

Unit 29 Social Movements: Meanings and Dimensions

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Learning Objectives

Social movements have emerged to be a crucial area of social science inquiry. This unit deals with

- the concepts of social movements
- origin of social movements
- element of social movements and
- transformation of social movements

29.1 Introduction

Social Movements are parts of social progression. These phenomena represent varieties of collective actions across time and space. As social processes social movements emerge as manifestation of collective discontent against the established social, economic and political orders. These emerge as the collective critic of the society rejuvenating vital social forces. As student of sociology you would be interested to know the meanings and several social, political, economic, cultural etc dimensions of social movements.

This unit introduces you to some of the fundamental issues of social movement. It aims to conceptualize social movement from a socio-historical perspective. There are several traditions of conceptualizing social movements. Glimpses of these traditions are also presented here. There are several causes of social movements. In this unit we have elaborated the causes or origins of social movement and have explained the roles of ideology, leadership and organization in social movements. The processes of transformation of social movements are in also discussed here. Since we would be dealing with varieties of issues, involved in social movements in the following units of this block these key issues are clarified at the outset for cognitive coherence of this the block.

29.2 Concept of Social Movements

Social movements have broadly been perceived as 'organized' or 'collective effort' to bring about changes in the thought, beliefs, values, attitudes, relationships and major institutions in society or to resist any change in the above societal arrangements. Blumer (1951) defines social movements as 'collective enterprises to establish a new social order of life'. To Toch (1965) social movement is an 'effort by a large number of people to solve collectively a problem they feel they have in common'. According to Haberle (1972) it is 'a collective attempt to bring about a change in certain social institutions or to create entirely a new order', J.R. Gusfield (1972) perceives a social movement as a socially shared demand for change in some aspect of the social order'. To Wilson (1973), social movements may either be for a change or resistance to

change. Thus to him, a social movement is an organised endeavour to bring about or to resist large-scale changes in the social order by non-institutionalized means.

a) Historical and Social Context of Conceptualization

It is significant that social movements are conceptualized in a particular historical and social context. For example in the North American society, in the wake of the emerging threat from the Fascist and the Communist movements in the 1930s "social movements are conceptualized by scholar like Haberle in 1951 as the potentially dangerous forms of non-institutionalized collective political behaviour which if left unattended, threatened the stability of the established ways of life". Social movement however, is not solely destructive. As a collective agency it possesses several creative potentials. Thus many scholars like Blumer and many other have highlighted the emergence of new norms of adaptive behaviour, problem solving and learning orientation potentially present in social movements. In the 1950s and 1960s the scholars like Turner and Killian (1957), Parsons, (1969) Smelser and others viewed social movement from collective behaviour perspective. In this approach social movements are viewed as non-institutionalized collective actions, which are not guided by existing social norms, formed to meet undefined or unstructured situations and are understood in terms of a breakdown either in the organs of social control or normative integration, due to structural changes. The resulting strains, discontent, frustration, and aggression from this situation ultimately lead the individual to participate in non-institutionalized. It is also pointed out that this behaviour pattern has a 'life cycle', which moves from spontaneous crowd action to the formation of public and social movement (Cohen, 1995:671-72, cf. Jamison and Eyerman, 1991:14).

Again each society has its own perception on the social movements which is developed based on its own socio-economic, cultural and the intellectual tradition. For example, the scholars in the Europe conceptualized social movements in a somewhat different term, based on their socio-political conditions and the intellectual heritage, from that of the Americans. While in the US it is an empirically observable phenomenon, in Europe it has emerged to be theoretically connected object. The Marxian theoretical position was widely followed in Europe; Weberian position was widely used in the United States.

It is significant that after the World War II the philosophy of the 'welfare state' was widely accepted all over the world except in the authoritarian regimes. As a corollary to this welfare state philosophy institutionalized conflicts between labour and capital were recognised as legitimate collective social behaviour in the modern society. According to Eyerman and Jamison the existence of strong, institutionalized, reformist social democratic labour movement in all the countries of Western Europe affected the way social movements were conceived by social scientists. As the conflict between labour and capital got institutionalized in the social democratic tradition, labour movement also got a legitimate place as organised collective behavior in the modern societies. In the United States social movement has remained anti ideological and the distinction between social movement and social institution. Thus Smelser distinguishes between general movement (long term shift in societal norms and values and change in attitude and consciousness) and social movements (immediate observable outburst of collective behaviour pushing long term changes along with it). Thus he distinguishes between norm and value oriented social movements respectively. And accordingly, a social movement to him, was an observable expression of general movement (Eyerman and Jamison , 1991:17-18)

Social movements in the developing countries were manifested in different

socio political contexts. Anti colonial, workers and the peasant movements were the dominant patterns of collective actions with a wide political connotation in built in these movements. While the anti colonial movements aimed at the liberation of the colonized countries from the imperial powers, the workers and the peasant movements were directed against the oppressive capitalists and landowners of these countries. Significantly, the nationalist spirit of the cross section of the population was the most appealing force in the anti colonial movement, while the workers and the peasant movements were mostly organised based on the Marxian philosophy of class struggle. In the post World War II period success stories of the workers and the peasant movements in the then Soviet Russia, China, Vietnam and Cuba had become the guiding spirit to the workers and the peasant movements in the developing countries. Social movements of various forms have got wider legitimacy in the political culture in the societies. In a state of increasing poverty, illiteracy, corruption and sharpening class inequality a vast section of the population have accepted organised collective action as a mode of protest and survival. However, in the wake socio political transition, globalisation and introduction to new economic order in these countries the forms of collective action have under gone a qualitative change.

b) Change in Perception since late 1950s

The established social and the political order of Europe and America received a severe jolt in late 1950s and 1960s with the vehement outburst of the Black civil rights, students, women's, peace, gay and environment etc. movements. The hitherto existing theoretical perspectives however, were unable to explain these movements which marked a sharp departure from the earlier organised movements of labor and the working class. These departures were largely viewed in terms of the emergence of new social actors and categories due to the fundamental shift in social structure and the emergence of post-industrial society. The 'postindustrial movements engage different actors, different loci of conflict and different issues than those of the industrial society. Even at the empirical level, these social movements exhibited new characteristics and new ideas. Hence there was a need to move beyond the existing framework of explanation.

Touraine (1981, 1983) observes these phenomena as 'new social movement being potential bearers of new social interests'. To him, it is through the process of collective will formation that social movements come to recognize themselves as collective actors with a historical project. The European tradition tried to discover a process of new knowledge and collective identity formation in these actions. Here the most common approach has been to analyze social movement to be the carriers of political projects, and historical actions.

Thus in the European tradition social movement is seen in terms of structures and long term processes. There is a concern for distinguishing the new from the old social movements.

For the European sociologists, it is the political meaning of the movement that is of utmost significance. For example, Alberto Melucci (1988) sees social movements in primarily symbolic terms and identity formation as a kind of dramaturgy. Social movements make power visible, and they challenge the dominant meaning systems or symbols of contemporary everyday life. He talks about the issues of identity in social movements in great length. We shall discuss this issue in the next two units of this block.

The American sociologists have however, seen knowledge and identity as non-empirical objects. The knowledge component of a social movement to them provide the issues or ideologies around which movements mobilize resources or socialize individuals.'

Since 1960s and onward the collective behaviour approach is being contested by the resource mobilisation theorists to emphasis on the effectiveness of the movement organization (see Zald and McCarthy 1987). As an alternative to collective behaviouralism, the theory of resource mobilisation has emerged in the American tradition to explore why some movements are more successful than others. Tilly (1978) for example identifies collective action in terms of the pursuit of common interest, which is typical of social, all movements. This approach assumes that collective actions are related to the specific opportunity structures. Here importance is given on the rationality of human action, whereby the participants in the social movement calculate the cost and benefits of their participatory action in collective mobilization. In this approach social movements are seen 'either as the creation of entrepreneurs skillful in the manipulation or mobilisation of social resources or as the playing out the social tensions and conflicts'. Thus the motivation of the actors is seen as rational economic action. The resource mobilization theory, indeed, aims to interpret those sets of social movements that are the visible parts of the American social reality in management term. It is linked to the policy problem of containment. (Ibid: 47)

Social movements in the developing countries have conventionally been conceptualized either from the Marxian or from the Functionalist perspectives. However the proliferation of the new social movements, manifestation of new form of collective actions, resurgence of the violence in the new contexts and the articulation of new forms of collective actions in these societies have generated enormous interests among the social scientists, policy planners and social activists for the study of social movements. However there has been a tendency to analyze social movements of these societies following the theoretical tools widely used in the western societies.

Reflection and Action 29.1

What do you mean by social movements? How has the issue of identity been conceptualized as an essential part of social movements?

29.3 Origin of Social Movements.

There are several schools of thoughts on the origin of social movements. The classical model of thought is represented by the versions of mass society, collective behaviour, status inconsistency, raising expectations, and relative deprivation.

- a) The mass society theorist, like Kornhauser (1959), is of the view that due to the lack of an intermediate structure people in the mass society are not integrated in the society. This leads to alienation, tension and ultimately social protest. In the mass society individuals are related one another not by variety of groups etc., but by their relation to a common authority, i.e. the state. In the mass society, in the absence of independent groups and associations people lack the resource to ward off the threat to their autonomy. In their absence people lack the resources to restrain their own behaviour as well as that of others. Social atomization engenders strong feelings of alienation and anxiety, and therefore, the disposition to engage extreme behaviour to escape from these tensions (Kornhauser 1996 : 92). It is pointed out that the mass society is conditioned by elite domination over the mass. It replaces the democratic rule. In this society individuals are objectively atomized and subjectively alienated. In this system people are available for mobilization by elite. To Kornhauser "alienation heightens responsiveness to the appeal of mass movements because they provide the occasions for expressing resentment against what is, as well as promises of a totally different world. In short, people who are atomized readily become mobilized" (Ibid: 92).

- b) The proponents of the theory of **status inconsistency**, like Broom (1959) and Lenski (1954), are of the view that the objective discrepancy between persons ranking and status (dimension e.g., education, income, occupation) generate subjective tensions in the society leading to cognitive dissonance, discontent and protest. The state of severe status discrepancy, according to these scholars, lead to subjective tensions and dissonance. According to Geschwender (1971) the set of circumstances described by the status inconsistency hypothesis would produce varying intensities of dissonance and dissonance-reducing behaviour according to the degree of discrepancy between relevant status dimensions (cf. Mc Adam 1973 : 136).
- c) The theory **structural strain** as propagated by Smelser, Lang and Lang, Turner and Killian suggests that any severe structural strain can help manifest social movements. To Smelser the more severe the strain, the more likelihood of social movements. In general it is argued that there are sequences leading to the manifestation of social movements. These sequences move from structural weakness due to the strain in society leading to psychological disturbances and ultimately to the manifestations of social movements. There are, however variety of reasons behind the structural strain. Individuals experience strain out of disruption in the normal functioning of the society. this disruption may be caused by the process of industrialization, urbanization, migration, increase in unemployment. The increase in the quantum of disruption is positively related to the manifestation of social movement. In this perspective social change is the source of structural strain. Social change is described as stressful because it disrupts the normative order in which people are accustomed leading to a feelings of anxiety, fantasy and hostility (Mc Adam 1997). Thus in general this theory visualizes social movements as collective relations to such strains that create severe tensions. Some aggregate of there tensions reach reach to a "boiling" point triggering social emergency. This model emphasizes wage on the psychological effect that strain has on individuals than on the desire for a political goal (Ibid)
- In this context it is important to mention here that Smelson has highlighted the significance of the **generalized beliefs'** in conjunction with other five factors - structural conduciveness, structural strain, a precipitating factor, mobilization of the participants for action, and the failure of social control are necessary conditions for a collective episode (Smelson, cf. Walsh 1978: 156)
- Thus the classical model has observed social movements as response to structural strain, it is concerned with the psychological effect that stain has on individual and that collective participation in the movement is guided by urgent psychological pressure and not by the aim to change the political structure. (McAdam, D. 1996: 135-143)
- d) The **theory of Relative Deprivation** has been got a place of prominence in the social movement study. In the Marxian analysis economic deprivation has been identified to be the prime cause of social conflict among the two antagonistic classes i.e. the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. To Aberle (1966) deprivation has also non-material base e.g. status, behaviour, worth etc. Relative deprivation, i.e., the discrepancy between legitimate expectations and the reality is the central point of social movement. Gurr (1970) has perceived deprivation as a gap between expectations and perceived capabilities involving three generalised sets of values: economic conditions, political power and social status (cf.Rao, 1982)
- e) The **theory of Cultural Revitalization**. As propagated by Wallace (1956) expresses the view that social movements are manifested out a deliberate, organised and conscious action of the member of the society to construct a more satisfying culture for themselves. To him, the revitalization

movements undergo four phase of progression: from cultural stability to increased individual stress to cultural distortion and disillusionment to cultural revitalization.

It is to mention here that no element of strain and deprivation alone can produce a movement unless there is a subjective perception about these objective conditions of deprivation. Ideology, organization and leadership play crucial role towards the manifestation and sustenance of social movements. We shall be dealing with the issues in the next section of this unit.

Reflection and Action 29.2

You must have seen several discontents to get collectively manifested in your society. Are all these discontents being termed as social movements? What are their origins?

29.4 Components of Social Movements

Conventionally ideology, collective mobilisation, organisation and leadership are identified to the vital elements of social movements. Ideology provides a broad frame of action and collective mobilisation in the social movement. It also provides legitimacy to the process of interest articulation organized collective action. There are different ways of formulating ideology in a social movement. However, in the context of new social movements role of ideology has been a subject of close scrutiny. Some aspects of this issue we shall discuss in the next unit.

Collective mobilization is again a central element of a social movement. The nature and direction of a social movement is widely shaped by the nature of collective mobilisation. Collective mobilisation may be radical, non-institutionalized, spontaneous, large scale or it may be non-violent, institutionalized, sporadic, restricted. It may also undergo a process of transformation from radical to reformative or institutionalized. Routinisation of charisma is an illustration to this point.

Leadership and organization are closely linked to the process of collective mobilisation. A leader can be charismatic figure or a democratically elected one. In the context of new social movements the issues of leadership, organization ideology and collective mobilisation have acquired several new dimensions.

For years, social movements as an area of legitimate sociological research have occupied a position of marginality both in the functionalist and Marxist paradigm. For the functionalists social movements were sources of potential disruption to an entity. Here only by assigning a marginal position to social movements was 'integrity of the functional theoretical system ensured. On the other hand, though the Marxist analysis is concerned with social transformation, this has identified the "classes" as the sole agents of social transformation. Non-class movements are viewed critically, and sometimes with contempt or hostility' (Scott, A. 1990: 2). Over the years, however, these single order explanations have proved to be inadequate in analyzing the complexity of the phenomena of social movements, and a vast body of literature has emerged in this emerging area of social inquiry. These studies have made sincere efforts to comprehend the issues and dynamics of social movements by using cases from various parts of the world. Significantly, the dynamics and components of the social movements—ideological orientation, organizational set-up, patterns of mobilization, leadership, tactics of collective action, issues involved in the social movements and their linkages with the wider social processes and so on—are critically scrutinized through their efforts to explain the phenomena of collective mobilization with new perspective(s). Thus in these efforts of the social scientists there has been not only the quest for

identification of the 'newness' in the emerging social movements of the 1960s and thereafter, but also a genuine urge to locate the various elements of commonalties in these episodes.

New Components: New ideals, Collective identities and Resources

In the context of the emergence of new social movements the issues of values, culture, subjectivity, idealism, morality, identity, empowerment, etc., have got new coinage and added prominence in these efforts. Thus Bertaux (1990) adds the view that 'subjectivity' and 'idealism' are essential elements of social movement and must be taken seriously.

Similarly, social movements help generate a sense of collective identity and new ideas. Melucci has emphasized on collective identity formation in the context of new social movements. To him, social movements grow around relationships of new social identity that are voluntarily conceived 'to empower' members in defense of this identity (Melucci, 1996). Eyerman and Jamison (1991) assert that 'by articulating consciousness, social movement provides public spaces for generating new thoughts, activating new actors, generating new ideas (1991: 161-66). To Hegedus (1990) involvement in an action is a matter of conscience and emotion, of responsibility (1990: 266).

However participation in social movements may not necessarily always be for the quest of an identity; rather, it may be for the gratification of political and material interests. Tilly (1978a): McAdam (1982), Tarrow (1994 and many others are of the view that social movements manifest in response to the increase in the potential political opportunities and growing receptivity of the state to the activities of the challenging groups. In general, these scholars emphasize on the various resources involved in the manifestation and operationalisation of social movements.) Tilly (1978a) for example identifies collective action in terms of the pursuit of common interest, which is typical of social movements. This approach, known as resource mobilization, assumes that collective actions are related to the specific opportunity structures. Here importance is given on the rationality of human action, whereby the participants in the social movement calculate the costs and benefits of their participatory action in collective mobilization. In this approach social movements are seen 'either as the creation of entrepreneurs skillful in the manipulation or mobilization of social resources or the playing out the social tensions and conflicts'. Thus the motivation of the actors is seen as rational economic action. The resource mobilization theory, indeed, aims to interpret those sets of social movements that are the visible parts of the American social reality in management terms. It is linked to the policy problem of containment (47).

Reflection and Action 29.3

Critically analyze the relevance of identity and ideology in social movements.

29.5 Transformation of Social Movements

Every social movement is having a life history and undergoes a process of transformation. The movement may emerge to be routinised accompanying a decline in support for a movement, (Clark, Grayson & Grayson 1975: 19). Such process of transformation of the movement is indeed contextual and cultures, polity and economy specific. Zald studied transformation to social movements in the comparative frame. He finds that the process of transformation of social movements in the United States and Western Europe has been oriented to be reformist while in the Eastern Europe social movement transformed itself into regime challenges (Zald 1988: 19-24). It is observed in the developed societies that in the absence of a shared culture of popular opposition to the authorities and powerful groups, in the absence of a grass-roots organisation structure, lack of space for unconventional tactics and likely co-option of the dissidents

and critics by the state, collective mobilization are not sustained for a larger time (Oberschall 1978, Gamson 1975, Walsh 1978). Here most of the social movements are institutionalized in nature.

The emergence of a 'national social movement' from within the institutionalized frame of reference of the state, as pointed out by Tilly (1998), "a social movement is neither a party nor a union but a political campaign. What we call a social movement actually consists in a series of demands or challenges to power-holders in the name of a social category that lacks an established political position" (Tilly 1985: 735-36).

As pointed out earlier, ideology, organization, leadership, subjectivity, idealism and orientation towards change are important components of social movements and closely attached to the process of collective mobilization and new identity formation. Change in the form of these components brings tremendous change in the character of the social movements, and accordingly social movements may also be categorized. P.N. Mukherjee (1979) categorizes social movement as 'revolutionary movement' and 'quasi-movement' based the nature and direction of change initiated by the process of collective mobilization (in a movement under reference). To him, when collective mobilization aims at effecting wide-ranging and far-reaching changes of a system it may be called a revolutionary movement, and when it aims for changes within a system only it may be called a quasi-movement. Sociologists observing the life histories of various social movements point out that sooner or later a social movement becomes subject to the process of routinization. Often a protest movement starts off with a radical ideology but develops its own establishment in turn. To Rao (1985), when a movement with a defined ideology becomes a well-established political party, it ceases to be a movement (1985: 251). SinghaRoy(1992) highlights that in the Indian context any attempt to analyze social movements ought to reflect upon the dynamics of the movements over a period of time since the transformation of these movements are not discreet. Rather, the ideological re-orientation and organizations of those movements continue to remain attached with the collective mobilization in one form or the other. Thus over a period of time there is the process of institutionalization of mobilization. T.K. Oommen (1994) points out that the processes of mobilization and institutionalization do co-exist, and that 'institutionalization provides new possibilities of mobilization'. According to him, the processes of institutionalization and mobilization are to be viewed essentially to be the two different phases of a movement 'rather than mutually inimical processes ... In the final analysis mobilization is not displaced by institutionalization but goes hand-in-hand to a large extent and often the later process accentuates the former' (Oommen 1994: 251-53). (We shall discuss this issue in unit to 32 again)

The process of institutionalization, according to Oommen (1984), refers to a 'socially prescribed system of differentiated behaviour based on a relatively stable interaction pattern hinged on socially accepted values, norms, roles and practices'. While studying the process of institutionalization of collective mobilization he emphasized the role of institutional entrepreneurs towards the process of institutionalization. He however visualizes a contradiction in the institutional role of such entrepreneurs, as all may not accept their initiatives. Thus to him institutionalization of mobilization may not lead to bureaucratization, formalization or a status quo. It may rather bring 'with it possibilities of change, because the value-dissensus it creates may eventually lead to confrontation between the contending collectivities which provide the potential for continuous change' (Oommen 1984: 234-5). In his study of the agrarian labour movement in Kerala he highlights that the emergence of movement organization leading to routinization of charisma, development of bureaucratic structure, emergence of a parallel elite, persistence of mobilization beyond the purpose for which it emerged, invariably lead to the institutionalization of social movement. He argues that 'there is no inherent

tendency towards institutionalization of a social movement even when it occurs, it does not necessarily stop or even decelerate the process of mobilization which is so fundamental and prime to the very survival of a movement'. To him mobilization implies a collective action affecting the quality of politics. It calls for the 'induction of new structure into the system to meet the new challenges. That is mobilization necessitates the creation of new institutions and their institutionalization'. He also finds that mobilization is a continuous process with a varying scale and intensity over a period of time (Oommen 1984: 238).

While examining the issues of transformation of social movements in India, the observation made by Bipin Chandra (1996) in the context of the Indian national movement is worth mentioning. He highlights that this movement 'derived' its entire force from the militancy and spirit of self-sacrifice of the masses, including a large section of the peasantry and small landlords. This movement followed the strategy of truce-struggle-truce, in which phases of extra-legal mass movements alternate with more passive phases carried on within the confines of legal space. To Chandra, this strategy of Gandhi had the capacity to utilize the constitutional space without getting co-opted, and to maintain contacts with the masses and absorb their creative energies. This strategy, according to Chandra, bears close resemblance to the strategy of war of position as put forward by Gramsci. Gramsci saw India's political struggle against English as containing three forms of war: war of movement, war of position and underground warfare. Gandhi's passive resistance was a war of position, which in certain movements becomes war of movement and in others, underground warfare. Boycotts are a form of war of position, strikes are war of movement, the secret preparation of weapons and combat troops belong to underground warfare (Gramsci 1996: 23).(1998)

The Indian National Congress accepted the strategy of war of position, which had two basic thrusts. It was hegemonic and it alternated between phases of extra-legal mass struggle and phases of truce functioning within the law. This entire political process of 'truce-struggle-truce' was an upwardly spiraling one which also assumed that the freedom struggle would pass through several stages ending with the transfer of power by the colonial regime (Chandra 1996: 26-9).

Reflection and Action 29.3

From you known experience or bases on secondary source of information write a life history of transformation of a social movement in about 500 words.

29.6 Conclusion

In this introductory unit of this block we have raised several issues for discussion which would be dealt with in the remaining three units of the block. As the outset we have clarified the meaning and dimensions of social movements. The conversional modes of conceptualization of social movements, the shift in this mode since late 1950s, the emergence of new social movements, the European, American and the Indian orientation of social movement studies are discussed here. We have also examined the issues origin and vital elements of social movements. A brief discussion on social movement studies in Indian is also presented in this block.

Further Readings

1. Shah, G. (ed.) 2004 *Social Movements*. Sage Publication: New Delhi
2. SinghaRoy, D.K. 2004 *Peasant Movements in Post Colonial India: Dynamic of Mobilisation and Identity*, Sage Publication: New Delhi
3. Singh, R. 2003 *Social Movements, Old and New*. Sage Publication: New Delhi