New Social Movements in India: An Aspect of Environmental Movements

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Abstract: *The Indian Constitution itself contains provisions for environmental protection. The Directive Principles of State Policy acknowledge the State's responsibility with regard to environmental protection has laid down under Article 48-A of our Constitution that "The State shall endeavor to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country." India faces problems of environmental degradation and lack of governance on matters related to these.The new social movements in the Third World show a rare sensitivity to the heterogeneity of the sources and structures of exploitation and oppression. The new social movements can be seen as vehicles of cumulative change in the social, economic and political fields. The role of these people's movements and experiments transcends not only state power, but also the new existing civil societies.*

Keywords: Democracy, Ecofeminism, Environment, Indian Constitution, Social Movements,

1. Introduction

Democracy is largely understood as popular sovereignty where people have control over the decision made by the state. Since it is not practically possible for the people in the modern democratic societies to participate in the decision making process of the state directly, they do so through representatives. But when political parties become ineffective in representing the interest of the people, we see the emergence of social movements (SMs).It is a truism that no society is static. Space, processes and nature as well as the direction of social change vary from time to time and society to society. Social movements are nothing new and they are taking place all around the globe, whether, they are based on certain issues or interests, under different institutional environments. In India also social movements have taken place around identity issues or interest based activism. Social movements play an important role in escalating not only the processes of change, but also in giving direction to social transformation. Till the 1960s, sociologists' interest in social movements was largely focused on sanskritisation and socio-religious reform movements, excluding the political dimension as beyond their scope. It issometimes argued that the freedom of expression, education and relative economic independence prevalent in the modern Western culture are responsible for the unprecedented number and scope of various contemporary social movements. However, others point out that many of the social movements of the last hundred years grew up, like the Mau Mau in Kenya, to oppose Western colonialism. Either way, social movements have been and continued to be closely connected with democratic political systems. Occasionally, social movements have been involved in democratizing nations, but more often they have flourished after democratization.

Charles Tilly defines social movements as a series of contentious performances, displays and campaigns by which ordinary people make collective claims on others.

Sidney Tarrow defines a social movement as collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents and authorities.

It is important to note, however, that such tendencies and trends, and the influence of the unconscious or irrational factors in human behavior, may be of crucial importance in illuminating the problems of interpreting and explaining social movement. Objectives, ideology, programmes, leadership, and organization are important components of social movements. They are interdependent, influencing each other. These social movements then bring about change in the social, economic and political environment and thereby, become a social force themselves.

M.S.A. Rao defined social movement as a 'sustained collective mobilization through either informal or formal organization or which is generally oriented towards bringing about change'. **Social movements involves:**
a) Collective mass mobilization
b) Collective mass support
c) Formal or informal organization
d) A conscious commitment towards its aims and beliefs
e) Deliberative collective action towards change

2. Types of Social Movements

David Bayley (1962) divides 'coercive public protest' into legal and illegal protests. Each category is further sub-divided into violent and non-violent protests. Some others classify movements into grassroots and macro movements. Social movements are also classified on the basis of issues around which participants get mobilized. Some of them are known as the 'forest', 'civil rights', 'anti-untouchability', 'linguistic', and 'nationalist' and other such movements. Some others classify movements on the basis of the participants, such as peasants, tribal, students, women, Dalit's, etc. In many cases the participants and issues go together. Social movements into the following types on the basis of the socioeconomic characteristics of the participants and the issues involved:
1) Peasant movements
2) Dalit movements
3) Backward caste movements

4) Women's movements
5) Industrial working class movements
6) Students' movements; and
7) Middle class movements

Now we add **two more** type—**human rights and environmental movements.** These movements are based around certain issues and their theorizations claim to cover all social and economic groups. Though the leadership of these movements in the contemporary times comes from the middle class, they primarily raise the issues affecting the deprived classes and communities.

3. Environmental Movements in India

The United Nations, conference on Human Environment, Stockholm, 1972 paved the way for a number of studies and reports on the condition of the environment and its effect on the present and future generations. It expressed concern to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations. The development of 'green polities' or 'eco-greens' or the 'green movement' in Germany and North-America in the early 1980s boosted the formation of the 'green network' and the 'green movement' throughout the world, including India. A number of action groups, research institutes, and documentation centers have been established to study and mobilize public opinion on environmental issues (Spretnak and Capra 1985). By now the material on the environmental situation in general and in certain sectors such as air, land, forest, water, marine resources, etc. has proliferated in different forms from popular literature to 'scientific' studies. Environment provide valuable material not only on various aspects of the environment but also people's resistance and struggles. There are large areas of forests which are inhabited by rare species of animal life. The country is also having many rivers which provides livelihood for a considerable number of people including the Adivasi .However these natural resources were a favorite prey for the vested interests in the state. They exploited the nature without any social concerns. This resulted in larger issues of development and displacement. With the endangered nature the dependent population also faces many threats. Many of these threatened communities were also marginalized groups including the poor and Adivasi. Their inability to fight against the mighty interests also accelerated the environmental exploitation and degradation.

The environmental movements in India were of special significance in the history of new social movements in India. These movements can be classified as new social movements because of their following characteristics;
1) The movements were addressing novel issues like environmental degradation
2) The movements were massive with the active participation of marginalized groups
3) The demands of the new movements were novel in the sense that it demanded right to livelihood and rights of displaced
4) The environmental movements adapted non-violent strategy
5) The movements incorporated hitherto unrepresented sectors of society including adivasies, women and the marginalized.

6) Many of the new environmental movements forced the governments to take affirmative policies in the form of new laws and provisions.

The post-independence era has witnessed environmental degradation on an unprecedented scale. Soil erosion, air and water pollution, rapid depletion or forest cover and wild life are just some of the effects of environment degradation. III-conceived plans of urbanization and industrialization have only led to further ecological crisis. As has been pointed out by eminent scholars that development results in destruction of eco-friendly, labor intensive traditional means of production; pollution of the environment and depletion of bio mass; and a result of the above two, deprivation of the ecosystem results in the loss of the sources of livelihood of the people. The most tragic industrial accident has been the poising caused by the leakage of MIC gas in Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh). In mid night of December 2-3, 1984 a catastrophe unfolded itself in the city of Bhopal, when a deadly lethal gas floated over the city causing causalities to thousands of humans and animals and creating unbearable sufferings for those who survived as they developed genetic defects because of MIC gas causing blindness, kidney and liver failure and a variety of chronic diseases. The people of Bhopal still continue to be a vulnerable population as 390 metric tons of poisonous waste lay around the factory area for 25 years awaiting court's decision. Justice has been denied to the victims of tragedy as main culprit Warren Anderson is absconding, and there are no chance of his extradition to India.

Other environmental hazards can be seen as being caused by heavy environmental pollution caused by thermal plants, the main effluent being flying ash, as in case of Kolaghat, West Bengal. Sewerage system, betel cultivation and floriculture have been worst hit by such fly ash.

Ecological movements have erupted wherever there have been threats to forests and agriculture lands by inundation, water logging, salinity resulting from the construction of large dams and massive projects like the Tehri Dam, KoelKaro, Sirsi and Inchampalli. Sometimes environmental movements may spring from the urge of the forest dwelling communities to save forest from destruction like the Chipko movement and similar movements in Western Ghats, the Aravallis and also the Vindhyas, and also in the tribal belts of India. As Vandana Shiva points out that in India, ecological movements can be seen to have certain commonness although they may differ in their methods and their protest agenda. The commonness can be said to be in term of:

Economic conflict between two types of economic activity-one aiming at securing survival for the people in a sustainable manner through a genuinely collective management and the other aiming at maximizing the growth rate even at the cost of bare survival of many.Technological conflict arising out of the choice between two types of technologies, one indigenous which is labor- intensive and other western capital-intensive. The former causes lesser ecological hazards and the other annihilation of ecological pattern of a particular area.

Ecological movements therefore, focus their concern regarding the use of resource-hungry of modern technology and accompanying high ecological and social costs. Many of the movements in India have been and continue to be political movements grappling with ongoing or potential loss of control over natural resources. Their concerns derive from State policies that claim to be founded on the notion of economic development but which often end up seriously impairing the habitats, livelihoods of communities and obstructing their access to natural resources.

Chipko Movement:

This renowned movement began in 1971 in the hills of Uttrakhand drew upon the Bishnoi's action in Rajasthan nearly 265 years ago. Chipko Movement means hug-the-tree movement. The Chipko Movement's first action started in March 1974 in Reni village in the Garhwal Himalayas, when a group of village of women led by Gauri Devi hugged the trees and prevented the hired sawyers to cut them down for a sports goods company. The movement spread rapidly throughout the valley. Women, being most affected by the hardship of both the ongoing degradation to their environment and the privatization of basic resources, played a prominent and decisive role. When attempts were made to divert the attention of the men, the women stepped into save their environment and their livelihoods. This simple action translated into an organized and peaceful movement under the leadership of Chandi Prasad Bhatt. The movement largely drew upon Gandhian principles of non-violent and Satyagrah. This was the first movement of its kind, not just in post-independent India, but also across the world. It is regarded as one of the hallmarks in the history of the environmental movement.

As the movement gained steam the government finally yielded and the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, declared a ban on tree logging in the 5000-kilometer Trans Himalayan region. A United Nations Environment Program feature lauded the efforts of the participants: 'the Chipko people are working for a socio-economic revolution by wining control of their forest resources from the hands of a distant bureaucracy which is concerned with selling the forest for making urban-oriented products. It also sensitized civil society in India to the need to pressure the government to formulate an ecological policy that would promote sustainable development.

Anti-Dam Movements:

Prime Minister JawaharLal Nehru referred to dams as 'the temple of modern India'. After independence, the government sanctioned several large-scale dam projects with the aim of making drinking water available to all and making India self-sufficient in food production. India is among what are called 'big dam' countries, third only to China and the United States. Though these large dam projects have met with some success in providing food security to India, it has been argued they have come at a huge social and environmental cost. Roots of opposition to dam projects can be traced to the government's failure to rehabilitate displaced victims and to concern about ecological sustainability.

Anti – Tehri Dam Movement:

In 1972, the Indian Planning Commission approved plans for Tehri Dam, naming the principal town it would submerge, along with two populated and fertile valleys. Protest against the project began in 1967 and continued for more than two decades. The people's committee formed to oppose the dam succeeded in forcing the government to make several reviews of the project. In the mid -1980s the plan was abandoned for some time after the committee appointed by the government to review the project recommended ending it on environmental grounds. By 1992, when construction of the dam was well under way, the opposition movement peaked, and it seemed for some time that the protestors might persuade the government to again halt the project. The movement swelled, and environmental activists, concerned citizens, and others joined the residents of Tehri, neighboring villages, and the adjoining area of Uttarakhand in urging the end of what they viewed as a destructive, costly and unnecessary dam. Ultimately the movement was not successful and the authorities pressed on with Tehri Dam, finally submerging most of Tehri and the proposed valleys in 2005.

Narmada BachaoAandolan (NBA):

The other movement has been against the construction of Mega dams. India's planned economic development failed to take into consideration the displacement of huge number of people from the land where they have been living for generations. NBA is an ongoing movement to save the river valleys of the Narmada River in central India. It has mobilized people at the grass roots level on a scale unprecedented for an environmental movements in post-independent India. The movement is primarily against the construction of the SardarSarovar Dam which is estimated to displace 300,000 people – largely peasants and tribal people-and inundate farming land and forest area which is inhabited by rare species. The NBA and its supporters argue that the projected benefits, given past experience, are unlikely to be realized and are far outweighed by the social and environmental costs. The NBA is believed to get media visibility and catch international attention and NBA has succeeded in provoking a larger public debate on development and the environment within India. It has initiated discussion about which model of development is appropriate for India. NBA argues for the latter, nothing the idea of precaution in environmental matters, as well as the social, cultural, and economic rights of the displaced. It encourages the adoption of traditional water harvesting systems in villages and improving dry farming techniques, which all also promote social and ecological harmony. As a last resort, NBA also advices improvement of the efficiency of existing dam projects.

MedhaPatkar, a central organizer of NBA, states that the model of development symbolized by projects like the SardarSarovar Dam represent the 'epitome of unsustainable development', and there is no other way but to redefine 'modernity' and the goals of development, to widen it to a sustainable, just between human beings and between people and nature. The movement has drawn attention to the conflicts between environment and development at a popular level. By demanding that affected people be given voice, the NBA was instrumental in the World Bank's decision to

withdraw its funding and participation from the project on the basis of human and environmental concerns. The Supreme Court of India ruled on the NBA's litigation against construction of the dam in 2000, judging that the project could go forward as long as resettlement and rehabilitation of displaced people was appropriate and effectively carried out. The judgement, while recognizing the economic and housing rights of the valley's inhabitants to be fundamental, did not evaluate the environmental aspects of human rights.

The Silent Valley Project

Another significant anti-dam movement is against the Kerla Government's proposal to construct a dam across the river Kunthi in the Silent Valley. The government has argued that it is a viable alternative to the more expensive and polluting sources of thermal power. However, environmental and citizen groups oppose it due to a threat that it may upset the delicate ecological balance of the bio-diversity reserve inhabited by some rare species in the Silent Valley. International organization such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and International Union for the conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) mounted pressure on the government, leading to the shelving of the project in 1983 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This movement met with success fairly early and is one of the very rare instances where the State yielded to pressure and retacted.

4. Conclusion

The success stories have been rather unique in their initial conditions and not easily generalize. And, to get back to the conservative bias of Indian environmentalism, 'Environmental advocacy is wary of movements, such as the Gonds of Adilabad, where the struggles for rights are acutely destabilizing, even while a less threatening peasant movement like Chipko is celebrated.

Ecofeminism in the West, rooted in the analogy of women's and nature's biological, procreative, and maternal role, is echoed in Indian concepts of Purush/Prakriti and Shakti.The problems of development and environment in India are extremely complex. It is important to note that people at all levels of society-government, NGOs, scientists, and citizens often disagree about the best way to use resources in the most efficient, environmentally friendly, and equitable way. Therefore, it is crucial that any environmental movement that seeks to be a people's movement, and aims to become lasting and relevant, must sympathize with the concerns of all of India's poor and disadvantaged. There is no doubt that these movements have yet to play important roles in the preservation of both social and environmental rights within India, but such movements must fully recognize and value the right to development, in tandem with the right to a functional and healthy environment, if they are to meet with success on the public and political levels.

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