



AGRI MAGAZINE

(International E-Magazine for Agricultural Articles)

Volume: 02, Issue: 11 (November, 2025)

Available online at <http://www.agrimagazine.in>

© Agri Magazine, ISSN: 3048-8656

Social Movements in India: Concepts, Theories, Types and Contemporary Relevance

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Social movements are collective efforts that challenge inequality, demand justice, and influence social transformation. This article explains the nature, definition, and classification of social movements while exploring their genesis, ideology, and identity-based mobilization. It describes how leadership and organization shape collective action. Theories such as Herbert Blumer's Collective Behaviour, Neil Smelser's Structural Strain Theory, Resource Mobilization Theory, and New Social Movement Theory are discussed to understand the logic behind social protests. The study also analyzes major types of movements in India, including peasant movements, backward class mobilization, religious and sectarian movements, tribal struggles, Dalit resistance, women's movements, and environmental activism. Special attention is given to the "politics of transcendence," where spiritual or moral ideology becomes the driving force behind mobilization. The article concludes that social movements in India continue to challenge oppression, create democratic spaces, promote identity rights, and shape public policy.

Conceptual Issues: Nature, Definitions, Classifications

Nature of Social Movements

Social movements are organized and collective forms of action that arise when groups experience injustice or deprivation and feel the need to challenge existing conditions. Unlike spontaneous protests or riots, social movements are sustained over a longer period and pursue social, economic, cultural, or political change through coordinated efforts. They function through organized networks, structured groups, and effective leadership, which help in mobilizing people and shaping collective goals. A shared identity and common ideology further strengthen solidarity within the movement by providing participants with a sense of unity, purpose, and direction.

Definition

A social movement can be understood as a collective, conscious, and sustained effort undertaken by people who share common goals and come together to bring about or resist social change. It represents an organized form of collective action in which individuals unite around shared grievances, aspirations, and ideologies to challenge existing structures or defend certain values within society.

Classification of Movements

The classification of social movements can be understood through the different purposes they serve and the kinds of changes they seek to achieve. Reform movements aim to bring about limited and gradual changes within the existing legal or institutional framework without altering the broader social structure. In contrast, revolutionary movements seek complete structural transformation and challenge the very foundations of society. Redemptive movements focus on spiritual, moral, or personal transformation, emphasizing inner change and self-improvement. Resistance movements emerge to oppose specific policies, development projects, or forms of domination that threaten community interests or rights.

Identity movements, on the other hand, revolve around shared identities based on caste, gender, tribe, religion, or region, and they work toward recognition, dignity, and equality for marginalized groups.

Genesis, Ideology, Identity and Mobilization

Genesis of Movements

The genesis of social movements can be traced to conditions of inequality, discrimination, and exploitation that create deep dissatisfaction among people. Movements are often triggered by persistent social conflict, oppressive structures, or periods of economic crisis that intensify grievances and compel individuals to seek collective solutions. They typically emerge when existing institutional mechanisms—such as law, governance, or administrative systems—fail to provide justice or address the needs of marginalized groups, leaving collective mobilization as the only viable path for change.

Ideology

Ideology plays a crucial role in shaping social movements because it gives meaning, direction, and a clear goal to collective action. It provides a conceptual framework through which participants interpret injustice, understand their grievances, and envision the kind of change they seek to achieve. Ideology helps unify members under shared beliefs and strengthens their commitment to the movement's objectives. In the Indian context, different movements have drawn inspiration from various ideological traditions such as Ambedkarite ideology for Dalit liberation, Marxism for class-based struggles, Gandhian philosophy for non-violent social reform, and environmental ethics for ecological protection. These ideological foundations guide strategies, mobilization patterns, and long-term visions of social movements.

Identity

Identity plays a vital role in uniting members of a social movement by creating a sense of shared experience, belonging, and common purpose. When individuals recognize that they face similar forms of discrimination or exclusion, they come together under a collective identity that strengthens solidarity and commitment. In India, Dalit identity has been central to Dalit movements seeking dignity and equality; tribal identity has empowered Adivasi communities to defend their land, culture, and autonomy; and women's identity has given strength to feminist activism addressing gender-based injustices. Thus, identity acts as a cohesive force that binds participants and motivates collective action.

Collective Mobilization

Collective mobilization refers to the process through which grievances are transformed into organized collective action. It involves building networks, organizing meetings, conducting public rallies and marches, and creating platforms for participation. In the digital age, social media has become a powerful tool that accelerates mobilization by spreading information rapidly, shaping public opinion, and enabling wider participation. However, successful mobilization still depends on access to resources, effective communication channels, and strong leadership that can coordinate efforts and maintain momentum.

Leadership

Leadership is essential for providing direction, structure, and coordination within social movements. Leaders play a key role in framing ideology, defining strategies, setting objectives, and negotiating with authorities. Leadership may take different forms—it can be charismatic, as seen in figures like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar or Birsā Munda; institutional, emerging from formal organizations; or network-based, arising organically through collective participation. Regardless of its form, effective leadership helps sustain the movement, motivates supporters, and guides it toward achieving its goals.

Theories of Social Movements

Herbert Blumer – Collective Behaviour

Herbert Blumer's Collective Behaviour theory explains that social movements typically arise out of conditions of social unrest, where individuals experience widespread dissatisfaction

and emotional tension. In the early stages, these movements are often driven by spontaneous and emotionally charged reactions rather than deliberate planning. Crowds, collective excitement, and strong shared emotions play a significant role in bringing people together and initiating action. Over time, however, these initially unstructured and spontaneous behaviors develop into more formalized and organized movements with clearer goals, leadership, and strategies. Blumer's perspective highlights the importance of emotional energy and crowd psychology in the emergence and evolution of social movements.

Neil Smelser – Structural Strain Theory

According to Neil Smelser's Structural Strain Theory, social movements emerge when society experiences significant strain, such as inequality, discrimination, or periods of crisis that create tension among people. Smelser argues that six specific conditions must be present for a movement to develop: structural conduciveness, which allows people the space to express grievances; structural strain, which creates widespread dissatisfaction; the formation of a shared belief that explains the problem and unites people; a triggering event that sparks collective action; the process of mobilization, in which people are organized and led; and finally, weak social control, meaning that authorities are unable or unwilling to suppress the movement. When social strain combines with a shared belief about the causes of injustice, the environment becomes favorable for collective action, allowing a social movement to take shape and grow.

Resource Mobilization Theory

Resource Mobilization Theory argues that social movements are successful not merely because people have grievances, but because they can gather and effectively use the necessary resources to organize collective action. These resources may include money, social networks, media support, strong leadership, organizational skills, and access to communication channels. According to this perspective, grievances alone cannot generate a movement; what matters most is the ability to mobilize people through structured organizations capable of coordinating efforts, sustaining participation, and influencing public opinion. This theory highlights that movements succeed when they deliberately plan, strategize, and utilize available resources in a systematic way.

New Social Movement (NSM) Theory

New Social Movement Theory examines the emergence of modern movements that focus on identity, lifestyle, cultural values, human rights, and environmental concerns. Unlike traditional movements rooted primarily in economic class issues, NSMs emphasize broader goals related to democracy, ecology, gender equality, minority rights, and global justice. These movements arise from post-industrial societies where cultural and identity-based issues gain prominence. Examples of such mobilizations include feminist movements advocating women's rights, environmental movements striving for ecological protection, and LGBTQ rights movements seeking equality and social acceptance. NSM Theory highlights the shift from materialist struggles to post-materialist values that define contemporary social activism.

Types of Movements in India

Peasant Movements

Peasant movements in India have historically emerged from severe agrarian distress and the hardships faced by rural communities. These movements seek to end landlord oppression, excessive land revenue demands, low wages, bonded labour, and the overwhelming burden of agricultural debt. Their demands typically include land rights for cultivators, fair crop prices, adequate irrigation facilities, guaranteed Minimum Support Price (MSP), and loan waivers to relieve financial pressure. Major examples of such mobilizations include the Champaran Indigo Movement, the Telangana Peasant Struggle, the Tebhaga Movement in Bengal, and the contemporary farmers' protests that gained national attention. Together, these movements represent the broader struggle for agrarian justice and reflect the socio-economic challenges confronting India's rural population.

Backward Class Movements

Backward class movements aim to achieve social mobility, educational advancement, employment opportunities, and adequate political representation for historically disadvantaged communities. These movements challenge caste-based discrimination and demand equal access to state resources and institutions. Significant examples include the Non-Brahmin Movement in Tamil Nadu, which sought to challenge upper-caste dominance, and the Mandal Commission Movement, which advocated reservation policies for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Collectively, these movements have played a crucial role in redefining caste relations in India and advancing the broader agenda of social justice.

Religious-Sectarian Movements

Religious and sectarian movements focus on spiritual reform, moral upliftment, and the purification of religious practices. Movements such as the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj promoted religious reform, ethical conduct, and social progress, while numerous other sectarian groups emphasized spiritual liberation and inner transformation. These movements often reflect what is known as the “politics of transcendence,” wherein spiritual ideology is used to inspire collective action and encourage individuals to rise above material concerns in pursuit of truth, purity, and justice.

Tribal Movements

Tribal movements in India have emerged primarily as struggles against land alienation, forced displacement, and the exploitation of forest resources. These movements advocate for tribal autonomy, self-governance, cultural protection, and secure rights over land and natural resources. Prominent examples include the Santhal Rebellion, the Birsa Munda Movement, the Jharkhand Movement for statehood, and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, which strongly involved Adivasi communities. Tribal movements emphasize identity, dignity, and ancestral rights, highlighting the ongoing need to protect indigenous communities from marginalization and developmental displacement.

Dalit Movements

Dalit movements are anchored in the struggle for equality, dignity, land ownership, education, and political representation for communities historically oppressed under the caste system. Rooted deeply in Ambedkarite ideology, these movements challenge untouchability, discrimination, and institutional caste-based exclusion. Key examples include the Dalit Panthers movement inspired by Black civil rights struggles, the emergence of BAMCEF as a socio-educational organization, and the broader Ambedkarite movement demanding social transformation. Together, these mobilizations continue to push for justice, constitutional rights, and an end to caste oppression in India.

Women's Movements

Women's movements in India focus on gender equality, women's rights, personal safety, and greater political and social representation. These movements address a wide range of issues, including dowry harassment, domestic violence, unequal property rights, workplace discrimination, and sexual violence. Prominent examples include the Chipko Movement, which saw strong leadership from rural women; the anti-arrack movement against alcoholism; and the nationwide protests that followed the Nirbhaya case. These movements highlight the importance of women's empowerment in building a just, inclusive, and democratic society.

Environmental Movements

Environmental movements focus on protecting forests, rivers, biodiversity, and fragile ecosystems from destructive industrial and developmental activities. These movements criticize unsustainable development models and advocate for ecological balance, community rights, and sustainable resource use. Some of the most influential environmental mobilizations in India include the Chipko Movement for forest preservation, the Silent Valley Movement against a proposed hydroelectric project, the Narmada Bachao Andolan opposing large dams, and the Save Western Ghats campaign. These movements emphasize the need for sustainable development and ecological justice in a rapidly industrializing nation.

Politics of Transcendence

The concept of “politics of transcendence” refers to a form of collective action in which spiritual or moral principles are closely intertwined with social change. In such movements, religious or ethical authority becomes a major force for mobilizing followers, offering moral legitimacy and inspiring devotion. These movements encourage people to rise above immediate material concerns and focus instead on higher ideals such as purity, truth, justice, and moral transformation. Politics of transcendence can be seen in monastic orders, sectarian reform groups, spiritual revival movements, and various moral awakening campaigns that use ethical teachings to challenge social evils and promote a more just and harmonious society.

Conclusion

Social movements play a central role in strengthening India’s democracy by providing a platform for people to collectively express their concerns and demand meaningful change. They give voice to marginalized communities whose grievances often remain unheard within formal institutional structures. By challenging systems of inequality, oppression, injustice, and exploitation, these movements work toward creating a more inclusive and equitable society. Theories of social movements help us understand the conditions under which movements emerge, the reasons behind their growth, and the strategies they adopt to achieve their goals. In India, various forms of mobilization—such as peasant struggles, Dalit movements, tribal resistance, women’s rights campaigns, environmental activism, and backward class movements—have significantly shaped social and political processes. As society continues to evolve, these movements remain essential for safeguarding rights, promoting dignity, ensuring equality, and driving transformative social change.

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