

Social Movements

I. Introduction

Social movements involve collective action by the people. Any form of collective action cannot be labelled as a social movement, even if it is directed towards changing the existing social values. For example, in some places when a car or a truck knocks down a pedestrian a mob collects immediately and starts beating up the driver. The mob is provoked because the driver's actions have led to injury or loss of life. Hence this could be regarded as a form of collective action to ensure sanctity of life and to prevent rash driving. But can we call this a social movement? No, because this is just an impulsive outburst. Hence, another feature of a social movement is that it should be sustained and not sporadic. Similarly social movement differs from a crowd by being a longterm collectivity, not a quick spontaneous grouping. However, crowds may emerge as a result of social movements. A Morcha taken up by members of a woman's organization, a part of the women's social movement may attract a crowd.

II. Definition

The International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (1972) defines a *social movement as a variety of collective attempts to bring about change*. The attempts may be to bring about change in certain social institutions and to create an entirely new social order. Or the attempts may represent a socially shared demand for change in some aspects of the social order. Turner and Kilhan define a social movement as a “*collectivity which acts with some continuity to promote or resist change in the society or group of which it is a part*” (cited by McLaughlen 1969: 27). Toch (1965) emphasizes that a *social movement is an effort by a large number of people to solve collectively a problem they feel they share in common*.

III. Types of Social Movements

Social movements can be classified under various typologies depending on such factors like aim of the movement, organization, means adopted to achieve the aims, value strength and so on. Some of the types are:

- a) **Migratory movements:** When a large number of people migrate due to discontent and or due to the shared hope for a better future in some other land, we talk of migratory movements. For instance, the mass exodus of men to Gulf countries specially from the state of Kerala is an example of a migratory social movement. Similarly, the mass migration of people from Bangladesh to India during troubled times is another instance of a migratory movement.
- b) **Reform movements:** This type of a movement constitutes a collective attempt to change some parts of a society without completely transforming it. A reform movement accepts the basic pattern of the social order of that society and orients itself around an ideal. It makes use of those institutions such as the press, the government, the school, the church and so on to support its programmer. Reform movements usually, rise on behalf of some distressed or exploited group. Reform movements are almost impossible in an authoritarian society. Such movements are mainly possible in democratic societies where people tolerate criticism. For example, the socio-religious reform movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in India aimed to remove social practices like sati, denial of education to women, ban on widow remarriage, ill treatment of widows, child marriage, caste disabilities and so on.
- c) **Revolutionary movements:** Such a movement seeks to overthrow the existing system and replace it with a totally different one. Revolutionary movements aim at reconstructing the entire social order. They challenge the existing norms and propose a new scheme of values. The examples that immediately come to one's mind are the French Revolution and the

Russian Revolution which resorted to overthrow the existing socio-political order prevailing in France and Russia respectively.

- d) **Resistance or Reactionary movements:** These arise among people who are dissatisfied with certain aspects of change. The movement seeks to recapture or reinstate old values. For example, the Islamic Fundamentalist movement and the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) can be classified under the heading reactionary or resistance movements. Within every society, at different points of time we can have general movements or specific movements. All these types of movement generally have a programme of protest and action, establishment of a power relationship favorable to the movement and promotion of membership gratification

IV. Functions of Social Movements

So far, we have defined and explained the main features of social movements with the help of examples and typologies. Another important aspect of social movements, which needs consideration, is the functional aspect of social movements.

According to Touraine (1968) social movements have three important functions. They are

- ❖ **Mediation:** They help to relate the individual to the larger society. They give each person a chance to participate, to express his ideas and to play a role in the process of social change.
- ❖ **Pressure:** Social movements stimulate the formation of organized groups that work systematically to see that their plans and policies are implemented.
- ❖ **Clarification of Collective Consciousness:** This is a significant function. Social movements generate and develop ideas which spread throughout society. As a result, group consciousness arises and grows

V. Origins of Social Movements

A social movement represents an effort by a large number of people to solve collectively a problem or problems that they feel they have in common. In doing so the people must first of all understand the problem. Therefore, the problem must be observable. Secondly, it must be objective. This means that it exists even if we are not aware of it. A low caste status or lack of realism in films is there even if people at a given point of time are not aware of its existence. When people become aware of the problem it means that their consciousness of the problem is real. Hence, they are now subjectively aware of the objective situation. This would mean that problems are not created by people out of nothing. They exist in reality but it is only when people actually understand a problem that they try to find out means to overcome it.

All this may seem somewhat complicated but it actually is quite simple if we try to go into major details. First of all, we must try to understand why there is a sudden need for collective action. We are using the word 'sudden' because if a problem exists in reality why is it that people react to it only at a given point of time and not earlier. In order to understand this mystery, or rather, understand the very existence of social movements, we must go into its origins. It is only then that we can understand the nature of any social movement. M.S.A. Rao (1979) had done a great deal of research on social movements and he identified three factors relating to the origins of social movements. We shall attempt to explain these:

- 1) **Relative Deprivation:** The first factor is relative deprivation. A social movement usually starts because the people are unhappy about certain things. They may feel that they are not getting enough. In other words, they feel that they are deprived of something. The Naxalite movement would have this as a cause. The peasants felt that they were being

exploited and deprived of their rights and the fruits of their labor. They therefore decided to protest. Similarly, the movement for abolition of reservation of seats for backward classes in educational institutions, which took place in Gujarat, was again a result of relative deprivation. The upper castes felt that their children were being deprived of seats in good schools because of the reservation policy. At the same time those pressing for more reservation are doing so because they too feel deprived

- 2) **Structural Strain:** However, all social movements do not arise out of relative deprivation. They can also originate from structural strain. When the prevailing value system and the normative structure does not meet the aspirations of the people, the society faces strain. What happens at this time is that a new value system is sought so as to replace the old. This leads to conflicts and tension. Usually, individuals in such a situation violate the social norms. For example, where intercaste marriage is not permitted we may still find a few cases of such marriage, in violation of the norms. However only when individual actions are replaced by collective action does a social movement take place
- 3) **Revitalization:** We may quite often find that relative deprivation and structural strain are related to each other. They together form the basis of a social movement. In the case of the women's movement, relative deprivation is a cause for structural strain. Similarly, an examination of social reform movements may reveal that both these causes exist. However, we must keep in mind that social movements are not merely protest movements. Though social movements express dissatisfaction and dissent against the system, they may also offer a positive alternative. Indeed, they may be started for revitalizing the existing system which is undergoing structural strain. Revitalization is therefore the third factor associated in the emergence of a social movement.

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VI. Social Change and Social Movements

One of the main problems of sociology is to understand how and why societies change. All societies undergo changes. In some cases, these may be radical in the sense that some social institutions may be replaced by new ones. Or, there may be major changes in the existing social institutions. For example, the prevalence of nuclear families in the place of traditional joint families has brought a change in the family as a social institution. Furthermore, there are other institutions, which no longer exist. For instance, if a society based on slavery is replaced by feudalism, then the social institutions in that slave society may disappear too. If we observe societies over a period of time (i.e., historically) we will find that changes have taken place in all of them. In some cases, these may be gradual, i.e., spread over a long period of time. In others they may be rapid.

Social change, as we know by now, does not take place merely by chance or due to some factors predetermined by fate. There are several forces operating simultaneously in society, which bring about change. Some of these may be external to social institutions. Changes caused by a change in the economy or the production relations is one such instance. Industrialization creates changes in social institutions. The changes in the family structure, mentioned above, are caused by the impact of industrialization. Nuclear families are more adaptive to the nature of industrial societies than joint families. The latter are more suited to pre-industrial, mainly agrarian, societies. At the same time, there are change producing agents inside a society as well. Social movements are one of these internal forces, which contribute to changes. Of course, they may at times prevent or resist changes.

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