early 19 th century Europe. The political leaders and authors were concerning on the issues of empowerment of the discriminated groups for creation of a new society by changing property relationships. Ghanshyam Shah(2004) conceded the view that historical movement must evince a minimal degree of organization, though trends may range from a loose, informal or partial level of organization to the highly institutionalized to bureaucratic .

In other words, social movements try to set a beliefs, and active participation of a certain class of group of people and change the existing situation towards a progressive context.

However, we can say that social movements refers to collective action through the legal means within the purview of political institutions, as well as violent extra- institutional collective action. The elements of social movements are including leadership, ideology, programmes and organizations, which are interlinked and influence each other(Shah.17). The objectives of the movements may vary and range between broad objectives and particular issues. Ideological provides the direction for evolving strategy and programme. Leadership that initiates or emerges in the course of the movements plays important role in the articulating ideology and objectives and maintaining the spirit of participants. Movements could be institutionalized or extra- institutionalized collective political actions are move forward towards social or political change. Collective actions that follow the path acquiescence for social mobility and change in status are not considered as social movements. Social movements may classifies into reformist, reformatory, and revolutionary. Reforms does not challenge political system per se. It is noteworthy that new social movements are linked to the post-modern societies. The new social movements not connected with economic issues and are not concerned with state power. They are primarily concerned with protecting and enlarging the autonomy of civil society.



At this outset, in this paper an attempt has been made to search the connection between social movements and human rights and how different groups preserve their rights and promote democratic values in Indian socio-political reality.

Methodology

For the comprehensive knowledge of the subject, we have used secondary source including books and journals etc.

Social movement and Human Rights: Some Issues

Social movements and human rights are connected each other in various ways. Without social movements, the hitherto excluded groups could not access their rights in the hierarchical and patriarchal society like India. The contemporary discourse of human rights is chiefly a product of reflection on immense violation of human rights. The history of rights can be found by the writings of John Locke theoretical and philosophical foundation of Rights (1632-1704). Locke argued that human beings enjoyed inalienable natural rights like right to life, liberty and property even before the birth of the state and civil society. Contemporary liberal democratic state seeks to base its legitimacy on protection and preservation of these natural human rights. The mainstream concept of rights based on liberal individualism and citizenship rights irrespective of groups' identity. Liberalism focused on mainly values of liberty, fraternity, equality etc.

Indian constitution provides civil, political and other rights as fundamental rights to its citizens that are legally enforceable. For instance, we may say that constitutional fundamental rights of India including right to freedom, right against exploitation, right to freedom of religion, cultural and educational rights and right to constitutional remedies. It provides social, economic and cultural rights under the name of Directive principles of State Policy but these rights are not legally enforceable (Ray2003:3411). Social movements old as well as new are closely connected human rights.

In Indian context, during the pre and post independence a large number of social movements have taken place in various parts of India. Sometimes these movements are class based termed as old social movements and cultural and group based movements are named as new social movements. Different scholars analyzed these movements from their own view. Some scholars blame opposition parties, leaders and trade union leaders in India for instigating the masses to direct action. Many scholars also conceded their view on that mass movements are



redundant in Indian culture and civilization due to its 'matrilineal' character and all pervasive hierarchy. Because of the Brahmanical ideology and hierarchical social structure have predominant since time immemorial.

In the post independent phase, the consequence of the conflict between tradition and modernity. Scholars who focused on development arguing that existing political institutions, which are rigid or incompetent, do not adequately meet the rising aspirations of the people.

As the gap widened between the two, political instability and social order leading to mass upsurge increased. A. R. Desai (1986) observed that civil and democratic rights of people are not protected by Constitution but movements raised voice for civil and political rights for people.

In Reinventing Revolution, Gail Omvedt(1993) observed that the most important shift in social movement politics has been conceptual; In response to changing governance and ascendant social shifts, she contends, a class of 'new social movements' emerged in the 1970s across the India. T. K. Oommen(2010) argued that new social movements of India are responses to the discontents of Indian modernity, the planned economic development and the failure to implement the constitutional promise of equality and social justice, the failure to undermine the foundations of hierarchy in traditional Indian society led to human rights violation in the Indian society.

According to them, the Indian and society privileged the processes of institutionalization of social conflicts over the same. The important movements including dalit movements like dalit, women's, tribal, human rights, environment and so on which have been witnessed by Indian democracy.

Dalit movement

Dalit movement lies on four fold Varna system in Indian society. Hinduism is inherently unequal and hierarchical religion. The burnt of this hierarchical division of Hinduism is mainly born by dalits in all aspects of their lives. The term dalit means oppressed, placing the lowest rank in the Hindu caste system. Dalits are called *avarna*, those who outside of Chaturvarna. Generally, dalits are untouchables in Indian society, depriving to access various types of rights in their lifecycles. They are residing the periphery of any rural location. The notion of purity and pollution have been particularly resilient in relation to drinking water



sources (Rao2010:44). The anti-caste system movement was emerged under the leadership of Jyotirao Phule in Maharashtra and Tamilnadu in 1920s. E. V. Ramasamy Naicker (Periyar) spreadhead “self-respect movement” and worked for eradication of caste in Tamilnadu and elsewhere in South India. Priyar has propagated the principles of rationalism, self-respect, women’s rights and eradication of caste. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar also raised his voice for dalit people in India. The anti-untouchability movement launched by Ambedkar in 1920s assumed an all India character. In 1930s , dalits demanded separate electorates and later Ambedkar tried to improving the status of untouchables is to renounce Hindu religion(Omvedt2002:294). In 1950s , Ambedkar found Buddhism to be an appropriate alternative religion for the untouchables as it was an indigenous Indian religion of equality and was anti- caste and anti-Brahmin in nature. In1970s, dalit panthar movement was taken place on the lines of Black panthars of America. The dalit panthars condemned and discarded the dominant culture and tried to build an alternative socio-cultural identity for the oppressed classes(Shah 2004,122).

They aimed at dismantling Hindu caste system and bringing about all round revolution.

Thus, the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements that were launched in India raised the issues of democratic equality and social justice.

Tribal movement

In the year 1950, 212 tribes were considered as scheduled tribes in India. The tribal movement can be classified as follows: ethnic movement including culture/religious identity; agrarian and forest rights movements; environmental movements; involuntary displacement and rehabilitation movements and political movements centering on nationality question for a separate state. All these movements are inter-linked.

Some of the tribal movement focused on sankritisation movements to assert tribal status as caste Hindus. Economic issues are more often than not at the core of tribal movements. The non-tribal landlords impose high level s of rents on tribals. Moneylenders’ unsrupciously charge heavy interest that the tribals’ are unable to pay and they are forced to sell their land to repay their debt becoming in the process landless labourers.

The problems of tribals are land alienation, forced labour with low wage, land grabbing etc some of the reason of tribal movements in India. In the post independent phase, the major problem tribal movement was displacement and deprivation of their resources of livelihood



caused by the construction dams, hydropower projects and mining etc. Recently, Deucha Pachami in the Birbhum district in West Bengal area tribes are assert their voice for displacement due to coal mining found in that area.

Women's Movement

Women's movement in India are based on by women's movement in the West, which emphasize the universality of gender related issues and therefore 'universal sisterhood' of women. Gail Omvedt categorizes women's movement into two types first, equality based women's movement, Second, liberation movements of women. The former focused on directly challenge the economic, political or family structure, but rather aim at attaining an equal place for women in it with their male counter parts. and at abolishing the most patriarchy, whereas the women's liberation movements directly challenge the sexual division of labour itself (Shah 2002:152).

The contemporary women's movement was started in the 19th century with social reform movement by Raja Rammohan Roy. He raised voice for malpractices against women in the Indian society which mainly based on religious and social customs. The issue of gender discrimination like rape, sexual harassment at work place, domestic violence against women in the family and public place were taking as issues in the post independent phase of Indian society. Women groups have often move forward for protesting sex determination tests, family planning practices and fought for issues like legal maintenance guardianship and custody of children. In recent times in India the proposed 33% reservation bills, which tries to reserve seats in Parliament and state legislatures, has become a major issue of debate both in and outside the Indian parliament. Thus, women's movements in India raised important question of civil, political, economic and cultural rights and achieved considerable success in terms of Domestic Violence prevention Act in recent scenario.

Environmental Movement

In the year 1980s, the development of environment movement and ecological movements were taken place in Germany and North America. Consequently, encouraged the growth of the green –movements across the globe. A number of groups started working on the issue related to environment like air, land, forest, water, marine resources etc in India. Harsh Sethi classifies the struggles into three categories. The following categories are struggles that operate in the domain of political and economic perspective, raises the issue of rights of



resources. Second, the movements emphasized on the environmental degradation and seeking solution within existing socio-economic perspective and technological aspects. Third, some environmental movements focused both man and nature relationships” ([://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp_content/S000456WS/P000859/M019314/ET/1486099597QUAD-1.pdf](http://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in/epgpdata/uploads/epgp_content/S000456WS/P000859/M019314/ET/1486099597QUAD-1.pdf)). The environmental movement was taken place for various cause like forest and its products, land use industrialization, shortage of agricultural land, using chemical inputs led to degradation of land and water logging, dismantle of mineral resources, big dams and the displacement of people, industry related pollution etc. However, the chipko movement and Narmada Bachaob Andolon (NBA) are the best examples of ecological movement and environmental movement in India. Celebrated scholars like Ramchandra Guha worked on Chipko Movement whereas Amita Baviskar worked on Narmada Bachao Andolon. Guha depicted the Chipko movement in terms of the focusing on state and peasantry (Shaj 2002:423). During the Chipko movement in Uttarkhanda Hills, a large number of women protested against the large scale felling of trees for commercial purpose. This undercurrent of protest against forest management policies of the government and its opposition commercialization purpose and the continuing lack of development of the hills chiefly explains the rise of Chipko movement. Narmada Bachao Andolon was a movement against the large scale displacement of the people and the environmental degradation that the dam caused. On the whole, we can say that, the rights to life or livelihood, personal liberty are mainly at stake. Celebrated Scholar Vandana Shiva (2009) tries to correlate to feminism and environment. Women move forward in various parts of India who actively took participate in environment movement.

In West Bengal, environmental movement was taken place due to the land acquisition in the Singur, West Bengal. It showed people’s movement against land acquisition.

Human Rights Movement

Human Rights refer to those basic rights, which one enjoys by virtue of being a human being. Human rights are those rights by without human beings cannot be survived. According to protection of Human Rights Act 1993, human rights are the rights relating to liberty, equality, and dignity etc of the individual which guaranteed by the constitution and International Covenants and enforceable by courts in India.



During post-independent phase, the human rights movement was generally categorized into before 1970s and after 1970s. The relevant organizations PUCL and PUDR based on their respective ideological grounds.

International organizations like Oxfam International, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International are also played crucial role in accelerating human rights issues. Some scholars conceded their view on various issues for human rights movement like labour related dispute, flaws of police force, lack of free expression, religious dispute, denial of freedom, academic freedom etc.

Human rights issues can be divided into some types. The following types are 1. Issues are relating to several rights of prisoners including their trials, detentions and prison ambience. 2. Violence by the police and armed forces including torture in lock-ups, extra-judicial killings, illegal firing and death in false or fake encounters. 3. Dealing with laws like TADA, POTA, MISA etc.

Since 1990s, National Human Rights Commission and several State Human Rights Commission were made relevant role in Indian socio-political milieu. But the human rights commission are only recommendatory body in India, Several cases reported of human rights violation in front of the Human Rights Commission in recent times. The Commissions only create human rights awareness to the people across the India.

Conclusion

To conclude we can say that social movements, whether old or new, rise directly or indirectly the basic issues centering on human rights. Contemporary social movements in India have focused on the issues of violation of various types of rights including socio-cultural discrimination and social exclusion, environmental issues etc. The religious reform movements in India mainly fought against social evils such as caste and untouchability, sati, polygamy, child marriage. The new social movements like dalit movements, women's movements challenged hierarchical and patriarchal, caste based socio-political order of Indian society. Ambedkar the pro-leader of dalit movement challenged Bhramanism and consent for positive aspects of Buddhism. Economic issue are often than not at the core of tribal movements in India. The land alienation or deprive of land rights is major problem of tribal people. The women's movement in India raised important questions of civil, political rights, cultural and economic rights and achieved considerable success in terms of the



Domestic Violence Prevention Act etc, in recent times. Land acquisition for industrial and public purposes and environmental destruction and human costs caused by huge mining projects has become main issues in recent India. The success and failure of social movements largely depending on the kind of response these movements evoke from the state. Within the changing time, various social movements have been emerged such as movements for single women, LGBTQ communities movements etc which emphasized on basic rights of the respective persons of a group in the Indian society. Sometimes, we have seen these new types of social movements connected each other whether society accept their demands or rejects the same in contemporary scenario of socio –cultural milieu. It is expected that social movements creates awareness of human rights in India and sustain the integrity of multicultural society in near future.

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