

SOCIAL AND NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NATURE, THEORY, AND DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGES

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 20th February 2026 Accepted: 01st March 2026 Published: 07th March 2026	Social movements have evolved from episodic expressions of protest into enduring and constitutive processes that shape democratic life. In contemporary India, social movements reflect a complex interaction between structural inequalities, identity assertions, and changing forms of political participation. This paper offers a comprehensive examination of social and New Social Movements (NSMs) by integrating classical and contemporary sociological theories with Indian empirical realities. It critically analyses the transition from class-based movements to identity- and rights-oriented mobilizations, examines the role of globalization and digital media, and evaluates the challenges confronting movements today. Drawing on the author's doctoral research on New Social Movements in Maharashtra, the study demonstrates that Indian NSMs exhibit a hybrid character, simultaneously negotiating material deprivation and identity recognition. The paper argues that social and new social movements remain indispensable to democratic deepening in India by expanding participation, contesting hegemonic power, and articulating the voices of marginalized communities.
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INTRODUCTION

Social movements occupy a central place in political sociology and democratic theory. They represent organized and sustained collective efforts through which groups articulate grievances, challenge existing power relations, and seek social transformation. While the academic study of social movements gained momentum during the twentieth century, collective struggles have accompanied human societies across history.

Earlier theoretical approaches, influenced by crowd psychology, viewed social movements as irrational, emotional, and potentially dangerous disruptions of social order. Scholars such as Gustave Le Bon and William McDougall perceived collective action as a threat to stability. However, this perspective has been significantly revised. Contemporary scholarship recognizes social movements as rational, purposive, and organized forms of political participation.

David Meyer and Sidney Tarrow describe modern societies as “social movement societies,” where protest has become a normalized and legitimate mode of political engagement. Rajendra Singh further suggests that the increasing continuity and proliferation of movements indicate a transition toward a “post-societal” condition, in which citizens increasingly rely on collective action rather than formal institutions alone to articulate their interests.

In India, social movements have historically played a transformative role from the anti-colonial freedom struggle to post-independence mobilizations around caste, gender, land, environment, and displacement. These movements have not merely reacted to political structures but have actively contributed to redefining democracy by expanding its social and moral foundations.

EVOLUTION AND CHANGING NATURE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Classical Social Movements

During the industrial era, social movements were predominantly class-based and economically oriented. Rooted in Marxist and socialist traditions, these movements focused on issues such as exploitation, wages, working conditions, and redistribution of resources. Trade unions and workers' movements symbolized this phase, emphasizing material demands and structural change through organized collective action.

Transition to New Social Movements

With the transition to post-industrial society, the nature of social conflict underwent a qualitative transformation. The decline of traditional class politics, the expansion of the service sector, and the growth of education and communication altered the basis of collective action. Social movements increasingly began to focus on issues of identity, culture, environment, gender, and human rights.

This shift marked the emergence of New Social Movements (NSMs), which differ from classical movements in terms of goals, organization, and methods. NSMs emphasize autonomy, participation, symbolic action, and quality of life rather than centralized leadership and purely economic demands.

Historical Trajectory of Social Movements in India

Indian society has experienced a continuous tradition of collective mobilization. The freedom movement against colonial rule remains the most comprehensive social movement in Indian history, integrating political resistance with social reform and cultural renaissance.

In the post-independence period, social movements diversified significantly. Dalit movements challenged caste-based discrimination and demanded dignity and equality; tribal movements resisted displacement and asserted rights over land and natural resources; women's movements addressed patriarchy, violence, and legal inequality; and peasant and farmers' movements responded to agrarian distress and market exploitation.

These movements expanded the scope of democracy beyond electoral participation by foregrounding substantive equality, social justice, and participatory citizenship.

Globalization and the Transformation of Collective Action

The neoliberal reforms initiated in India after 1991 profoundly altered the socio-economic landscape. Globalization intensified market integration, privatization, and economic inequality, generating new forms of exclusion and vulnerability. Consequently, social movements adapted their strategies, discourses, and organizational forms.

In the era of globalization, NSMs increasingly operate through decentralized networks, transnational solidarities, and issue-based coalitions. Environmental movements, anti-displacement struggles, and human rights campaigns exemplify this trend. These movements challenge not only state policies but also corporate power and global governance structures.

Conceptual Framework: Defining Social Movements

Defining social movements is analytically challenging due to their contextual and historical variability. Early crowd psychology approaches emphasized irrationality and emotional contagion. Later scholars such as Charles Tilly and George Rudé emphasized organization, leadership, and ideological coherence.

Sidney Tarrow defines social movements as collective challenges based on shared purposes and sustained interaction with power holders. Paul Wilkinson highlights their role in producing large-scale social change through organized collective efforts. M. S. A. Rao conceptualizes social movements as continuous struggles grounded in ideological frameworks, whether pre-existing or emergent. These perspectives underline the rational, purposive, and transformative character of social movements.

Causes of Emergence of Social Movements

Social movements emerge from a complex interaction of structural and subjective factors, including social and economic change, cultural shifts, institutional breakdown, persistent inequality, relative deprivation, collective perception of injustice, and status inconsistency. These factors transform individual grievances into collective consciousness and organized action.

MAJOR SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Relative Deprivation Theory

This theory suggests that movements arise when individuals or groups perceive a gap between their expectations and actual conditions. It emphasizes subjective perception rather than objective deprivation.

Value-Added Theory

Proposed by Neil Smelser, this theory argues that social movements require specific preconditions, including structural conduciveness, strain, generalized beliefs, leadership, and

mobilization.

Resource Mobilization Theory

This perspective emphasizes organizational capacity, leadership, financial resources, and access to media. It challenges the idea that grievances alone can sustain movements.

New Social Movements in the Indian Context: Discussion

The dynamics of New Social Movements in India cannot be understood without attention to regional and empirical realities. Drawing on the author's doctoral research on New Social Movements in Maharashtra, with special reference to Ahmednagar district, it becomes evident that Indian NSMs display a hybrid character (Auti, 2018). Unlike Western societies, where NSMs are largely post-materialist, Indian movements simultaneously address material deprivation and identity recognition.

The study demonstrates that agrarian distress, uneven development, and policy-driven marginalization have contributed to the rise of issue-based mobilizations that function outside traditional party structures. Leadership in Indian NSMs is often decentralized yet deeply rooted in local social realities. Caste and regional identities significantly influence mobilization patterns, issue framing, and movement outcomes, confirming T. K. Oommen's argument that caste and class cannot be analytically separated in the Indian context.

These findings suggest that Western theories of NSMs require contextual modification when applied to India. Indian NSMs represent a continuous negotiation between economic survival, social dignity, and democratic participation.

Media, Digital Activism, and Social Movements

Digital media has transformed the nature of collective action. Social networking platforms facilitate rapid mobilization, dissemination of information, and symbolic resistance. However, digital activism also poses challenges related to sustainability, ideological depth, and organizational continuity. While social media amplifies voices, it may also reduce movements to episodic expressions lacking long-term impact.

Contemporary Challenges

Social movements in contemporary India face multiple challenges, including fragmentation due to identity politics, co-optation by political and market forces, the rise of regressive and exclusionary mobilizations, declining ideological coherence, and over-dependence on digital platforms. Addressing these challenges requires strategic adaptation and renewed ideological clarity.

The Free Rider Concept in Social Movements

A critical challenge in social movements is the free rider problem, introduced by Mancur Olson in "The Logic of Collective Action" (1965). This concept explains why individuals may benefit from collective goods such as policy changes or public rights without contributing effort or resources. Since benefits are non-excludable (e.g., cleaner air from environmental campaigns), rational actors might "free ride," assuming others will bear the costs.

In traditional movements, selective incentives like material rewards mitigate this, but NSMs, relying on ideological commitment, face greater hurdles. For instance, in India's anti-corruption drives, many citizens support the cause passively, weakening active participation. Overcoming free riding requires building solidarity, using social sanctions, or offering intangible benefits like community

belonging. This concept underscores the need for strategic mobilization to ensure broad engagement, enhancing movements' efficacy.

CONCLUSION

Social and New Social Movements remain indispensable to democratic life in India. They are not merely instruments of protest but creative forces that redefine justice, citizenship, and participation. By articulating marginalized voices and challenging dominant power structures, these movements deepen democracy and sustain participatory political culture. In the context of globalization and technological change, their relevance is likely to increase, provided they maintain organizational strength and normative commitment.

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