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Research Article



Ecological Movements as an Aspect of New Social Movements in India: a case study of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA)

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ABSTRACT

The study of new social movements occupies an important part in the study of Political Science. Unlike traditional social movements, the new social movements are highly participative and have strong programme of actions. New social movements emerge around new scopes and range of politics whose main objective is social transformation rather than state power. The environment, the rights and role of women, health, food and nutrition, education, shelter and housing, the dispensation of justice, communications and the dissemination of information, culture and lifestyle, the achievement of peace and disarmament, none of which were considered to be subject matter for politics in which ordinary people were involved, are major concerns for the new movements.

The environmental movements in India were of special significance in the history of new social movements because these movements address novel issues like environmental degradation with the active participation of the unrepresented sectors of society including adivasis, women and the marginalized, demanding right to livelihood and rights of the displaced, adopting a non-violent strategy.

Beginning with an overview of the New Social Movements in India, this paper particularly focuses on the ecological movements, which are by and large civil society movements spearheaded mainly by non-party organisations, illustrating the example of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a coalition of farmers, adivasis, and activists. The struggle of the displaced people in the Narmada basin as a result of the Sardar Sarovar Project has been to protect their subsistence livelihoods and their cultures against exploitation and erasure. The NBA has, beyond doubt, pioneered the development of alternative approaches for better participatory and sustainable water governance in the basin and is indicative of an alternative politics that seeks to create autonomous spaces of action outside the state.

Keywords: Participative, Social Transformation, Justice, Adivasis, Marginalised, Displaced, Sustainable, Development.

1. Introduction

The new social movements in the developing countries act as a platform for collective action in the civil society against broader exploitation and oppression. These movements can be seen as vehicles of change in the social, economic and political domains. Their role transcends not only state power, but also the new existing civil societies. The ecological or environmental movements are of special significance in the history of new social movements in India.

2. New Social Movements in India

The 1970s engendered a new phenomenon variously described as new social movements (NSM), middle class and students' activism, women's or feminist movements and grassroots movements. This new phenomenon differs from the earlier patterns of socio-political movements in a number of ways. The new social movements are less concerned with economic production and redistribution than with removal of corruption and authoritarianism, protection of ecology and environment, provision of civic utilities, gender equality and child rights, employment, rights of the most vulnerable and marginalised sections of the population. Another feature of NSMs is that they have centred on single issues, transient questions, regional and local issues and even sectional and sectarian issues. For this they are often called "micro-movements", as theorised by D.L. Sheth (2005), who considered them as harbingers of 'new politics' setting a trail of alternative politics to the prevailing patterns. Political and social movements at the grassroots have emerged as significant forces, aimed at countering the state's policies of globalisation.[1] They are also featured by growing proclivity for independence and autonomy from established political parties. These movements are also associated with the phenomenon of privatisation of state dominated economy and globalisation.[2]

The study of new social movements occupies an important part in the study of political science. Unlike traditional social movements, the new social movements are highly participative and have strong programme of actions. This phenomenon of new social movement can be traced back to the post World War II period. The end of World War II witnessed the emergence of a number of new states in the Third World. However, many of these states failed to meet the demands of its citizens. This can be understood as a major cause for the emergence of new social movements.

Social deprivation remains widespread in the developing countries in spite of substantial improvements during the post-war period. Almost half of the developing world's children are still not protected by immunization against communicable diseases. In the rural areas of the developing world nearly two-thirds of families are still without safe drinking water and an even high proportion is without adequate sanitation. Over-centralization, limited administrative capabilities, laxity of tax administration and authoritarian tendencies has combined to provide fertile conditions for corruption in many countries. All these factors promoted the cause of social protest in the states. Hence a large number of new social movements originated from the underprivileged section of the globe.[3]

The main objective of the new social movements is social transformation rather than state power. Issues like the environment, the rights, and role of women, health, food and nutrition, education, shelter and housing, the dispensation of justice, communications and the dissemination of information, culture and lifestyle, the achievement of peace and disarmament, none of which were considered to be subject matter for politics in which ordinary people were involved, are the major areas of concern for the new movements. This results in a process of de-politicization of the social realm. However the new social movements are not only social but can have varied dimensions like political and economic and that it may not necessarily be grassroots but can include various other sections too.

In recent years in India, a number of social movements have emerged which are varying in nature and methods. However, they do have a substantial shared ideology and some shared characteristics representing the people—the downtrodden Indian masses and oppressed groups such as Dalits and Adivasis, fighting against the demerits of globalization in opposition to the state as well

as large corporations and large funding agencies such as the World Bank. The new movements reject universal indices of measuring development and progress such as GDP, life expectancy, child mortality and literacy rate, etc. and they argue in favour of subjective and local yardsticks.[4]

3. Environmental Movements in India

The environmental movements in India are of special significance in the history of new social movements. These movements can be classified as new social movements because they address novel issues like environmental degradation with the active participation of marginalized groups like the women, dalits and the adivasis, largely comprising the unrepresented sectors of society struggling to protect their subsistence livelihood and cultures and often forcing the governments to take affirmative policies in the form of new laws and provisions, adopting a non-violent strategy.

India is a country blessed with abundant natural resources. There are large areas of forests which are inhabited by rare species of animal life and also many rivers which provides livelihood for a considerable number of people including the adivasis. However these natural resources were a prey for the vested interests in the state exploiting nature without much social concerns which in turn resulted in larger issues of displacement. Rajni Kothari (1984) in his reflections on the people's movements and grassroots politics in India delineates the trend of what he calls 'the non-party political process', and emphasises on the declining role the state in social transformation in India and so-called democracy being undermined by corruption, criminalisation, and repression and depoliticisation of large masses of people with precarious livelihood conditions. The examples are Chipko movement in U. P. Himalayan districts (now Uttarakhand), the miners' struggles in Chhattisgarh, the Ryot Coolie Sangham in Andhra Pradesh, the Satyagraha led by the peasants in Kankapura in Karnataka against the mining and export of granite, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha. In these grassroots movements, 'the struggle is not limited to economic and political demands but is extended to cover ecological, cultural and educational issues.[5]

Some popular ecological movements in India are the Silent Valley Movement in Kerala, a social movement aimed at the protection of Silent valley, an evergreen tropical forest in the Palakkad district of Kerala. It was started in 1973 to save the Silent Valley Reserve Forest from being flooded by a hydroelectric project. The valley was declared as Silent Valley National Park in 1985. The Chipko Movement, which started in the early 1970s in the Garhwal Himalayas of Uttarakhand against rampant deforestation, is also described as an ecofeminist movement as women were its mainstay.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan, a social movement consisting of tribal people, adivasis, farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists against the Sardar Sarovar Dam being built across the Narmada River, is another example. No project has stirred up such widespread controversy as the largest Sardar Sarovar Project on Narmada River. Controversies arose from the displacement of thousands of people as a result of submergence of vast areas, inhabited mostly by dalits and adivasis. The humanitarian issue of neglect of the poor, displaced and the delayed and half-hearted efforts made by the Government to rehabilitate them, made the communities, scheduled to be submerged by the dam construction, organize themselves into the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a coalition of farmers, adivasis, and activists. Their struggle has been to protect their subsistence livelihoods and their cultures against exploitation and erasure. NBA activists led by Medha Patkar took their agitation right to the heart of India, i.e., New Delhi where they thought they would get the attention of the entire country through media.

4. Narmada Bachao Andolan

The Narmada River is the fifth longest river in the Indian subcontinent, and one of the five holy rivers of India. Plans to develop the river for irrigation and hydropower have been discussed for over a century. The project was welcomed by the governments of beneficiary states- Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, which were the riparian states as well as Rajasthan, a non-riparian one. There was no doubt that the huge hydro-electric project would benefit all the four States, providing easy access to drinking water, irrigation and power on its completion.

But controversies arose from the displacement of thousands of people as a result of submergence of vast areas, inhabited mostly by dalits and adivasis. The conflict began as an interstate issue over the right of the state of Gujarat to raise the height of the Sardar Sarovar dam at Navagam to maximise storage benefits at the cost of submergence of potential hydropower sites in co-riparian states Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. This resulted in an impasse in the implementation of the agreed projects at Navagam in Gujarat, Punasa and Bargi dam in Madhya Pradesh and power benefit sharing among the states, with Madhya Pradesh refusing to ratify the agreements. To break the logjam, the Central Government of India intervened, establishing the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal [6] (NWDT) in 1969 under the Interstate River Water Disputes Act [7], 1956 to adjudicate on the dispute relating to sharing of water of the inter-state river Narmada and its valley. After ten years of deliberations, the NWDT gave its award in December 1979. The NWDT, considering the development of the water resources of the basin as a whole, gave its award, allocating share of water and Hydro Power of the Sardar Sarovar Project. The uniqueness of this award was that it allocated shares of water and power from the dam, according to estimates of river flows and hydropower potential based on its own study, not only between the three riparian states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh but also included an extremely arid non-riparian state, Rajasthan, for meeting the water requirements of its drought prone districts. The Tribunal's award also established minimum requirements for rehabilitation and resettlement of 'Project-Affected Persons,' based on its study's estimates of the dam's submergence area and the number of land-owning families living in those areas. At the state level, Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Limited (SSNL) in Gujarat had the mandate to implement and manage the Sardar Sarovar multipurpose project. In Madhya Pradesh, the Narmada Valley Development Authority (NVDA) [8] was vested with the responsibility for implementation of the projects.

Even though the tribunal award resolved the initial issue of water sharing, however, the height of dam, benefit sharing and the mode of settlement of project-affected people caused serious difficulties in implementation, particularly of the Sardar Sarovar dam. In the mid 1980s, when the World Bank agreed to finance the project before an environmental impact assessment was conducted, communities scheduled to be submerged by the dam construction organized themselves into the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a coalition of farmers, adivasis, and activists. The NBA questioned the benefits claimed from the major projects, challenged the resettlement and rehabilitation packages for project affected people and its implementation. It also rejected the environmental impact assessments made and the remedial actions taken by the project authorities. This challenge created worldwide attention to the major development activity planned in the valley and intense worldwide pressure ultimately urged the World Bank to withdraw from the project and this resulted in the Bank mounting an Independent Review Mission (IRM) called the Morse Mission to review the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP). But the IRM's report was neither accepted by the Government of India nor the World Bank.

The argument in favour of the SSP was that the benefits to be reaped were so huge that they would substantially outweigh the costs of the immediate human and environmental disruption. The dam would substantially reduce the long term costs for people and ensure income source for the future generations which otherwise would put increasing pressure on the environment. If the waters of the Narmada River continue to flow to the sea unused, it would lead to escalation of human deprivation, particularly in the dry areas of Gujarat. The project had the potential to feed as many as 20 million people, provide domestic and industrial water for about 30 million, employ about 1 million, and provide valuable peak electric power in an area with high unmet power demand.[9]

However, the NBA pinpointed that development need not mean displacement, ignoring the voice of the poor in the development process. Providing alternative means of livelihood along with houses is more important than distribution of money. It also exposed the corruption at different stages of rehabilitation and underlined the rights of the displaced persons to a decent living. But the

Government remained insensitive to the plight of several hundreds who were uprooted from their homes and livelihood. Some critics were of the opinion that the dam would benefit the rich industrialists instead of poor agriculturists.

The NBA filed a writ petition before Supreme Court raising several issues including Relief and Rehabilitation and, further construction should not be permitted till one year after the resettlement of these project affected families at 90 metres. Rise in the height of the dam meant submergence of more villages and displacement of thousands of more people from their homes. According to NWDT, the work on the dam could go ahead only if the land based resettlement of oustees below the height was complete and inability of any State to resettle the people below the particular height would amount to termination of the project. According to a survey conducted by NBA, it was found that more than 3,500 families were still to be resettled as per the NWDT.

The court gave its main judgment on 18-10-2000 in NBA v. Union of India. The court was of the opinion that displacement of the tribals and other persons would not per se result in violation of their fundamental or other rights; on their rehabilitation at new locations, they would be better off than what they were; at the rehabilitation sites they would have more and better amenities than those they enjoyed in their tribal hamlets; and the gradual assimilation in the main stream of society would lead to betterment and progress. As the Relief and Rehabilitation subgroup had cleared the construction up to 90 metres, the same could be undertaken immediately. Further rising of the height would be only *pari passu* with the implementation of the Relief and Rehabilitation measures and on the clearance by the Relief and Rehabilitation subgroup. Narmada Control Authority would draw up an action plan in relation to further construction and the Relief and Rehabilitation work to be undertaken. Such an action plan would fix a time frame so as to ensure Relief and Rehabilitation *pari passu* with the increase in the height of the dam and each State should abide by the terms of the action plan so prepared by the Narmada Control Authority with regard to the acquisition of land for the purposes of Relief and Rehabilitation and within the period specified by Narmada Control Authority.[10]

According to NWDT Award and Supreme Court's judgment of October, 2000 and March, 2005, the construction of the dam was not allowed to outpace rehabilitation work. The project affected families should be settled at least 6 months in advance of raising the dam height above 110 meters. However, the directions of the Supreme Court, given in the main judgment of 2000, were not implemented in letter and spirit. Thus, further applications were filed by NBA in the Supreme Court for rehabilitation of the oustees in accordance with NWDT Award. The main cry of the NBA was that there should be no question of raising the height of the dam without providing for the corrective measures to meet the failures and deficiencies in rehabilitation work. The agitation against the project was justified taking into consideration the fact that the poor, voiceless, displaced persons were denied justice and human rights. Many of the project affected families complained that they had not been offered compensation. Where they got compensation, its amount was so meagre that they could not purchase the area of land to which they were entitled. Some people had to pay bribes for the receipt of compensation. More shocking was that income tax was deducted at source from the amount of compensation paid to the oustees. It was submitted that compensation packages involving cash payment should not be subjected to payment of income-tax because compensation was not the income of the oustees rather it was being paid to them in lieu of what had been taken from them[11]. The testimonies of the struggling people recount their deeply disturbing experience of erasure- of their cultural, political, economic and ecological spaces of existence.

One of the first measures of the NDA government after coming to power in May 2014 was to raise the height of SSP by 17 meters to its final height of 138.68 metres. This was in direct violation of the NWDT which disallowed any further displacement before complete rehabilitation in the Narmada Valley. The recent fact-finding report titled "*Drowning a Valley - Destroying a Civilization*"

pointed to the grave implications of this move – set to unleash an unprecedented displacement on an estimated 2.5 lakh families in 245 villages in the 3 states.[12]

Medha Patkar vociferously pointed out the large irregularities, manipulations and ongoing corruption in the Narmada valley; including those in disbursement of compensation to farmers and other affected people. Drawing comparisons, she said that the scams were even bigger than the recently exposed 'Vyapam Scam', which had already put the Madhya Pradesh government and the Narendra Modi-led NDA government under the scanner and attracted widespread attention. She continued with the demand for land for all displaced families. The Fact Finding Report brought forth by the Central Fact Finding Committee was distributed to the press. The report, prepared after their visit in the valley, revealed numerous violations and non-compliance of judicial orders, inaccurate surveys, massive corruption and denial of justice to those forced to suffer for the cause of 'development'.

Following the mammoth catastrophe in Nepal and Uttarakhand, the affected people from the valley have urged activists, environmentalists, policy-makers and the governments to take cognizance of maintaining ecological balance, for the lives and livelihoods of more than 2.5 lakh families, already facing massive devastation.

Medha Patkar, addressing a gathering at a convention, on July 28, 2015 announced that a week-long 'padyatra' from Narmada valley to Rajghat would be launched on August 6-12, 2015 against Development Terrorism and Destructive Displacement, and from August 12 onwards, *Jeevan Adhikar Satyagrah (Right to Life)*. [13] That the struggle of the people in the Narmada valley is symbolic of the struggle of millions of common people across the country and is a united fight to sustain peace, justice and democracy, was the conclusion that emerged out of a daylong Convention, at the Constitution Club in New Delhi, organized on the eve of 30 years of relentless struggle by the NBA.

Despite the continuous struggle for 30 years in the Narmada Valley, the lives of tribal farmers, fisherfolks, workers and others is under grave threat. With raising the height of Sardar Sarovar Dam, water can flood villages and submerge houses, farmers, shops, schools, temples, and mosques as well as lakhs of trees. After persistent legal and field battles, about 11,000 families will get land but the rest are still without it. Thousands of adivasis, farmers, labourers, fish workers and potters, those who have struggled for justice, legal and human, will be ousted and displaced. Non-violence and civil disobedience embodied in the NBA is a collective history of innumerable rallies, hundreds of hunger strikes, sit-in protests, dharnas, gheraos, public meetings, folk songs, street plays and dances which have all formed part of the struggle that asserted the right of the people to their land, water and forests and set a precedent for a large number of other social movements in India.[14]

Thus, undoubtedly, there has been a serious governance failure in the Narmada basin regarding the proper utilisation of its water resources. State hegemony consists of coercion and consent, as Gramsci (1971) stated. Given that the development of the Narmada dams is going ahead without the consent of the vast majority of the people in the valley is symptomatic of an authoritarian rather than a democratic state. The Amnesty International has indicted India for pursuing development at the expense of human rights. The basic assumption that big dam projects are indispensable for irrigation and power development has

led to ignoring the tremendous environmental and social costs associated with such projects and a violation of the basic principle of "reasonable and equitable" utilisation of water as mandated by international covenants on the use of river waters. The inability to fulfil

the need for irrigation through dam projects has also led to the excessive exploitation of ground water leading to reduced surface flow. The various mass organisations and NGOs led by the NBA have continually agitated for people-centred water governance in the basin so far with only partial success. The NBA has, beyond doubt, pioneered the development of alternative approaches for better participatory and sustainable water governance in the basin. The NBA articulates resistance in a number of interrelated realms within the society, including the economic, cultural, and political and

environmental. This is indicative of an alternative politics that seeks to create autonomous spaces of action outside the state. The NBA has been involved in various types of reconstruction work or 'Nava Nirman' in the valley since 1991, engaging in alternative energy projects, conservation work, tree plantation and the like. The Andolan also involved creation of new services in the rural areas launching the first micro-hydel project in Domkhedi on August 15, 2000, with the consent of the villagers, in an environmentally sustainable way. The NBA, in concert with the adivasi communities in the valley has proceeded with a radical programme of, 'humara gaon mein humara raj' (our rule in our villages). Interestingly, the Andolan has also been involved in creating international networks of solidarity and actions forging operational links with various groups outside India and thereby extending the networking of the NBA struggle beyond the local geography of the Narmada valley. [15] Moreover with the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2006 now to be implemented throughout all the districts of the basin, there is an opportunity to prepare a comprehensive basin development plan and implement it over a period of time.

Conclusion

Therefore, environmental movements, like any other form of New Social Movement, to be people's movements and vehicles of societal change, must be sympathise with the concerns of the vulnerable and disadvantageous sections of the society recognising the fact that right to development must be in tandem with the right to a healthy environment.

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