NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES TO INDIAN DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

India's rich environmental history is marked by numerous movements that have sought to protect the country's diverse ecosystems and ensure sustainable development. The environmental movements ignited a sense of ecological consciousness but also critiqued the prevailing developmental model of the liberal state. The movement challenged the authority the hegemonic attitude of the Indian state and its developmental models induced by globalization. The movement aims to protect global ecosystem sustainable livelihood of the indigenous people of the forest, environmental protection and to forge a balance between individual and nature. "Environmental movements focus on ecological balance, people's rights and developmental model of the state. It aims in ecological preservation and try to ensure community participation in decision making process to protect the lives and livelihood for sustainable living. The movement tries to promote alternative developmental models that are inclusive, sustainable and environmentally friendly. They want to promote community-based resource management as a part of sustainable development of the local people.

Key Words: Community Rights, Sustainable, Ecological Balance, Environment, Movements, Marginalized, Development.

I. Introduction

An environmental movement is a type of social movement that involves an array of individuals, groups and coalitions that perceive a common interest in environmental protection and act to bring about changes in environmental policies and practices. Environmental and ecological movements are among the important examples of the collective actions of several social groups (Bandyopadhyay, 1999, 882). The increasing confrontation with nature in the form of industrial growth, degradation of natural resources, and occurrence of natural calamities, has resulted in imbalances in the bio-spherical system. Major reasons for the emergence of environmental movements in India are as follows: Control over natural resources, False developmental policies of the government, right of access to forest resources, Indian sustainability movements have deep philosophical roots that predate modern environmentalism by centuries.

In recent years, the coupling of social movement activism with democracy has become almost axiomatic at a global level. Popular movements contributed to the collapse of authoritarian nature of Indian democracy. The significance of social movements under conditions of authoritarianism is broadly captured in the thought that they serve as a venue for sustaining and ultimately expressing popular civic sentiments and interests under circumstances where the prevailing authoritarian political climate does not allow for such form's expression. New social movements are distinct from traditional anti systemic movements such as oppositional parties in two ways – First the focus of these movements is not to capture state power through elections or a violent revolution but rather to transform the nature of politics itself (Prarajuli,2001,260). Second, new social movements in India and elsewhere dispel the myth of a vanguard. In these movements, antagonisms are expressed not only through class but through multiple 'sites of power' such as gender, ethnicity, caste and regional identity.

II. Sustainable Movements in India

Chipko Movement

The Chipko Movement, which began in 1973 in the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand, is one of the significant movements in Bharat's environmental history and a powerful example of grassroots ecological activism. The movement emerged as a response to the extensive deforestation occurring in the region, driven by commercial logging interests. This exploitation of

forests threatened not only the ecological balance but also the livelihoods of the local communities, who relied on the forests for fuel, fodder, and sustenance (Baxi, 1989,168).

The uniqueness of the Chipko Movement lay in its direct action and non-violent protest tactics. Villagers, led predominantly by women, physically embraced the trees to prevent them from being felled, a symbolic and practical act that obstructed loggers (Bandyopadhyay, 1999, 881) and highlighted the villagers' commitment to environmental preservation. This strategy was inspired by Gandhian principles of satyagraha (truth-force) and non-violent resistance. The role of women in the Chipko Movement was particularly significant; they were both the primary caregivers and the most affected by deforestation, as it increased their daily burden in gathering resources necessary for survival. Their leadership highlighted the intersection of environmental and gender justice, challenging both ecological degradation and gendered social structures (ibid).

The Chipko Movement highlighted the importance of forests in maintaining ecological stability, including soil conservation, water retention, and climate regulation, which are essential for the health of mountainous regions. The movement emphasized that ecological well-being is inherently tied to social and economic resilience, especially in rural communities. Moreover, it influenced broader environmental policy discussions in Bharat, leading to the development (Baxi,1989,169) of forest conservation policies and inspiring similar protests in other parts of the country.

Bishnoi Movement

The Bishnoi Movement of 1730 is among Bharat's earliest recorded acts of environmental conservation and serves as a significant testament to the relationship between spirituality and environmental stewardship. Originating within the Bishnoi community of Rajasthan, the movement emerged when 363 Bishnoi villagers sacrificed their lives to protect khejri trees (Prosopis cineraria) from being cut down on royal orders. This act of martyrdom by the Bishnois, who embraced the trees in non-violent resistance, emphasized their commitment to ecological preservation, deeply rooted in their faith and cultural values (Guha.R,2003, 57). The Bishnoi community follows the teachings of Guru Jambheshwar (Jambhoji), a 15th-century spiritual leader who established the 29 principles of the Bishnoi faith. These principles, including protection of all life forms, conservation of resources, and harmonious coexistence with nature, were intended to promote an ecologically balanced lifestyle. Jambhoji's teachings emphasized environmental responsibility as a religious duty, inspiring the community (Guha.R,1999, 48) to protect flora and fauna and avoid practices that could harm natural ecosystems. The Bishnoi approach reflects biocentrism, where all living beings, humans, animals, and plants are considered valuable and interdependent parts of the ecosystem (Rangarajan, M,2013,53-78).

This early conservation movement has had a lasting legacy, inspiring modern environmental activism in Bharat. It illustrates that ecological responsibility is deeply embedded in cultural and spiritual values, advocating for sustainable practices that respect the intrinsic worth of nature. Today, the Bishnoi community (ibid) continues its conservation efforts, actively protecting wildlife, conserving water, and promoting afforestation, embodying a philosophy of ecological reverence and sustainable living (ibid) that holds enduring relevance.

Narmada Bachao Andolan

The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), led by Medha Patkar since the 1980s, stands as one of Bharat's most prominent movements questioning large-scale development projects and their impact on marginalized communities and the environment. The movement was formed in response to the construction of large dams along the Narmada River, notably the Sardar Sarovar Dam, part of a broader project aimed at providing water, power, and irrigation. While the dams promised economic development, the movement raised fundamental concerns about displacement, environmental degradation, and social justice (Bandyopadhyay, J,1999,882).

At the heart of the movement's critique was the displacement of indigenous Adivasi communities and rural populations who had lived along the Narmada River for generations. These communities relied on the river and surrounding land for their livelihoods, cultural practices, and spiritual well-being. The movement highlighted that displacement not only led to

loss of homes and land but also the disintegration of cultural identity and social structures, issues that were inadequately addressed in government resettlement plans (Brundtland Commission,1987, Report). The movement called attention to the human cost of "development" and argued for the recognition of people's rights over their lands, aligning with the philosophy of environmental justice.

It further criticized large dams for disrupting riverine ecosystems, threatening biodiversity, and altering natural water flows, which had long-term impacts on both local agriculture and wildlife. These ecological critiques were rooted in the concept of sustainable development, emphasizing that true development should not degrade the environment (Brundtland Commission,1987, Report) or marginalized vulnerable populations.

Namami Gange Programme

This river rejuvenation initiative, launched in 2014, is dedicated to cleaning and preserving the Ganga River and its tributaries. Namami Gange focuses on waste management, afforestation along riverbanks, sewage treatment, and public awareness, aiming to restore the river's ecosystem, crucial for millions who rely on it.

Namami Gange is inspired by reverence for nature, particularly rivers, which are seen as sacred sources of life in Indian culture. The Ganga River, in particular, is personified as Ganga Ma (Mother Ganga), symbolizing the idea of Bhumi Devi (Earth Goddess) as a nurturing force. The program reflects ecological dharma, the duty to protect and respect natural resources that sustain human life.

III. Environmental Movements and Challenges to Indian Democracy

Here this contestation between the development the development discourses and the new social movements can be explained by using Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony' and Foucault's notion of 'discourse', that we may precisely say that hegemony is constructed within the field of discourse. The contestation between the new social movements and the state are discourses because they are relations that are not fixed once and forever. They are hegemonic relations in which the meaning of each element in the relationship is contestable. Foucault suggests that power has no center; it is dispersed throughout the social formation in various sites of power. Each site of power expresses a relation of exploitation and subordination. Gramsci's notion of hegemony is important to analyze this as well. He argued that hegemony (Prarajuli,2001,265) is not a political process played out between the polar opposites of an imposing 'dominant' culture and the 'weak' subordinate culture of the subordinate groups never confronts culture in either a completely supine or totally resistant fashion. In the struggle to open their own spaces for resistance and affirmation, subordinate cultures have to negotiate and compromise around both these elements, they surrender to dominant culture and those they keep as representative of their own interests and desires.

Hegemonic discourse of development works at various levels. First it links nation-state with the global circulation of capital by fostering a world culture based on modern technology and a pervasive communications and information order. It tries to homogenize not only economic but secular and temporal space as well. The logic of the capital accumulation (Kishwar,2005,98) process subordinates the third world states by destroying its environment and by transforming every one into a consumer. At the same time, states in developing society mediate between the 'universal consciousness of capital' and popular sectors marginalized by it, such as women, indigenous people and the rural poor. The states these groups to the dominant discourse of national elites. In this discourse of development, the state is mandated to unify the national economy, to establish a common economy, to establish a common national market, and to impose linguistic and cultural norms. The Indian state (Kishwar,2005,99-110) has mediated class, ethnic, gender and caste conflicts through the medium of secularism, political democracy and the capitalist economic system. Although couched in a vocabulary of 'protection and development', the development discourse of the Indian state subordinates' women, Dalits, tribal and minority populations. Under the guise of a welfare state national elites have transformed caste, gender and ethnicity from relations of difference into relations of domination. Each social entity is both defined by the state and ordered in relation to the state. As the official guardian and development of these groups, the state denies them a creative alternative (Kothari,2011,242-44).

IV. Environmental Movements – A Struggle for Harmony

New social movements, challenge the philanthropic zeal of the modern nation-state which aspires to be a dominating force with totalitarian ambitions and at the same time claims to be guardian of its citizens. It tries to regulate both 'accumulation' and 'legitimating', 'capitalism' and democracy. As representatives of 'people-nations' new social movements challenge the states authority and its claim to represent the people. By affirming the local, the regional and the ethnic, actors of new social movements are attempting to overcome both the economic exploitation and politico-cultural subordination by the state. While the Indian state tries to integrate everybody as a citizen (through democratic electoral process) and as a consumer (through the free market), the actors of new social movements seek autonomous social governance (Prarajuli,2001,268-69).

The tension between the develop mentalist state and new social movements can best be characterized as a struggle for harmony. If the Indian state uses both coercion and persuasion to generate consent for development, the counter hegemonic movements of the marginalized use the dual strategy of 'collaboration' and 'resistance'. This is why we find tensions within the dominant development discourse as well as within the new social movements. In the new social movement, it is clearly visible that development is contested by the subaltern groups (ibid). On the one hand, India's durable democratic tradition has created the political space in which new social movements have emerged. On the other, increasing bureaucratization (Mahajan,2001,52-58) and political centralization in the 1970s and 1980s have repressed local struggles for autonomy. While new social movements have sometimes benefited from state-sponsored developmental and welfare programs, even these serve as avenues of contestation with the state.

In the cause of development, the state government generates one program after another in order to co-opt people's initiatives, for example – after a decade of grassroots struggle by women, indigenous people and the rural poor, the recent strategy of the Indian state has been to co-opt their issues as if problem of ecological deterioration and subordination of women could be solved within the dominant development paradigm. New social movements use multiple strategies to counteract state power by applying their own indicators to access the desirability of development (ibid). The issue, they argue, is not merely to integrate women into development or to 'catch up with men', it is to seek identity and autonomy for those peripheral zeds by the state's developmental policies. New social movements like 'dharmic dissent' in pre-colonial India and rightful dissent in colonial India represent the resistance of subalterns.

As carriers of emerging hegemony, new social movements are neither uniform nor devoid of tensions. But more significantly at the core of the movements there is a self-critical spirit and a sustained inner struggle (Shiva,2005,48). In each struggle, there is an internal tension between grasping available opportunity and claiming identity between participating in the existing politico-economic space and seeking autonomy. Women's movement, forest struggles; the anti-big dam movements can be categorized as a new social movement which definitely challenges the authoritarian nature of Indian democracy.

Women's increasing ecological concerns cannot be overestimated that is decreasing rate of soil fertility and lowering of water level due to green revolution. They even attempted to stop bauxite mining in Gandhamardan, (Orissa), limestone mining in the Doon Valley, or Uranium mining in Singbhum, (Jharkhand) to save water, soil, forest and agriculture. Women's movement (Shiva,2005,46) has demonstrated the subordination of gender to patriarchal high caste values that is violence against women in the family, workplace or neighborhood that is they tried to establish their identity and rights vi a vie state structure.

Many communities are also active in a struggle to save and regain local control over forest resources. Tribals, women and the hill people have begun to contest the develop mentalist policies of the social forestry programs promoted by the Indian state and the World Bank (the local people uprooted eucalyptus plant and replace them with saal, tamarind and mango trees in various places like Jharkhand, Karnataka to preserve 'aranya sanskriti'). Furthermore, forest resources were linked to the continuity of the tribe through their livelihood (ibid) which has been taken by them by the democratic state in the name of development. Even the 'chipko movement 'is a protest, a movement converting monoculture forests into mixed forests to promote community self-sufficiency in basic needs which has been hampered by the state.

The popular movement to stop the Subarnarekha Multipurpose Dam Project, for example – has been successful not only in postponing the construction of the dam but also in regenerating indigenous schemes as an alternative to big dams. The anti-dam struggle (ibid) of marginalized people has shown that their protest against the state is only to continue their survival and identity as a price for the big dams. Thousands of them are displaced by these monumental projects. If democracy means to ensure justice and rights to all its citizens then, why the need of such development that curves the rights of the indigenous people, its citizens. New social movements thus try to project the rights, identity, economic justice for the marginalized people which again challenge the bourgeois (capitalist) and authoritarian nature of Indian democracy (Prarajuli,2001,289).

V. Conclusion

The liberal Indian state has made a commitment to uplift and integrate women into its development programs but women's movement in rural India have also taken up issues of equal pay for women and struggled to implement employment guarantee schemes and minimum wage laws. Rural women have struggled to protect the ecological niches which guaranteed bio-mass availability for agriculture, animal husbandry, food, water and fresh air. They have begun to show that state induced development subordinated women. The argue that the patriarchal state and its capitalist model of development (in the name of liberal phase of democracy) is the major factor in the subordination of women. Modern technology and the green revolution in rural India have displaced and subordinated female labor (example Punjab, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Maharashtra that is in these states capitalist relations of production in the agricultural sector are most visible). Women's movement challenged the patriarchal state which goes against the rights of the women in the rural areas. All states actions are anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, the eco-feminist critique is focused against the homogenizing project of technological and capitalist development of state which goes against the interest of the women in particular and the rural people in general (Shiva,2005,39).

Their privileges and status with respect to the cultivation of cash crops for the market decreases because they lose decision-making power regarding the requirements of grain or pricing and income of grain. Environmentalism represents a topic that Guha views as completely intertwined with social justice. Guha emphasizes that environmentalism serves two essential purposes which need wider acknowledgment. Indian sustainability movements have been highly effective in mobilizing local communities and promoting traditional ecological knowledge. Chipko movement successfully halted deforestation in certain regions and raised awareness about the importance of forests for local communities. The movements highlight justice for the indigenous community who depend on natural resources for their survival. Narmada Bachao Andolan has fought for decades against large dam projects that displace local population, but it has struggled to stop such projects due to governments prioritization of industrial development. Environmental movements is seeming as an inclusive movement focuses on empowering marginalized communities and promoting social justice and ecology.

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