

THEORETICAL ISSUES IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

S.M. Michael SVD ■

The ferment reflection in recent social movements has attracted increasing attention all over the world. The civil rights movement, student movements, movements of organizations on the political right, the women's movement, ecological, dalit and tribal movements - all of these have received national coverage in the press and mass media. Hence, it is important to study the theoretical issues related to social movements.

1. What Is A Social Movement ?

The very word 'movement' suggests people on the move rejecting the existing arrangements and seeking new ones. The English word 'movement' derives from the old French verb *movoir*, which means to move, stir or impel, and the medieval Latin 'movimentum' (Wilkinson, 1971:15). According to the Oxford Dictionary, the term 'movement' signifies "a series of actions and endeavors of body of persons for a special object." In the words of Herbert Blumer, social movements may be defined as "collective enterprises to establish a new order of life" (Blumer, 1951:167). Wilson (1973) defined social movement as a conscious, collective and organised attempt to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order. According to Rao, "a social movement is an organised attempt on the part of a section of a society to bring about either partial or total change in society through collective mobilisation based on an ideology." (Rao, 1979: 2). Thus, the central conception of a social movement is group behaviours directed in a concerted way at bringing about social change. Only when collective action is sustained and is able to create an interest in a sufficiently large number of people, does it take the form of a social movement.

■ S.M. Michael is professor at the Institute of Indian Culture, Mahakali Caves Road, Andheri East, Mumbai, and guides research at the University of Bombay.

Heberle, in a similar vein, declares, "the main criterion of a social movement... is that it aims to bring about fundamental changes in the social order" (1951:6). According to Mukherjee, on the other hand, a movement can be change-promoting or change-resisting (1978:18). Oomen is of the opinion that the urge for a better future provides the focal point of analysis in any study of movements (Oomen, 1985).

It is important to understand that a mere change without affecting or intending to affect the social structure does not constitute a social movement. According to Gusfield, social movements are socially shared demands for change in some aspects of the social order (1970). Social movements share a common trait: disenchantment with the contemporary system and an attempt to build a more satisfactory system. They are manifestations of alternative striving of the people. They unmask contemporary social processes.

2. How And Why Do Social Movements Emerge?

Broadly speaking, there are three main theories which explain the structural conditions and motivational forces that given rise to a movement. These are theories of strain, revitalization and relative deprivation.

a. Strain

According to Robert Merton, movements are not accidental happening, they can be called 'mechanisms' of society to maintain stability (Merton, 1950). Such a 'mechanism' has an identifiable social function of compelling social systems to face up to challenges posed from time to time by changes in the techno-economic environment, in the demographic structure, or by changes in the realm of values resulting from cultural contact or cultural confrontation.

Smelser also developed a theory of collective behaviour based on the theory of strain. He posits structural strain as the underlying factor of collective behavior (Smelser 1963). Structural strain occurs when the prevailing value system and the normative structure do not meet the aspi-

rations of the people. Strain is considered as the impairment of relations among parts of the system, and the consequent malfunctioning of the system. What happens at this time is that a new value system is sought to replace the old. This leads to conflict and social norms. However only when individual actions are replaced by collective action does a social movement take place.

The limitation of this approach is that strain is considered as the impairment of the relations among parts of the system and the consequent malfunctioning of the system. However, strain or conflict has also a positive value in bringing about changes in the existing system, as it is made the basis of the ideology of protest.

b. Revitalization

This approach to the study of social movements is related to culture contact theories. The acculturationist provided a framework to study the response of the native cultures to the European cultures of the colonizers. Thus emerged the interest in the study of nativistic movements.

Nativism is an attitude of rejection of alien persons or culture or rejection of everything from a dominant society. In revivalism, the aim of the movement is to return to a former era of happiness, to go back to a golden age, to revive a previous condition of social virtue. This theory indicates adaptive processes of social change centered around acquiescence.

While Linton explained the nativistic movement in terms of inequality and frustration arising out of culture contact, Wallace interpreted the emergence of such movement among the natives in terms of revitalization. Revitalization has been defined by Antony Wallace as a conscious, organised effort on the part of some members of a society to create a more satisfying culture (Wallace, 1968). Revitalization is considered to be an adaptive process in establishing a condition of equilibrium which is a postulate of the structural-functional approach. Here, too, the significance of conflict in bringing about change is underplayed.

c. Relative Deprivation

Relative deprivation means a widespread feeling that people are deprived of some desired standard or thing in comparison with some standard or with the real or imagined conditions of other people. Thus, social inequality gives rise relative deprivation. Movements are perhaps the chief mechanism through which the deprived categories demonstrate their power.

Here, social movements are seen as conscious efforts on the part of men to mitigate their deprivation and to secure justice. Heberle defines a social movement as a collective attempt to bring about a change in certain social institutions or to create an entirely new order (1968:438). The roots of social movements mostly lie within the social problems. In the word of Rao, "... the relative deprivation theory offers a more satisfactory explanation of the genesis of social movements...motivating people and mobilizing them around certain interests issues" (Rao 1979:5).

The notion of relative deprivation is to be found in the thoughts of Marx and Engels (1973). Marx, Engels and Aberle used the term "relative deprivation" as the basis of conflict, to explain the genesis of social movements and social change.

Starting from the materialistic interpretation of history, Marx showed that the contradiction between the forces of production and relations of production was at the basis of change. Specifically in the capitalist mode of production, the individual is alienated from his labour, product, and polarization of classes. The class conflict backed by the polarization ideology brings about revolution with a view to establishing a classless society which is a state of non-alienation and freedom of the individual.

In this context, the theory of relative deprivation developed by Marx and Engels may be useful insight in accounting for the genesis of social and cultural movements. Marx and Engels recognized that dissatisfaction with the status quo was not determined by absolute realities but by relative expectations.

The concept of relative deprivation was further developed by Aberle (Aberle, 1966). He defined relative deprivation as a negative discrepancy between legitimate expectation and actuality. According to Tocqueville, what is significant is not the absolute level of poverty or prosperity, but what people have come to feel as their just due as compared with their present or threatened future existence (Gusfield, 1976:11).

A position of relative deprivation alone will not generate a movement. Hungry men do not revolt as such, as they are deeply involved in the primary act of staying alive (Malik, 1077). But it is the perception of a situation and the estimation of capabilities by certain leaders that they can do something that is required for the emergence of a social movement (Rao, 1979: 5). Rao stresses that relative deprivation refers not only to material conditions, but also to the other spheres of life, such as religion, education, politics and civic life (Rao, 1979: 5).

There have been many millenarian and messianic movements and cargo cults among the tribes all over the world in response to a situation of exploitation and domination by powerful non-tribals and the administration. The origin of tribal and dalit movements in India lie in the conditions of acute forms of relative deprivation in the context of exploitation by caste Hindus and other powerful trading communities.

3. Ideology

Ideology is considered to be a crucial aspect of a social movement. Without an ideology a social movement would grope alone in an uncertain fashion and could scarcely maintain itself in the face of forceful opposition from outside groups. Hence, ideology plays a significant role in the life of a movement (see Mukherjee, 1977; Gore, 1993; Beteille, 1991:12). It is a mechanism essential for the persistence and development of a movement (see Blumer, 1969:8-29; Gore, 1993).

Karl Marx showed the class character of an ideology. Each group shares a class-based collective consciousness, a world view that reflects its interpretation of reality, in short, an ideology. The ruling class

seeks to justify its social position by defining the benefits the other classes accrue due to their relationship to them. Similarly, other classes develop their own ideology.

A distinction has been made between ideology and utopia by Karl Mannheim. This distinction is extensively incorporated into the analysis of social movements. Ideas that stir people to break away from the existing order to bring about new conditions that seemed unrealizable and fantastic at the time are utopian. Ideology, on the other hand, is the historically determined thought pattern of a social group or class. Thus according to Mannheim, ideology is conservative in its implications. In Mannheim's scheme, utopias are one of the prime motors of social change (1960).

In his essay, "Ideology as a Cultural System", Clifford Geertz points out that ideology is viewed as a system of interacting symbols. He rightly points out that ideology is not merely a mental perception, but an interworking of images to grasp reality in the actual behaviour and activities of people (Geertz 1957).

A movement may start with an ideology or it may acquire one in the course of its development. In either case, it is continually revised in the light of subsequent events and the reaction of opposition reference groups. A social movement then is not just a process of collective mobilisation but one with an ideology, intended to bring either partial or intended changes in society.

Ideology helps the concerned section to gain self-respect, honour and merit. The shared ideology forms the identity of the group in a movement. While an ideology directs the course of events, the results of the events themselves have a crucial influence on the nature of the ideology, changing the pattern of communication with different symbols and codes. Thus, it is a dynamic symbolic system. It helps towards the codification of beliefs and myths in order to define a group's aspirations and responses to reality. Ideology then is closely related to the problems of identity, i.e., the way in which a group perceives itself in relation to other relevant groups and vice-versa.

It provides the yardstick for accessing the nature and degree of commitment of both leaders and for evaluating the results of events.

4. Leadership

A leader is an individual in a group who facilitates the group's movement toward its goals (Pandey, 1977). Leadership is highly significant both in the formulation of the ideology and translating it into the idiom of the masses for political mobilization (see Sharif & Sharif, 1956: 726; Wilkinson, 1971).

Prophecy play an important part in social movement which are given legitimacy by the vision of charismatic leaders. The idea of prophecy and charisma were worked out by Max Weber in a systematic way. The charismatic prophet becomes the symbol of protest against the existing order and for a new vision of the future order of society and culture from this mission. The charisma is stabilized through the bureaucratic leaders and other office bearers in a movement (see Gerth and Mills 1959).

5. Importance of Organisation in a Movement

United by an ideology, the leaders of the movement create organisational devices to fight evils and redress grievances. Some kind of organisation enables certain persons to act as authorised spokesmen and representatives of the movement. All movements have political implications even if their members do not strive for political power (Heberle, 1968: 436).

6. Typology of the Social Movements

There is no single criterion for the classification of a movement. No social movement can be accurately categorised in terms of only one ideal type or conceptual framework. We find therefore a number of classification and typologies in the literature on movements.

Movements are generally classified on the basis of locus, ideology, consequences and scale and spatial spread. The criterion of locus indi-

cates the section of society which is involved in the movement- linguistic, religious, sectarian, caste, peasant, worker, dalit, tribal, racial, ethnic, student or women.

Similarly, the nature of their ideology provides another criterion by which social movements can be classified: millenarian, chiliastic, messianic, cargo cult, sectarian, secessionist, revitalization movement, consisting of revivalistic, nativistic and protest movements.

Taking the nature of social change or its scope or consequences as the criterion, social movements can be classified into revolutionary, reformatory or transformative.

It is necessary to stress that a movement tends to acquire new features during its course, and that the classification remains relative to a particular phase in its development.

7. Consequences or Achievements of a Movement

An important conceptual problem in the study of social movements relates to the nature of social changes brought about by the social movements. The achievement of movement may be of different types. It may have merely brought some awareness among people, or it could have conscientised people. Social change occurs in many cases in a discrete manner rather than in an explicit fashion.

A social movement may bring different levels of structural changes: a) reformatory, b) revivalist, c) transformatory, or d) revolutionary. Reform is gradual, step-by-step action towards the intended objectives, resulting in slow changes in the socio-political structure of the society. *Reformation* may be identified with partial changes in the value system and the consequential changes in the quality of relationships. Often reforms are associated with the belief system, world-view, outlook, rituals and life-styles.

In contrast to reform, *revolution* is identified with radical changes in the total social and cultural systems. The changes are wholesale and

sudden and are often associated with violence. Revolutionary movements are characterised by class conflict and are associated with political parties based on carefully formulated ideology and programme of action. The revolutions in Russia and China are examples (Giddens, 1993:619).

Revival is connected with cultural ideas. A pure form of revival may not be possible. But it may create an awareness of the cultural roots in social change.

Transformative change are characterized by middle level structural change in the traditional distribution of power and the system of different allocation of resources, right and privileges by attacking the monopoly of the upper classes and castes in different areas of life, including religion. The element of conflict here acquires a sharper focus than that in the reform movements.

8. Life-cycle of a Movement

Almost all social movements are rooted in social unrest and problems. Collective tension builds up and people feel they have a problem in common. Certain social conditions are identified as the root cause of the misery. The movement gains support and a guiding ideology. Agitations rise every where. This period is generally brief and leads quickly to action. Stage three is the formalisation period through some movements. In this stage, a chain of officers is drawn up. There is division of labor among leaders and the followers. Fund raising is systematised and ideology becomes clear than before. The leaders clarify the ideology in that they remind people of the discontent they share in common, identify their opponents and state the objectives of the movement. The strategy and tactics for protest and for action are drawn and a moral justification for having adopted a particular course of action is established.

The next stage is one of institutionalization. The movement crystallises into a definite pattern. Efficient bureaucrats replace agitators; buildings and offices are established. The aims of the movement become accepted in that society.

Different movements come to different ends at different points of time : some movements end early while some dissolve after the objective has been achieved. Sometimes differences of opinion among the leaders within the movement, with each group having its own ideology and programme of action. Only some movements achieve full institutionalization.

9. New Social Movements and Post- Modernism

In the last three decades a crop of new social movements has emerged. These movements of the post-war periods are considerably different from the movements of earlier periods in terms of their theoretical presentation as well as structural-functional orientation. Movements for civil rights, anti-war movements, the women's movement, the peace, ecology and anti-nuclear movements - all these show this concern. There is a feeling that older paradigms, like traditional Marxism or functional theory, have been incapable of explaining the new social movements in their proper perspective.

Today there is a crisis of modernity. This crisis is the result of the disillusionment with modernity because of its failure to deliver promised things. Modernity is unsure of itself. The project of advanced modernity is the complete triumph over nature, the transformation of human nature, and the creation of a universal and homogeneous state (Drury, 1988:151). The crisis of modernity emanates from loss of faith in this modern project. It no longer believes in the nobility of its own project, sunk into despair and nihilism. The experience of the late twentieth century speaks of a diffused, highly fragmented social system across the globe which is unsure of its future.

In its attempts to explain the fragmented reality of contemporary societies, new social movement theory overleaps with postmodernism. The term "post-modernism" encompasses a range of attempts to describe, defend or in some way establish a stance in relation to the contemporary loss of faith in absolute facts and universal values, the apparent instability in the relationship between observed realities and the meaning assigned to them (Epstein, 1990:49).

The new social movements emphasize a new vision or project toward a more rational society to build an alternative system of power represented by people acting individually or collectively through voluntary institutions and associations (see Michael, 1995). It is rooted more firmly and meaningfully in problematic locales and specific topographies, be the issue local, national or global (Giri 1991). Take for instance, the ecological or the environmental movements. They appear to have generated a global network of concerned activists who provide inspiration for seeking alternative across the globe. These movements, along with peace and human rights movements, illustrate the global cooperation of concerned citizens who desire to act locally but to transform society globally (Kothari, 1987:279).

In developing societies, the process of development appears to have led to the annihilation of tribes, cultures and peoples (Giri 1991). Thus people's movements of various kinds question the development of peoples, cultures, symbols and habitats that take place in the name of modernisation and development.

10. Conclusion

Social movements are an organised attempt by people to transform society. They arise mostly due to the discontent of the people with the existing social order. For a movement to be successful, there must be a vision, a belief in the possibility of a different state of affairs, and an enduring organisation devoted to the attainment of this vision.

Reference

- Aberle, D.F. *The Peyote Religion among the Navaho*. Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, No. 42, New York: Wanner Green Foundation, 1966.
- Beteille, A. "Impurity and Deprivations - Some Concluding Remarks," as quoted in Lata Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991.
- Blumer, Herbert. "Collective Behaviour," in *New Outline of the Principles of Sociology*. A.M. Lee (ed.), New York: Barnes and Noble, 1951.
- Blumer, Herbert. "Social Movements" *Studies in Social Movements. A Social Psychological Perspective* ed. Barry. London: LcLaughlin. The Free Press, 1969.

- Drury, B. Shaida. *The Political Ideas Of Leo Strauss*. London: Macmillan 1988.
- Epstein, Barbara. "Rethinking social movement theory". *Socialist Review*, Vol.20, no.1, January- March, 1972.
- Geertz, Clifford. *Interpretation of Culture*. London: Hutchinson and Company, 1975.
- Gerth, H.H. & C.Wright Mills (eds.). *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University press, 1959.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Sociology*. (2nd ed.). Oxford: Polity Press, 1993.
- Giri, Ananta. *Transitional Movements and the Contemporary Global Ethnoscape*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Johns Hopkins University, U.S.A. as quoted in "Neo-Social Movements: A Creative Cultural Perspective" by Clymes Augustine and A.K. Sharma in *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 47: 3, 1994.
- Gore, M.S. *Social Context of an Ideology : Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*. New Delhi: Sage Publications ,1993.
- Gusfield, R. Joseph. *Protest, Reform and Revolt. A reader in Social Movements*. New York: John wiley & Sons, 1970.
- Heberle, Rudolf. *Social Movements: An Introduction to political Sociology*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951.
- _____ "Types and Functions of Social Movements" in *International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, Glencoe, III., Free Press, 1968.
- Kothari, Rajni "On humane government", *Alternatives*, XII (1987).
- Linton, R. "Nativistic Movements", *American Anthropologists*, vol. 45, 2 (1943).
- Malik, S.C. *Dissent, Protest and Reform in Indian Civilization*. Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977.
- Mannheim, Karl . *Ideology and Utopia*. London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.
- Merton, Robert K. "The Sociology of Knowledge" in *Social Theory and Social Structure* , (Glencoe, III., The Free Press, 1950), pp.456-88.
- Michael, S.M "Sociology of Religion in New Social Movements" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 4, 1995, pp. 2800-2801.
- Mukherjee, P.N. " Social Movement and Social Change: Towards a Conceptual Classification and Theoretical Framework," *Sociological Bulletin*. Vol.26, no.1, December 14, 1977, pp. 14-28.
- _____ "Naxalbari Movement and the Peasant Revolt in North Bengal" in *Social Movements in Indian* (M.S.A.Rao (ed.), Delhi: Manohar Publications,1978.
- Ommen, T.K. "Social movement," *Survey of Research in Sociology and Social Anthropology 1969-79*. Prepared by ICSSR, 2, Satvahan, New Delhi ,1985 , pp. 136-148.
- Pandey, B.N.(ed.). *Leadership in South Asia*. New Delhi: Vikas ,1977.
- Rao, M.S.A. *Social Movements and Social Transformation. A Study of two Backward Classes Movements in Indian*. Delhi: Macmillan Company ,1979.

_____. "Theoretical Issues Regarding Social Movements " Paper Presented at the U.G.C. Seminar on Social Movements, 1983.

Sherif, M. and Sherif, C. *An Outline of Social Psychology*. New York: Harper, 1956.

Smelser, Neil J. *The Theory of Collective Behaviour*. New York: Free Press, 1963.

Wallace, A.F.C. "Revitalization Movements", *American Anthropologist*, vol. 58, 2, 1956, pp.264-281.

_____. "Nativism and Revivalism", in *International Encyclopedia of Sciences*, vol.II, Macmillan Co and Free Press, USA, 1968.

Wilkinson, Paul . *Social Movement* . London: Pall Mall, 1971.

Wilson, T.H. *Introduction to Social Movements*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.