

---

# UNIT 12 SOCIAL ACTION: CONCEPT AND APPLICATION

---

*\*Archana Kaushik*

## Contents

- 12.0 Objectives
- 12.1 Introduction
- 12.2 Social Action: Concept and Related Terms
- 12.3 History of Social Action
- 12.4 Scope and Relevance of Social Action
- 12.5 Social Action: Some Reflections
- 12.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 12.7 Further Readings and References
- 12.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

---

## 12.0 OBJECTIVES

---

In the previous Block, we learnt about community mobilisation and group process for community development. In this Block we will be learning about social action and social policy. In this Unit, you will gain an understanding of the meaning and concept of social action. It traces the history of evolution of social action in the Indian panorama. It also covers related terms having similar goals and processes. This Unit chalks out unique characteristics of social action with relevant examples. Overall, this Unit will give you comprehensive idea of social action and its applicability in critical issues that surround the contemporary world.

---

## 12.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Social Action has been used to signify a wide range of primarily voluntary initiative to bring out change in social systems, processes and even structure. There are situations in the social environment that precipitate inequality and injustice, adding to the vulnerabilities and impoverishment, hardship and misery to certain sections of society, which, even after much of efforts, are not resolved amicably – such circumstances call for social action. In this method rights and interests of marginalized people are protected by coming in conflict with systems and structures that perpetuate accumulation of resources and power to disburse those resources in the hands of a few who are insensitive to the needs of weaker sections of society. Through social action, skewed resources and power are redistributed to uplift the disadvantaged groups in the society. Added to this, scope of social action is also to build a democratic and just, transparent and harmonious social structure and efforts are directed towards achieving these objectives too.

In this Unit, the meaning, process, relevance and scope of social action would be covered at length. You may realize that social action is one of the most applicable and appropriate methods in the India's context. *Narmada Bachao Andolan* and movement that led to realization of Right to Information Act, are some of the finest examples to show how pertinent social action is in the contemporary social environment. Let us look into the concept of social action in detail.

---

## **12.2 SOCIAL ACTION: CONCEPT AND RELATED TERMS**

---

The term **Social Action** is being used to depict a spectrum of voluntary action or initiatives that aim to address relevant social, political, economic, ecological and ethical issues in the country. In the last few decades, the term has become increasingly ambivalent and ambiguous with interplay of varying meanings and contexts. A wide range of activities like; charity, relief work, service delivery, public policy initiatives, advocacy campaigns, social movements, socio-political mobilisation, networking for desired social change have been clubbed under the gamut of the term – social action. In a layman's understanding, social action would cover the whole rubric of activities directed towards desired social change for the benefit of masses. Varying meanings emerging out of different types and contexts of problems and their interventions makes social action a complex and yet dynamic concept.

In the Indian context, social reform movement and following movement for political freedom and the tradition of Gandhian approach to social work and social action have played a crucial role in shaping the perspective of social action meant for the upliftment of downtrodden. Social action is taken as a transformational practice to meet the objective of promoting well-being by bringing change in the arrangements in social system that lead to inequality and injustice, preventing people from realizing their full potential as self-determining agents. Likewise, from the Gandhian perspective, social action as a practice covers varying degrees of samrachana (reconstruction) and sangharsh (struggle).

Let us understand the concept of social action through some of the definitions provided by different authors.

Mary Richmond, for the first time, in 1922, made use of the term social action in social work. She has defined social action as “mass betterment through propaganda and social legislation”. This definition stresses on improving the condition of huge sections of population as an aim of social action with propaganda and social legislations as main strategies.

**Lee (1937)** stated, “social action seems to suggest efforts directed towards changes in law or social structure or towards the initiation of new movements for the modification of the current social practices”. Planned social change seems to be the aim of social action as per this definition.

**Coyle (1937)** noted, “social action is the attempt to change the social environment in ways, which will make life more satisfactory. It aims to affect not individuals but social institutions, laws, customs, communities”. This definition stresses on collectivistic approach of social action rather than individualistic.

**Fitch (1940)** maintained that social action is legally permissible action by a group (or by an individual trying to promote group action) for the purpose of furthering objectives that are both legal and socially desirable. This definition focuses on inclusion of those strategies that are legally permissible in the process of social action.

**Hill (1951)** described social action as “organized group effort to solve mass social problems or to further socially desirable objectives by attempting to influence basic social and economic conditions or practices”. Here, influencing basic social and economic conditions has been highlighted as the function of social action.

**Wickendon (1956)** applied the term social action to that aspect of organized social welfare actively directed towards shaping, modifying or maintaining the social institution and policies that collectively constitute the social environment. Desirable change in social structure is the key element in this definition.

Likewise, **Baldwin (1966)** defined social action as “an organized effort to change social and economic institutions as distinguished from social work or social service, the fields of which do not characteristically cover essential changes in established institutions. Social action covers movements of political reforms, industrial democracy, social legislation, racial and social justice, religious freedom and civic liberty, its techniques include propaganda, research and lobbying”. This is a comprehensive definition of social action, noting its uniqueness in relation to other social work methods, strategies and techniques being used and dimensions covered.

**Friedlander (1977)** stated that social action is an individual, group or community effort within the framework of social work philosophy and practice that aims to achieve social progress, to modify social policies and to improve social legislation and health and welfare services. Modifying social policies and improving legislations are significant aspects of this definition.

All these definitions give different viewpoints of social action and yet share many common features. To some, its scope is broad while others limit its relevance and significance in their definitions. Similarly, differential opinions are expressed regarding the usage of strategies and tactics of social action. Let us look at some more definitions of social action, especially those by Indian social work authors.

**Nanawati (1965)** considered social action as “a process of bringing about the desired changes by deliberate group and community efforts. Social action does not end with the enactment and signing of social legislation, but that the execution of the policies was the real test of success or failure of social action”. This definition focuses on long term impact of social action as indicator of its success.

**Moorthy (1966)** stated that “the scope of social action includes work during catastrophic situations such as fires, floods, epidemics, famines, etc., besides securing social legislation”. Work during calamities and disasters have been highlighted in this definition.

The Institute of Gandhian Studies defines social action as the term commonly applied to “social welfare activity, which is directed towards shaping or

modifying social institutions and policies that constitute the social environment in which we live.”

**Singh (1986)** maintained that “social action is a process in which conscious, systematic and organized efforts are made by some elite(s) and/or people themselves to bring about change in the system which is instrumental in solving problems and improving conditions which limit the social functioning of weaker and vulnerable sections. It is, on the practical plane, nearer to social reform than to social revolution, which aims at smashing the entire existing social structure and to build up a new social set-up. It is conflictual in nature but at the same time non-violent”. This broad definition covers many shades of social action – clarifying the process, goal, target groups, nature, resemblance with social reform and ethical base of non-violence.

Thus, we observe that social action aims at bringing about structural changes in the social and economic systems largely through social legislation and alterations in social policy. Disadvantaged section is the target population and mass mobilisation is crucial, yet, target group may or may not actively participate in the planned intervention. It is planned and conscious effort with specific strategies and techniques to be implemented to achieve the goals of equality, social justice and empowerment.

Now, attention may be diverted to some of the social interventions and processes that share similar aims and objectives as social action. One such term is **Advocacy**. A Latin word, advocacy means — raising voice on behalf of others [ad- on behalf of others and voca-raising voice]. It is an activity that influences, motivates and encourages democratic powers to take decisions on various social issues and problems in favour of downtrodden and marginalized population. Advocacy may be defined as the process of influencing and persuading those people who have social, political and economic powers so that they can bring desired changes in the policies with the aim to ensure equitable resource distribution in the social system.

Advocacy, in its aim and even usage of strategies is very similar to social action. They share same values and ethics as their belief in equitable distribution of resources, human rights and social justice. Advocacy is one of the strategies of social action, the latter being broader and more complex.

Another term that shares similarity with social action is **Social Movement**. Wilkinson (1971) defined social movement as “a deliberate collective endeavour to promote change in any direction and by any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution or withdrawal into ‘utopian’ community”. In another definition, Blumer (1957) says, “social movements are collective enterprises to establish a new order of life”. Peasant movement, tribal movement, dalit movement, women’s movement, students’ movement, etc., are a few examples of social movement. The downtrodden and the marginalized communities have mobilized themselves and raised their voice against the failure of state and society to safeguard their livelihood and Rights. Social action and social movement share same ideological beliefs and values, but social movements have been, more often than not, unplanned and sporadic while social action is a well-defined process initiated and guided by social work professionals in the

light of theoretical and conceptual basis. However, you may recall that Narmada Bachao Movement is led by a social work professional, Ms. Medha Patekar.

Social action is taken as an auxiliary method of professional social work. It is an organized effort to change or improve social and economic institutions. Some of the social problems like dowry system, depletion of natural resources, alcoholism, housing, health, etc., can be and have been tackled through social action. The objective of social action is the proper shaping and development of socio-cultural environment in which a richer and fuller life may be possible for all the citizens. From the above discussion, certain peculiar features of social action may well be delineated. It is essentially, an intervention directed for solution of mass problem(s) and aimed at improvement of mass conditions. It talks about influencing institutions, policies and practices. The goal of social action is redistribution of power, resources, human and material. It aims to do advocacy on behalf of, or along with, mobilized sections of disadvantaged client population. It tends to influence the decision-making process at the political and social levels.

Thus, we see that social action is seen as a method to be used to bring about or prevent change in the social system through a process of making people aware of the socio-political and economic realities that influence or condition their lives and by mobilizing them to organize themselves for bringing about the desired results through the use of appropriately worked out strategies, with the exception of violence. Let us take a look at the historical processes related to emergence of social action.

**Check Your Progress 1**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Enlist five peculiar features of social action as given in the definitions above.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

### **12.3 HISTORY OF SOCIAL ACTION**

---

India has a long tradition and history of reform movements, voluntary actions and philanthropic initiatives with the aim to seek welfare of masses. In the light of social situations, that were mainly social problems affecting the masses, reform movements took place in India. Even during Bhakti movement, Kabir, Nanak, and other religious reformers in their preaching addressed the removal or abolition of social evils in the name of traditional practices that were creating hurdles in the well-being of common people.

It may be noted that in the West, problems were mainly psychosocial in nature, more focused to individual behaviour and social interactions. This resulted in development of methods of social work practice like casework and group work, which was further substantiated with Freudian psychoanalytical theories and Erickson's psychosocial theories that were developed during that period only.

In India, problems were of different nature — illiteracy, poverty, exploitation of lower caste people, untouchability, abuse and exploitation of women and inherent practices of gender discrimination and the like. These social evils prevented a large section of the society from getting equitable distribution of resources and opportunities for development and thereby enjoying a dignified life. Social reform movement led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and Iswarchandar Vidhyasagar resulted in abolition of *sati pratha*, measures for permitting widow remarriage among Hindus, entry of women in the formal education system and so on. Dwarkanath Tagore, Debendranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen and others worked for founding educational institutions for women and emancipation of women in West Bengal. In western part of the country like Maharashtra, Prarthana Samaj established in 1867 in Bombay clamoured for caste reform. Justice Ranade, considered as the Father of the Renaissance in Western India, founded Widow Marriage Association. Similarly, Jyotiba Phule established orphanages and schools for girls. In the same way, Ramakrishana Mission founded by Swami Vivekananda did a lot of social service like starting dispensaries and orphanages, running schools, etc.

All these initiatives set the stage for more concrete form of social action. Certain benefits of these social reform movements were passage of social legislations like abolition of sati custom, widow remarriage Act, mobilisation of masses and awareness about social evils. Further, historical evidences reflect that though there have been history of social reform and social movements for more than two thousand years in India, a more formalized and coherent form of social action emerged in the beginning of the nineteenth century. This formalized social action which emerged as a political response to the colonial state by the British in India. As the social base for political freedom broadened, the dividing line between social movement for abolition of social evils in the country and political movement as freedom struggle almost disappeared. Movements led by socially enlightened individuals, particularly, in the last half of the nineteenth century, helped in creating social and political spaces for social action.

Freedom movement, especially led by Mahatma Gandhi laid foundation of a strong culture of social action. It may be noted that the legacy of the Gandhian social action has played a crucial role in laying the foundation of social action in India. Gandhian social action includes a combination of *samrachana* (that is, reconstruction) and *satyagraha* (insistence on truth). He practiced and preached for imbibing values of non-violence, stressed on ideas of *swadeshi* (of one's own country) and *swaraj* (self-rule). Gandhian ideology of peaceful protest in the freedom struggle has made the whole world bow down in front of his ideology, conviction and belief. Alongside, he also stressed on reconstruction— The Tolstoy farm was set up by Gandhi, with the funding support of his German friend Kallenbach, Sir Ratan Tata, Nizam of Hyderabad, Indian National Congress and Muslim League. These led to formation of various kinds of institutions to strengthen social action.

Further, Gandhian activism to protect the rights of peasants in Champaran and Kheda and the rights of mill workers in Ahmedabad demonstrated the effectiveness of micro-level social action in influencing the larger political arenas and action. The Gandhian praxis of grassroots political struggle along with macro-level policy initiatives and broader interventions for social reform further set the guidelines for social action. The ideas of satyagrah and swadeshi served both as ethical principles as well as political strategies. The cumulative social action at the socio-political arena helped in the emergence of a more radical stream in the freedom movement in the first decades of the twentieth century. Inspired by Gandhiji, the political movement, infused with the spirit of social reform, became a national movement participated by all, irrespective of caste, creed or community.

After 1920, for about three decades, many other instances of social action emerged at the center-stage. Prominent ones are communist movements, Dalit movement initiated by Dr. Ambedkar, the Hindutva movement propounded by Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. In consonance, the social reform movement against the hegemonical Brahmanism, led by Mahatma Phule in Maharashtra, Narayana Guru in Kerala and Periyar Ramaswamy Naykkar in Tamil Nadu were other important social justice initiatives. The reformist initiatives for the welfare and equality of women by Pandita Ramabai and Savitribai Phule also played significant role in the endeavours of political freedom. Likewise, Ramakrishna Mission initiated a number of charitable, reformist, educational, welfare and development activities.

All these small scale and large, regional and national level social action initiatives propagated mass mobilisation, mass awareness and action, provided ample opportunity to practice skills, techniques of social action, encouraged leadership among few and ability to question surroundings among the masses that hamper their social functioning. This in turn, strengthened the historical background of social action in India and courage and confidence to fight for freedom against colonialism.

After Independence, many young idealists expressed their dissent to the apathy of the state and to the cynical manipulation by the dominant political parties. Social action by Jai Prakash Narayan, social movement led by Medha Patekar, Aruna Roy and Arvind Kejriwal's initiatives for Right to Information Act and many more are some fine examples of relatively recent social action interventions.

**World-wide trend:** Likewise, the world history is also full of examples of social action that were expressed in the form of Civil Rights Movement, Student Unrest in the USA against the Vietnam War, the revolt in Prague against the authoritarian State, the Naxalite movement in India and the neo-left movements in different parts of the world. Many of these movements were a reaction to an increasingly authoritarian and oppressive state and associated insensitive socio-political processes. Emergence of Liberation theology was an expression of dissent to the oppressive power structures of the state. Feminist movement sought to question the structure of patriarchy. The two aspects common in various kinds of movement were the sense of dissent (to traditional state, power structures, culture and ideologies) and a mass mobilisation to bring about change in the existing structure and system. These social movements, reform initiatives

---

## **12.4 SCOPE AND RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL ACTION**

---

The scope of social action is very vast. The innovative approaches, participatory techniques, outreach, and holistic thinking are critically important in creating a better world. In fact, it is due to social action by some of the socially enlightened people and voluntary sector, that various basic Rights - the Right to Health, the Right to Water and Food, the Right to Shelter and Work, the Right to Knowledge, the Right to a Dignified and Just life, the Right to one's Entitlements, etc., have been put on the table. Recently, the successes made in terms of legislation like as Right To Information Act and National Rural Employment Guarantee Act are because of concerted efforts and constant pressure exerted on the government by civil society organizations.

Apparently, you may think that if government of our country that has committed itself to be welfare-state, takes adequate measures for the welfare and development of the weaker section of the society, then, what is the scope left for social action. Hypothetically you may be right but despite the pro-active face of the government, socio-demographic indicators give us a dismal picture of the country. Nearly 40 percent of the country's population is living below poverty line. Poverty levels continue to be high even though every year newer schemes and approaches for poverty alleviation are designed and implemented. Even after more than 60 years of Independence, there are places like Kalahandi where still people die of hunger. At many places like in Orissa, people sell off their offspring for a few rupees because of poverty. Crores and crores of rupees are allocated for combating poverty, and statistics reflect that numbers of people below poverty line are increasing every year.

Further, female literacy rate in the country is still nearly 50%. According to one estimate, close to 50% of students in the age group of 6-11 years are not able to read, write and do simple arithmetic. Similarly with respect to health, the situation is very bleak if not worse — 80% people opt for private health care system when need arises as government health care system lays behind both in quality and quantity. It is estimated that about 3% of the population are pushed below poverty line every year because of health expenditure. Social security system in the country lags behind even those nations that are economically quite poor off compared to us.

Nonetheless, taking the broader and optimistic view of India's fast progress and booming economy would not let us (the social work professionals) to pay attention to problems like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, gender discrimination, female foeticide, child labour, accessibility and affordability of adequate health care system, provision of social security system and so on and so forth. Social action is meant to bring about necessary changes in the policy and legislation for well-being of disadvantaged sections of society. Further, if policies and social legislations are in place, then focus should be shifted to implementation stage. Despite innumerable schemes and programmes, policies and legislations, if things at grassroots are not right, then, social action may be



carried out to set the systems right, which indeed is the need of the hour in the present Indian context. It may be affirmed again that there is a need to bring out necessary changes in the system — fixing people who are not performing their duties sincerely, people who are corrupt and eat up money meant for the welfare of the poor, politicians involved in various scams — all these situations call for social action as milder approaches would not work in such cases.

There have been innumerable instances of successful work accomplishments through social action. Social action is a powerful tool that becomes much more effective if the primary stakeholders (beneficiaries) are mobilized to create the pressure. Now- a-days, even media is playing a vital and pro-active role — justice in Jessica Lal Murder case, and Priyadarshini Mattoo case were resolved after media’s social action. Even Indian cinema has projected potential of social action in an excellent manner through movies like Lage Raho Munna Bhai, Rang De Basanti that have triggered successful social action and advocacy in different parts of the country. There are many more examples of social action that have been carried out in recent past in various parts of the country.

**Check Your Progress 2**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Discuss briefly the scope of social action with elderly with special reference to India.

.....  
.....  
.....

---

## **12.5 SOCIAL ACTION: SOME REFLECTIONS**

---

Social action is an important instrument in social development. As the empowerment approach gained momentum, the relevance of social action increased further. There was a paradigm shift in the way planning and implementation of socially relevant projects and programmes were taken up. Initially social planners and policy makers planned for the people at grassroots ‘assuming’ their problems and needs (Trickle down theory). Then, gradually there was shift in the focus and primary beneficiaries are now involved in the process of planning and implementation which is bottom up approach. With 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments people at grassroots are enabled to take active part in social auditing through gram sabha and ensure accountability, transparency and judicious use of their resources. Though many evaluation studies have shown that panchayati raj system is a paper tiger, it may be visualized as a solid system, at least anatomically, that needs social action intervention and people’s active participation may be sought to make the system function effectively.

In most of the Third World countries, welfaristic approach dominates due to charity and religious obligations. In that context, adopting an empowerment perspective, largely through consensus, is not an easy task. There is a need to

build up a new theoretical discourse and perspective on social action, based on a fresh look at the various social action practices and institutionalization process, in the context of the paradigm shift in the production of knowledge, communication and political process.

The process of social action is often moulded by the larger socio-political contexts and cultural ethos. Social action encompasses both moral and political under currents. There are some slippery patches while practicing social action, avoidance of which requires a great deal of maturity. Often times, when one gets lot of recognition and support from the public while mobilizing people, it becomes difficult to control temptation to ‘enjoy’ power. As seen in several recent mobilisations (disguised as social action), political parties approach the leaders for collaborations for their petty gains. While political platform gives power to bring about the desired change in the social structure and systems quite rapidly, more often than not, people get caught in the clutches of vote politics and lose out their actual goal for which the mission and the movement began. On the flipside, public support fizzles out soon if the desired results are not achieved in a limited time. Thus, practicing social action needs to be very careful of the dynamics of this powerful method of working with people.

One of the interesting facts that you may realize is that while there is no dearth of interventions through social action in the country, before or after independence. It just required commitment, understanding of the issue at hand and conviction and courage.

**Check Your Progress 3**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answer.

- 1) Mention very briefly any social action intervention that you have initiated/ experienced/observed in your surroundings.

.....  
.....  
.....

---

## **12.6 LET US SUM UP**

---

Social action is one of the very challenging and powerful methods used for mobilizing masses in order to bring about structural changes in the social system or to prevent negative changes. It is based on human rights perspective and adopts the process of empowerment through redistributive justice. Certain social problems like poverty, exploitation, abuse, stigmatization, ecological issues, bonded labour, child labour, women empowerment, substance abuse, etc., can be tackled through social action. The main objective of social action is to bring solution of mass problems, improve in mass conditions and redistribution of power, resources (human, material and moral). Other similar terms like advocacy and social movement were also mentioned in this Unit the historical evolution of social action tracing bhakti movement, social reform movements

and political struggle led by Gandhiji. Gandhian ideology plays a crucial role in social action.

While discussing scope and relevance of social action, we explored that majority of developmental issues in the contemporary world may be resolved through social action. If we want to have long term solutions and believe in human rights and empowerment perspective, then social action becomes apt for us.

---

## **12.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES**

---

- 1) Britto, G.A.A., (1984): Social Action and Social Work Education in the Eighties, in *Social Work and Social Action* (ed) H.Y. Siddiqui, Harnam Publications.
- 2) Britto, G.A.A., (1984): Some Principles of Social Action, in *Social Work and Social Action* (ed) H.Y. Siddiqui, Harnam Publications.
- 3) Samuel, J. (2000): *Social Action: An Indian Panorama*,(ed.), Pune: Voluntary Action Network India.
- 4) Chowdhry, D. Paul, (1992): *Introduction to Social Work*, Atma Ram & Sons, Delhi.
- 5) Davis, Martin, (2000): *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social Work*, (eds.) Blackwell Publishers, Massachusetts, pp.317-318.
- 6) Friedlander, W.A. (1977): *Introduction to Social Welfare*, Prentice Hill, New Delhi.
- 7) Moorthy, M.V., (1966): *Social Action*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay.
- 8) Nanavati, M.C., (1965): Social Action and The Professional Social Work” *social work forum*, vol.III, no.2, pp.26-29.
- 9) Pathak, S.H., (1971): Social Welfare, *Health and Family Planning*, New Delhi.
- 10) Siddiqui, H.Y., (1984): *Social Work and Social Action* (ed.), Harnam Publications
- 11) Singh, Surender (1986): Social Action in *Horizons of Social Work* (ed). By Surender Singh & K.S. Soodan, op. cit. p. 161.
- 12) Foran, J. (2003): *The Future of Revolutions*. Landon: Zed Books.