Political diversity, common purpose: social movements in India

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At the risk of sounding repetitive, one needs to reassert that the methodological problem of identifying and defining a social movement is fairly difficult. The problem becomes particularly complex when we focus on the Asian region. Given its multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-political reality, the bewildering multiplicity and diversity of social movements in the region should not come as a great surprise. After all, social movements necessarily must be, and firmly are, embedded in the social, cultural and political realities of a nation. Whereas a description of the movements is a matter of information collection and a systematic presentation of such information, an analysis of the embeddedness and linkages of the movements with wider socio-political processes is a very difficult and long-term task, particularly for the Asian region. Apart from being complex, the region is also so vast that to capture its variety in a single article is quite impossible. Accordingly, this paper shall try to convey an essence of such complexities by focusing on social movements in India, assuming of course that much of the general aspects of the analysis are extendable to other areas of the Asian region.

Nevertheless, it would seem to be necessary to have some kind of a guideline, if not an exact definition, of a social movement in order to explore further its complexities. Accordingly, we shall use the following as such a guideline:

A Social Movement is any explicit or implicit persuasion by non-institutionalized groups seeking public gain by attempting to change some part of ‘the system’.

Accordingly:

1. Social movements are an attempt to bring about institutional change, mainly from without the social structure.
2. Change may be limited to reform. It may alter some practices or policies of an institution, but leaves the institution itself intact.
3. Change advocated may also be radical or revolutionary; demanding fundamental change in the existing social/institutional structures and relationships.

Quite obviously, a variety of social movements in Asia would fall into at least one of the above categories; and many may overlap between the three.

In general, one may state that the scope and concerns of the social movements in the Asian region are not very different from those of other continents of the world. The more historical movements involving industrial workers, peasants and adivasis (indigenous people) have, since the independence of many countries in the region from colonial rule, been supplemented by the women’s, environmental, human rights, and peace movements. A particular characteristic of the South Asian part of the region would be the dalit, the religious reform, and religious fundamentalist movements. The religious fundamentalist movements pose a particular problem in any inventory that attempts to list the movements in the region — should one include them or exclude them? In terms of involvement of people, these are large movements; but as far as their objectives go, they exhibit the inadequacy of the guideline or definition of a social movement presented above. Many of them are quite radical, since they even demand a structural change in the system itself — from a secular state to a state based on a particular
religion. But in the process, they have also to be seen as movements that promote enmity, hostility and violence amongst people of different religions, which raises the question about the legitimacy of including them in any list. If ‘public gain’ is to be interpreted as ‘common good for the majority of the oppressed and of those facing injustice’ in the definition offered above, religious fundamentalist movements would be difficult to accommodate since they would seem to be promoting ‘public gain’ of a particular identity only, that is if their work is at all characterizable as promoting ‘public gain’. But their reality, extent of penetration within the society and linkages with state politics can not be simply dismissed, particularly in present day India.

The national movement for independence

Aspects of Asia that must always be seen as a historical backdrop when discussing its social movements are a variety of national liberation movements against colonial occupation in many countries of the region. Contemporary social movements cannot really be well understood without identifying the elements of continuity and change from such liberation movements. And nowhere else is that as important as in India.

The Indian national independence movement, as is well known, was greatly influenced by the leadership provided by Mahatma Gandhi. The sheer number of people who participated in this movement, particularly from about 1910 to the time of independence in 1947, is staggering. Apart from gaining political independence for India, the movement influenced a nation of 300 million people in 1947, and over a billion today, in nearly all aspects of politics and life. Apart from its main characteristics of non-violence and struggle based on truth — satyagraha — Gandhian thought penetrated areas such as governance, decentralization, ethics and morality of politics, education, rural and national development, self-reliance, volunteerism, caste and untouchability and much more.

After gaining independence, and even after Gandhi’s assassination by a Hindu religious fanatic in 1948, his thoughts spurred a wide variety of Gandhian movements and civil society formations that continue today. The persistence and resilience of his thoughts can also be discerned today in movements that may not be direct descendants of Gandhian movements, such as the environmental, adivasi and local governance movements. The more direct Gandhian movements would include the Sarvodaya movement, which concentrated on the redistribution of land in the 1950s and 1960s but is fairly dormant now, the movement for bringing in Panchayati Raj (local governance), and a plethora of Gandhian institutions all over the country, of which the Gandhi Peace Foundation in Delhi, Sewagram Ashram in Wardha, Gandhigram in Tamil Nadu, Gandhi University and Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat would be prominent. His notion of self-reliance, symbolized by the hand-spun local cloth, khadi, and a variety of other locally produced products, is promoted by the state through a vast organization called the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, with an extensive network of still-popular retail outlets.

Gandhian thought finds popularity amongst groups and movements that seek to establish a more ethical, moral and harmonious relationship between human activities and nature, and who are seeking another world that draws away from centralization of political power and economic production. It would therefore seem to confront and resist both forms of capital, private or state-owned, putting much more emphasis on community ownership.

Dominant political trends

In order to arrive at a somewhat deeper understanding of the continued impact of the independence movement, so as to situate better the other contemporary movements in India, a brief outline of the trends that dominate the Indian polity is appropriate here. The main organization that channelled the masses of people towards India’s independence was the Congress Party. It was through this that Gandhi was able to reach out and consolidate the movement for independence. It was also
clear that by the time India was close to its independence, the Congress Party had little faith in the Gandhian notions of power, governance and development. The modernist Nehru, with undiminished respect for his master, Gandhi, nevertheless violently differed from his ideology. His preference, and that of the ‘progressive’ elements within the Congress Party, was for a Soviet-style industrial modernization process, combined with a secular, socialistic approach. In a sense therefore, Gandhi’s vision was seen to be utopian by even those within his own organization. This is coupled with the fact that, despite Gandhi’s efforts to bring in reconciliation between the Hindu nationalists and Muslim elements demanding a separate nation, the country was finally divided on religious lines. And instead of one, two countries — India and the mainly Muslim Pakistan — emerged in 1947, stamping for the future a pronounced politics based on religious fundamentalism and intolerance.

But Gandhi and his ideas faced, and continue to face, violent criticism and opposition from another section of the society, namely the dalits, who see B. R. Ambedkar as their true leader. They believe that Gandhi’s concern for the untouchables (‘harijans’, the people of God as he called them) was based on upper caste ‘compassion’ (and hence was false), rather than a recognition of their social, political and economic rights as equal citizen’s of India. The Left was mostly cold and critical of Gandhi since he did not explicitly talk of ‘class’ and, worse, his preferred form of resistance, satyagraha, is fairly different from the notion of class struggle. What becomes apparent therefore is that Gandhian thought is seen to differ from that of Dalits and the Left.

The Left has been, and continues to be, a persuasive political force within the country, without perhaps ever being dominant. Quite clearly, the national independence movement was dominated by the Congress Party. After independence, and perhaps not uncommon compared with other multi-party democracies, the single Communist Party of India began to split, and has three main strands today — the CPI, the CPI (Marxist) and the CPI (Marxist-Leninist), the last being recognizable as the ‘Maoist’ party in other countries; which itself has many factions. Formed in 1967 and coinciding with the campus revolts of the late 1960s, with an explicit agenda justifying the use violence as a method for capturing state power, the CPI (ml) caught the imagination of a large mass of academics, intellectuals and students during that time, who enrolled in it to work alongside peasants in remote areas of the country. The CPI and CPI (M) on the other hand have participated in the electoral process, with the CPI (M) having had more success in the states and the centre; it has ruled the state of West Bengal for the last 25 years continuously, and has a see-saw with the Congress party in ruling Kerala. Apart from the three left parties, there also exists a large number of left and left-oriented non-party groups and organizations all over India, active in a wide variety of issues.

State power however continued to remain largely with the Congress Party, who paid the usual lip service to Gandhi, but moved the country in directions far distant from his ideals. The most prominent one-off exception to this occurred during Rajiv Gandhi’s tenure as Prime Minister when, in 1994, the country’s constitution was amended to pave way for the Local Governments, the Panchayati Raj, most favoured by Mahatma Gandhi. The Congress Party leadership also remained mostly and firmly upper-caste, with a centrist approach which sometimes had a mildly left leaning, as in the case of nationalization of banks. In contradiction however, it is the Congress Party that ushered in the era of neoliberal globalization in India beginning 1990. Two departures to this trend of Congress domination that can be discerned in recent years has been the rise of the lower-castes and the Hindu nationalist forces in electoral politics, which has completely changed the scenario of Indian politics.

The Hindu nationalists had little presence in state politics, but had a strong presence in the society through civil-society-type work, mainly through their ‘social movement’, the RSS. The lower castes and the dalits, gradually distanced themselves from the ‘benevolence’ of the Congress Party by organizing their own parties, such as the Bahujan Samaj
Party, the Samajvadi Party, and elements of Janata Dal. They tasted electoral success in states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, and began influencing the national politics. The Hindu nationalists, through a series of acts that heightened communal tensions, including the demolition of the Babri Masjid (a historic mosque) by Hindu fanatics, and by using the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the continued hostility with the Muslim Pakistan as a constant marker, paved the way for the linked political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to grab power at the centre, as also in other states of India. Gradually therefore, the political polarization instead of being based on class, poverty and development, has moved increasingly to issues based on identities; of religion, caste and ethnicity. And it is within this mind-bogglingly complex system of politics, religion, caste, poverty and cultural diversity that the social movements operate, attempting social transformation!

The movements

The most easily identifiable movements in India are the ones connected/related to the political parties. Thus, the three Communist Parties each have a trade union, a student/youth union and a women’s movement allied to them. But this trend is also common for other parties, including those whose presence may be more dominant in state rather than central politics. Thus, the Congress and the right-wing BJP have allied to them a trade union, a student union and a women’s movement. These are further supplemented by unions of professional workers affiliated to political parties, like that of school, college and university teachers etc. Having deep loyalties to their parties, with a high degree of control, these movements tend to mimic the traditional tensions and competition that exists between their parent parties. Although the student, labour and women’s and other issues articulated by each might be the same or similar, there would be a tendency to compete with each other. This does not imply that there are no common agendas or collaborations from time to time. But the need for unity is a common refrain, particularly from those elements who are bothered by fragmentation and the subsequent loss of political strength.

The contradictions, however, appear when the parent party is in power. The allied movements, vociferous when their parent parties are in opposition, have to muzzle their views to support their party in power, negating the definition offered in the beginning that a social movement is the one that is ‘outside the system’. Party-allied movements are therefore not seen as independent.

Set apart from such ‘traditional’ movements are the ‘new’ and ‘independent’ movements that tend to distance themselves from the traditional party linkages, in order to innovate in terms of organizational structures, leadership roles and proximity with the most oppressed in remote areas. The Environment movement comes easily to mind as one such example.

Revisiting Chipko Andolan

Andolan is the common term for a movement in India. The well-known Chipko Andolan literally means ‘Hug the Trees Movement’, which originated from an incident in a remote village high up in the Himalayas in 1972. The bare facts of the incident are that there was a dispute between the local villagers and a logging contractor who had been allowed to fell trees in a forest close to the village. On the particular day, there was a meeting with the related government officials in their office away from the village, for which most of the men had gone. Meanwhile, the contractor’s workers appeared in the forest to cut the trees while the men folk were absent. Undeterred, the women of the Reni village reached the forest quickly and clasped the tree trunks thus preventing the workers from putting their axes and saws to the trees. Thus thwarted, the workers had to withdraw and the incident spread like wildfire across communities and media and forced the government, to whom the forest belongs, to negotiate with the community, mostly women. The women began setting up their committees in the region and began articulating larger issues about eco-friendly development, as a partnership be-
between the community and the government. In spite of the usual ups and downs, the movement continues today as a major environmental movement and has inspired a large number of people in the country and the world.

The underlying elements of this movement are sometimes not well understood by people, particularly by the elites in India and in the western world. There is a tendency to cite it as an example in the same breath as, say, the Sierra Club and such like; as a shining example of environmental conservation. In essence, conservation is at best an underlying element in the action of the women. What they were articulating more strongly was their ‘right to use’. The issue therefore may be characterized as a competition regarding the rights of use; in this case the competition was between the state-approved contractors and the community. It is not as if the women were fighting so that the trees remained untouched. In fact it is they themselves who had a need for these trees, as a source of firewood for their hearths, and for the leaves, as fodder. In comparison, the contractor was going to clear-fell them for the timber, in this case for manufacturing sports goods. The women were articulating the question: ‘Whose use is primary? Theirs for cooking food or of a distant sports goods factory?’ Inherent in this competition to control a natural resource is the conservation of a replenishable resource, but that is in the method of use rather than in its non-use. The contractor would have clear-felled the trees, destroying them forever. The communities traditionally lop the branches and pluck the leaves, allowing the resource to replenish over time.

Chipko therefore provided a blueprint for future movements, both in its articulation of the tensions between the state and the communities over the right to natural resources, and also in newer forms of mass action and organizational forms — the most noticeable being the gender aspect inherent in its action. In a different context, the anti-dam movements in India and other countries of Asia articulate similar concerns regarding the contending rights of the community and the Government in decisions affecting the common property resources that provide subsistence to the local populations. Beginning with the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA, Save the Narmada Movement), the anti-dam movements have spearheaded the environmental movements to centre stage, through their radical redefinition of development itself. The success of the NBA in forcing the World Bank to withdraw its financial support to the dams on the Narmada river has reverberated throughout the world, and largely contributed to the setting of the World Commission on Dams that gave its persuasive report in 2000. Largely due to the efforts of the NBA, hundreds of resistance movements in the area of natural resources and environment are allied today under the banner of the National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM).

The Dalit agenda

The caste system is an ancient historical legacy closely entwined with Hinduism, and still dominant in the Indian and South Asian societies, as also in Japan (the Burako). This system of four varnas (groups), namely Brahmin (the elite, learned and the landed), Kshatriya (the warriors, well endowed), Vaishya (the traders) and the Shudra (the menials and the lowest), in that order of hierarchy, has at its bottom the untouchables, the dalits. One of the problems of the Left in India has been its inability to combine caste with class into an inclusive political agenda. From other political formations has come, at best, compassion and sympathy, including, as mentioned earlier, from Gandhi, but not political empowerment that could lead to political rights. The two most influential thinkers and leaders to that end have come from within the dalits, namely Jyotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar.

The influence of the older dalit political party, the Republican Party has dwindled over the years and has been supplanted by the more successful Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in recent years. The RP was mostly active in the state of Maharashtra, where as the BSP has extended itself over large parts of North India, and has actually ruled in the most populous state of India, Uttar Pradesh. The
backward castes, as they are designated officially by the government, have also changed the political scenario in another populous state of India, Bihar, where their party the Rashtriya Janata Dal, has been in power for many years now. Similarly, it is another party that espouses the cause of the backward castes, the Samajwadi Party, which is in power in Uttar Pradesh today.

The dalit social and cultural movements have remained robust and active within civil society, drawing their strength from Phule and Ambedkar. But like the Left movements, different strains have come up, often not in harmony with each other. They received international notice for their fierce protests at the International Conference on Racism in Durban some years back, when the Indian Government refused to have the issue of Dalits included in the Conference agenda. They formed an important component of the World Social Forum, held in Mumbai in January 2004.

**Resisting globalization**

With nearly every political party implementing policies of privatization, liberalization and promoting foreign direct investment and markets, since 1990, the conflict between the marginalized and the impoverished with the government has visibly increased. With the closure of thousands of older industries, an increase in agricultural inputs and a decrease in the purchase prices of domestic agricultural produce, the workers and the peasants are bearing the brunt of the neoliberal policies. With the urban middle class reaping whatever little benefits the neoliberal world has to offer, the rural–urban divide is deepening further.

India has about 340 million people as its labour force, of which only about 30 million are organized. Which leaves over 300 million in the unorganized sector, the bulk of which is agricultural labour. The trade union movement has, therefore, been unable to reach out to the majority of Indian labour. A large proportion of the unorganized labour comprises dalits, women and adivasis. Consequently, most of these find their expression through the social movements to which they are allied; which may be of the environmental, adivasi, peasant or dalit kind. And increasingly, these movements have had to deal with issues related to globalization in the last 15 years. With the national media firmly in the grasp of neoliberal interests, their expression has got further stifled, and they have become more invisible, since they are not of interest anymore, meriting little mention in the frenzied news industry.

The Gandhian legacy of volunteerism spawned a plethora of development voluntary agencies, particularly after the heyday of the Maoist uprisings in the early 1970s. Many city professionals migrated to rural areas, working directly with people in areas such as education, health, rural development, water and sanitation etc through these voluntary agencies. In the beginning there were few funds available to these agencies for their work, and they worked truly in the spirit of volunteerism, close to the communities. But beginning in the 1980s, the central government recognized their importance as delivery agencies for rural development and began to set aside funds for them. Combined with funding available from agencies abroad, the voluntary sector quickly mushroomed into the more familiar NGO sector, particularly in numbers. Estimates of NGOs in India go up to a figure of 200,000!

The funded, professionally staffed, NGO contrasts greatly with the large social and mass movements that are cash starved but have a much larger people’s base. Very often, the two collaborate on issues, in their geographical areas, but a mutual tension bordering sometimes on mistrust persists. The movements generally find the NGOs less radical, prone to taking decisions determined by their funding needs. The advent of globalization seems to have heightened such tensions, since the NGO sector is heavily favoured by even institutions like the World Bank.

The situation has got further complicated by the advent of the local government institutions, the Panchayats, since the constitutional amendments of 1994 that facilitated their emergence. Since they are elected bodies with five-year cycles, movements and NGOs are confronted by such democratic institutions in
precisely the areas they work in. Governments, mostly irritated by the presence of NGOs and movements have been quick to raise the question of legitimacy of the civil society institutions in the midst of such democratically elected bodies. Many NGOs have either ignored the Panchayat institutions, or come in conflict with them. But some have recognized their political importance, however inefficient they may be, and tried various forms of collaboration with them.

One such movement is the People’s Science Movement. It is unique to India as it is difficult to find a similar movement in other countries. It consists of a large number of science professionals — engineers, doctors, scientists and a large number of teachers, who have combined with the local people and communities, and in many instances the Panchayats, in very large numbers — as many as 300,000 — to work nearly all over the country. The movement combines reconstruction and struggle in its efforts, working in areas of education, literacy, water, health, rural production, energy and local governance systems; and uses various forms of struggles to resist the neoliberal onslaught. Whenever feasible, it collaborates with the government, but also confronts it when it finds itself in disagreement. With a definite left leaning, the movement has emerged as one that has tried to be inclusive in bringing together people from all shades, from centre to left; and in its intellectual efforts, it has tried to synthesize Marxist and Gandhian thought. In particular, it has experimented actively in local level people’s planning methods, in collaboration with the Panchayats, as a means of resisting the centralizing tendencies of the neoliberal paradigm.

A major upheaval is taking place amongst the social movements in India, particularly after the challenges of holding the World Social Forum (WSF) in January 2004. With the international community favouring India as the venue for the fourth forum after the first three in Porto Alegre, Brazil, there were many who doubted whether the process could remain inclusive in a heavily diverse and somewhat divisive world of Indian social movements and NGOs. Given the fact that there are divisions even amongst the movements belonging to the same ideology, and the historical differences between the Left, the Gandhians, the Dalits, the Socialists, the Environmentalists, the New and the Traditional amongst the women, worker and peasant movements, the fears can only be termed as genuine. In the end, with a political process that has gone on for nearly two years, nearly 200 mass movements, social organizations and NGOs from diverse ideologies combined to form an Indian working committee to work together to make the WSF2004 happen. This is quite unprecedented, particularly when one is reminded that the Brazilian organization has only eight member organizations.

But the WSF is obviously not everyone’s favourite space. Since it excludes groups who believe in violence as a modality of action, and given the deep mistrust of Indian movements to foreign funding agencies in general, some groups and movements came together, including from other countries, like the Philippines, to organize a parallel event to the WSF2004, which they called the Mumbai Resistance 2004. Their claim is that their agenda against imperialist globalization is more radical than that of the WSF. As long as movements ranged against neoliberalism are prepared to mobilize more and more masses for the purpose, the WSF does not anyway claim, or want, to be the only platform or space from which they need to operate. This has clearly been the articulation of the movements that came together for the first time in such large numbers for the WSF in India. Such an articulation is clearly an indicator of the fact that the movements are beginning to see the value of keeping the main objective in view rather than quibbling over who is in control. If such an attitude sustains even after the WSF, one could say that the WSF has had a positive impact on the Indian movements. One can only hope for that.

**Afterword**

At the time of writing, it is now two weeks since the WSF in Mumbai and time to get back to the world. It has been a grind; and in the end one must admit, a satisfying one.
I remember an Indian friend who asked, after it was confirmed in January 2003 that the next WSF would be in India, ‘Will the WSF, an infant, die in India or grow further?’ That is a question that has plagued many of us who have been involved in its organization. Although it is difficult to remain unbiased, I feel the Indian edition has qualitatively enhanced it.

That obviously calls for an explanation. The enhancement is not just statistical in terms of participation, although that too is significant. With about 78,000 delegates preregistering, 24,000 attending through daily registration and an additional 5000–7000 coming in each day without registration, on average about 110,000 people were there at the venue every day — exceeding the WSF003 figures. Of especial interest is the fact that of these, 23,000 were non-Indians from 151 countries. Most important for us in South Asia, around 700 of them were Pakistanis — the largest single Pakistan group to travel to India since partition.

The enhancement is significant, however, in the nature of participation. In Porto Alegre, one hardly notices the blacks and the indigenous, who otherwise constitute a majority in Brazil — the dominant colour is white.

At Mumbai, the dalits and adivasis were most visible amongst a myriad diversity of grassroots groups. Their articulation and expression was on the streets of the venue, the NESCO Grounds; rather than in the seminar halls — so much so that some IC members remarked that there were two parallel forums, in the sparsely filled conference halls and in the overcrowded open spaces of the venue. Unlike Porto Alegre, the celebrity speakers were less dominant and visible — the ordinary people much more so.

The enhancement was also thematic. Of the six main cross-cutting themes, three dominated — war and peace, dignity and exclusion, and patriarchy — for the first time in any WSF. The presence of women in panels, dalits and delegations from Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan lent some authenticity to the themes.

Apart from the usual organizational tasks regarding the venue and logistics, press and media, transportation and accommodation etc, which were quite formidable, the biggest challenge in India was to create a collective platform of diverse, complex and often divisive political groupings, social movements and NGOs. That 190 such groups constituted the India General Council (as compared to eight in Brazil) ultimately helped create the nature of participation and organization that was finally witnessed. It is a big achievement and has required stupendous efforts by many. Every task is political — the nature of funding (Ford, DFID, Rockefeller etc were unacceptable), who will chair or facilitate, talk to the press and so on — but in the end — with many mistakes, glitches and problems — something worked out.

There are basically two main questions — how will this shape the future of WSF — how will WSF2005 in Porto Alegre take it forward; and how will the India process sustain itself. Will the common platform in India — a big achievement itself — make any difference and survive?

The Indian question is perhaps too specific, but the larger question is for everyone to comment upon — those of the Fellows who were in Mumbai, and also those who have been reading about it. Can we begin a conversation?

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