
UNIT 8 PATTERNS OF DISSENT AND PROTEST MOVEMENTS IN INDIAN STATES

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8.1 INTRODUCTION

A large number of people are not satisfied with the existing pattern of relations. They find the economic, social, cultural and political aspects of these relations unjust and one-sided. People have protested in different states of India against such patterns of relations. The protest of people have taken the form of protest movements. In this unit you will study patterns of dissent and some protest movements in Indian states.

8.2 MEANINGS: DISSENT AND PROTEST

The history of human civilisation is marked by “dissents” and “protests” within human relationships and human groups and also between civil and political society. Dissent means disagreement or withholding assent. It has a negative connotation i.e. a dissenter is a non-conformist. During medieval period dissent was considered as sacrilege. However, in democracy it acquired a new meaning carrying the notion of radical and hence not conforming to the values that are either “authoritatively” allocated by the state or practiced by the civil society. Protest is something more than dissent. It emerges out from dissent and is a concrete form or expression of disapproval or objection. Protest and dissent are inseparable so much so that without dissent protest does not have any meaning. If both dissent and protest form the basis of human organisation into a group and with its own goal, leadership, certain degree of motivation and political communication,

it takes the shape of a movement. Movements entail collective action to transform and change the status quo. In a democratic society, such kinds of movements are referred to as “social movements” in general and since the later part of the twentieth century as “new social movements”. These movements build upon various themes such as ecology, gender, human rights and so on, present a kind of pattern that requires incisive analysis. The protest is expressed against any form of domination and discrimination. The protest movements are movements against unjust and unequal order in social, economic, political or cultural form.

8.3 PROTEST MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The protest movements are forms of social movements. Some scholars like Andre Gunder Frank and Marta Fuentes differentiate between the social and political movements. The former are meant to change the patterns of relations in the social domain, and the latter are related to political aspects. But some scholars like Ghanshyam Shah argue that there is no difference between social and political movements; both are used synonymously. The study of social movements seeks to focus on political sociology, that is, the study of politics of the masses, their aspirations and demands, articulation of their problems, the modus operandi in asserting their demands outside the institutional framework and their occasional efforts at overthrowing the existing state power. Political scientists had largely ignored this area of study for greater understanding of political processes. The recent emphasis on social movements indicates a marked shift from positivism, institutionalism, constitutionalism and state-centricism perspectives towards a holistic understanding of social conflict and change.

The components of a social movement are the ideology, programmes, strategy, objectives of social change leadership and patterns of mobilisation. Social movements are usually specific to culture, history and social structure. Issues and strategies of movements are relative to societies and to their history. For instance, quest for freedom may become the central issue for the struggle of a collectivity in one society, in one period; the same quest may emerge in another society in another period. The mission in the movements is to reject or alter the past and present forms of norms and values of society to have a better society. The idea of ‘social transformation’ or ‘change’ is at the core of social optimism, and therefore, challenges the fixed notions of values, norms, power and hierarchy in the society. It aims for social optimism by ‘deconstructing’ the critical conflictual aspects.

The state perceives the protest and social movements as a challenge to its legitimacy of governance. So the immediate response of the State is negative and suppressive. If the intensity of the movements is high, the state uses various strategies and tactics to diffuse collective action by soft paddling and leniency involving dialogue and negotiation and appeasing and co-opting the participants. Rajni Kothari maintains that the transformation of the state is to be achieved through the transformation of the civil society through grass-roots model of mass politics as against the parliamentary or presidential or party model of mass politics. The role of the centrally coordinated decision making of the state must change to a more participative, operating in concert with other centers and institutional spaces in civil society. The State must wriggle out from the dominant interest and classes and maintain autonomy to effectively act as a mediator in conflicts and stresses of civil society. And, the concept of movement to be embedded in the

notion of going beyond the nation-state syndrome of statehood, in particular the national security state syndrome.

Ghanshyam Shah classifies movements into revolt, rebellion, reform and revolution to bring about changes in the political system. Reform seeks to change in the part of the system and does not challenge the political system per se; revolt poses a challenge to political authority, aiming at overthrowing the government; rebellion aims at attacking the existing authority without any intention to seize state power and in revolution, a section or sections of the society launch an organised struggle to overthrow not only the established government and regime but also socio-economic structure which sustains it, and replace the structure by an alternative social order. T. K. Oommen believes that social movements provide the stage for confluence between the old and new values and structures. M.S.A. Rao also offers a typology that movements as reformist, transformatory and revolutionary. David Baylely divides 'coercive public protest' into legal and illegal protest further, each category subdivided into violent and non-violent protests. Another classification may be grassroots and macro movements, or on the basis of issues around which participants get mobilised.

8.4 CHARACTERISTICS AND PATTERNS OF PROTEST MOVEMENTS

There has been a spurt of protest movements since the 1970s in different states of India. These movements have been identified as the new social movements by some scholars. They are new in the sense that they have emerged in new context, Gail Omvedt identifies the main characteristic of these movements as apolitical, with new organisation and leadership aiming to change the relations of dominance and subordination. But all protest movements can not be termed as new social movements, since they still raise the issues which are related to the traditional economic and social relations.

In almost all states of India there are some characteristics and patterns of protest movements. The principal patterns can be identified as follows:

- 1) Disenchantment with the formal political institutions,
- 2) Increased violence within the civil society
- 3) Failure of state to deliver public good and services
- 4) Emergence of new social and political forces, and
- 5) States' response in the form of coercion, accommodation and repression

Mass movements or protests are largely have got subsumed in the popular culture being promoted as the 'globalised culture'. The Marxist scholars attribute it to the 'multilineal character' and 'all pervasive hierarchy' of the Indian society. However, some scholars criticise this and say that the protest movements are the result of the clash between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. The revolution of rising expectations of people is not met with political justice and hence there emerges a gap between 'political instability' and 'disorder'. Rajni Kothari argues that there is a need for 'direct action' in such kind of 'parliamentary democracy', so that the state gets transformed. Thus, the transformation of the state is to be achieved through the transformation of the civil society and not the other way. The role of the centralised state must decline to the extent that it operates in

concert with other centers as well as other institutional spaces in civil society. The state should be enabled to regain its autonomy from dominant interests and classes; it should be gradually made to wither away as an instrument of class and ethnic oppression but enabled to survive as a mediator in conflicts and stresses that will continue to take place in civil society. There is also a need to move beyond the nation — state syndrome of statehood.

8.5 EXAMPLES OF PROTEST MOVEMENTS

There are large number cases of dissent and protest movements in several states of India. These movements include those of all sections society. Some of these want to change the pattern dominance and subordination; some want to reinforce their dominance by demanding more concessions from the state; some challenge even the notion of nation-state.

8.5.1 The Naxalite Movements

Different shades of naxalite movements express protest against three sources of exploitation i.e. the unequal and exploitative economic relations, the oppressive caste system and the Indian states. According to them the exploiting classes in collaboration with imperialist forces and using the feudal-capitalist ideologies exploit the poor people. The solution to the problem lies in overthrowing the existing political, social and economic system. They profess the use of violent means in achieving their goal. The naxalites have been against participating in elections. But some of them have changed their attitudes about elections and have participated the elections.

The naxalite movement, which started by Kanu Sanyal and Charu Mazumdar in Naxalbari area of West Bengal in 1967 spread into several states in some years. The principal states among these are Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. But naxalites do not have wide spread social base in these states. They have strong pockets of support there. The main naxalite organisations are Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha (BPKs), the Marxist Coordination Committee (MCC) and the People's War Group. The naxalites have mobilised people on issues like increase in agricultural wages, land to the tiller. In Bihar, particularly, they have combined their struggle against class discrimination with the struggle against caste oppression. They have targeted their class enemies with violence, including kidnapping.

8.5.2 The Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM)

Chhattisgarh, a region in Madhya Pradesh till 2000, and thereafter a state, is more known by its liberation front (Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha), a protest movement exposing the interface between governance and civil society, than by anything else. This movement informs us that the relationship between some sections of civil society and the government is not always reciprocal or complementary, and that it may well be conflictual. The deep fault lies within civil society, which exists between dominant and subaltern groups. Society is deeply conflictive and hierarchically organised sphere, wherein the “haves” — rich and upper caste groups — form the social basis of the State, while the other groups — “have-nots” — are oppressed both by the state and the dominant groups. It is this oppressed group which protests and challenges both sets of interest i.e. the interest of the dominant group and the state — in the form of a “social movement”. The Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha clearly brings to light the rather truncated civil society, the top aligning with the political society. The Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha has thrown up an alternative,

in the sense of how a social movement can engender a new method of transforming society and shaping it in the modern mode.

The struggle of the workers in Chhattisgarh is rooted in the development and modernising project that denies them their basic rights and exploits them with pain and misery. It was with the establishment of the Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP) that new development took place in the socio-economic arena. The plant recruited only 10 per cent of the total 70,000 workers who were asked to perform casual manual work under hazardous conditions. The payment of wages to the daily casual workforce was erratic and much below the prescribed minimum wage. Even All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) that took the issue of low wages and exploitative work conditions failed to address the problems of casual workers. During this time, Shankar Guha Niyogi, who joined BSP (1961) as an engineering apprentice at the coke oven plant, founded the Blast Furnace Action Committee with 16 members and launched the struggle against the management by organising a number of strikes on the issue of remuneration. This was beginning of the first phase of the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha.

Very soon, within seven years Niyogi was thrown out of BSP management on charges of conspiracy and thereafter he decided to live with the people and organise them politically. He organised people at Bastar to fight against the middlemen profiting from the sale of meat by the villagers to urban areas but it was at Danitola that he began to mobilise quartzite stone mineworkers, under the banner of AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress) and established contacts with political activists at Dalli Rajhara, the headquarter of the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha. In fact, Danitola became the site for his experiments in 'trade unionism with a difference'. Niyogi was subjected to repeated coercion and harassment by the police, was imprisoned, exterminated from some of the districts of Chhattisgarh, and subjected to calumny. He, nevertheless, managed to institute a spectacular movement "New Chhattisgarh for New Delhi".

It was during the last days of emergency that around ten thousand workers of Dalli Rajhara revolted against the local trade union leadership of the AITUC and INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress) on the issue of equal bonus for regular as well as contract labour. The contract labourers of BSP were discriminated against even regarding payment of bonus hence they formed labour organisation under the leadership of Banshilal Sahoo. Meanwhile, Niyogi, after his release from jail, started organising the workers at Dalli Rajhara to support the strike and got Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS) registered in Indore. CMSS put forth an 18-point charter before the management mainly pertaining to increased wage payments, better working conditions and some job security. Initially CMSS met with success but in due course of time sufferance repression of management and police measures were taken by the management and police. However, in November 1977 the workers of Dalli Rajhara, Danitola and Hirri went on strike for 56 days and consequently the management conceded to their demands. CMSS was euphoric, as it had achieved success for the first time without the backing of the trade unions. It managed to raise the daily wage from Rs 3.50 to Rs 7.00 and subsequently to Rs 80.00, the highest daily wage in the country. But Niyogi, not content with the improvement in wages, wanted to radicalise the movement beyond trade union activities also included social reforms in his activities. He launched the anti-liquor movement as for most of the workers liquor consumption. The anti-liquor campaign, largely led by women, achieved a great measure of success as liquor shops were closed, people were discouraged from visiting them and social sanctions were imposed on those who did. This movement heralded a change in most of the

aspects of life and work of the labourers: Issues such as environment, appropriate technology, gender relations and the abolition of exploitative work conditions were to be considered by the movements. In fact, in 1978-79, the people of Dalli Rajhara formed the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha (CMM), a federation of about twenty organisations.

With the formation of CMM, the domain of the struggle expanded and by 1990s, it had developed into a well-organised trade union. However, in its initial formation stage it marked the culmination of a struggle that had recognised that any movement for workers needs to integrate both their living and working conditions. CMM held that the union must move beyond focusing on just economic issues and to encompass other spheres that touch the life of the working classes. The movement sent an important message, that “where governance fails to deliver justice to the people, the people through the process of struggle, establish the preconditions of justice for themselves. Ineffective governance was challenged by the mobilisation of civil society to secure the basic conditions of life and dignity for its inhabitants”. CMM organised Rajnandgaon Kapda Mazdoor Sangh in 1984 in the Bengal Nagpur Cotton (BNC) Mills and met with success. It carried on the work of unionising labourers in Bhilai under the leadership of Niyogi.

On the whole, by 1990s the experience of mobilising the miners had been successful and Niyogi turned his attention to other areas in the region that were marked by the exploitation of workers. CMM by now had transformed itself into a mass movement. For instance, on October 2, 1990, Niyogi called a meeting of workers of Bhilai but the BJP government in the State banned the meeting. The meeting was then shifted to Rajpur where about thirty thousand people participated, including workers from Delhi and Calcutta as well as tribals from Abujmar. The rally was a colossal success. Within a year Niyogi was arrested on the ground that he had not presented himself for the court hearings. Soon he was released but started receiving death threats. It was in September 1991 that Niyogi had met the President, the Prime Minister, and the Opposition leaders, petitioning against the high-handedness of the industrialists. Barely 10 days after his return from Delhi (September 28, 1991), Niyogi was shot dead in Bhilai. CMM, however, did not cease to exist. It focused on two main issues: carrying out an agitation against the MP High Court’s decision to set aside the conviction and death sentence on Niyogi’s assassins, and furthering Niyogi’s concept of “Sangharsh aur Nirman” by paying attention to all aspects of the lives of the marginalised. CMM has now expanded its constituency from workers to also cover marginal farmers. CMM continues with its work of mobilisation by organising massive rallies on Martyr’s Day (July 1) and Shaheed Diwas (September 28). It has also expanded its struggle to fight against all forms of injustice, with the Nyayaagrah Movement being initiated for just this purpose. It has undertaken the job of providing basic amenities to the people such as education, health, rehabilitation of slum dwellers, establishment of Shahid Garage, release of bonded labourers, securing women’s rights, conscious raising programs, struggle against mechanisation, environmental protection programs and participation in elections. It is this creative aspect of the movement that sets it apart from other civil society organisation – pressure groups that work within the framework provided by the State or social movements that deal with single issues.

8.5.3 The Self-Determination Movements

Self-determination movements express dissent against the existing arrangement of relations between the principal political unit and its constituent units. In relation to the nation-state, certain nationalities, and in relation to the dominant nationalities the smaller nationalities question the

existing relations. They feel that such an arrangement was unjust and detrimental to their interests. On the contrary it favoured the dominant groups. In order to change this type of relations, the smaller nationalities start self-determination movements. Such movements may assume the form of autonomy movements demanding separate political unit from the existing dominant unit with due respect to the sovereignty of nation-state. They may also question the sovereignty of the nation-state and demand establishment of their own sovereign state. Various states in India have witnessed the rise and fall different forms of self-determination movements at different point of times. The principal examples of demands in various states for the formation of separate states within the parameters of Indian constitution include the formation of Telangana state, Vidharbha, Harit Pradesh, etc. Recently in 2002 three new states were created as a result of movements which demand their formation. These states are Uttaranchal, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. The demand for creation of sovereign states has come mainly from the North-East, Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab. Earlier such demand was made in the Tamil speaking areas of south India. It is important to note here that all self-determination movements in these regions do not advocate sovereign state for them; they would like to have a suitable rearrangement of federal relations within the framework of Indian constitution.

The movements which challenge the sovereignty of the Indian nation-state are also called the insurgencies. Some of them get support of the masses. They target the institutions and organisations which are identified with the nation-state or central government, or even the social groups which are perceived to be patronised by the central government. The response of the state to these movements included accommodation of a group of leadership and weakening them, dividing the insurgent groups or use of coercion.

Use of coercion has given rise to the related problem, i.e., the human rights violation. The security forces have used repressive measures against the insurgents and their supporters. Many times the innocent persons have also been targeted by the security forces. This has prompted the human rights groups to demand protection of the human rights of the insurgents and the people. As the security forces have also been attacked by the insurgents, the latter also demand that their human rights should also be protected from the insurgents.

8.5.4 Anti-Development Movements

Development based on the modern scientific approaches has not been sustainable. It means that for the development – setting up modern institutions, industries, dams etc., the natural resources have been used in such a way that they can not be retained. Apart from the depletion of natural resources, development has also caused miseries to human being. On the one had it has led to the displacement and migration of people from their traditional habitat, on the other hand their traditional knowledge has been made redundant. People – the civil society, NGOs, grass root organisations, have responded to the encroachment by development and modernisation in different fields- against construction of big dams, deforestation, etc. They have demanded that development should be sustainable; it means that the natural resources and traditional knowledge should be used in such way that natural resources are not totally depleted and the traditional knowledge is retained. Such development is known as sustainable. There has been reaction for and against development. It is opposed by the people who feel adversely affected, by intellectuals, Gandhians, NGOs sympathetic to the affected people, and by the states where the affected people reside. Conversely, industrialists, the foreign funding agencies like World Bank and IMF extend their support to such development. Most important examples of Peoples’

protest against development include Narmada Bachao Andolan and the environmental movements. Narmada Bachao Andolan which has continued for more than three decades in different forms has got strong opposition and support. The construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam, which is opposed by the Narmada Bachao Andolan is supported by different Gujarat governments, politicians, and the World Bank, but it has been opposed by Narmada Bachao Andolan, people, politicians and governments in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattishgarh. The attitude of the central government has been ambivalent dictated by the political considerations.

8.6 SUMMARY

To sum up, dissent means withholding consent or showing disagreement. When dissent takes the form unorganised or organised activity is becomes a protest. There have been protest movements in different states of India. These protest have been against the real or perceived discrimination or unequal social, economic, cultural or political relations. Protest movements also form some kind of social movements. In Indian states there have been various kinds of protest movements. Different shades of Naxalite movements, Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha, self-determination movements and anti-development movements, which have been discussed in this unit provide an understanding to the patterns of dissent protest in India states.

8.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the relationships between the social movements and protest movements.
- 2) Write a note on the Naxalite movements.
- 3) Analyse the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha.
- 4) Compare the self-determination movements and anti-development movements.