

UNIT 22 POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

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22.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with an important theme in political science, namely, social and political movements in modern India. After going through this unit you should be able to

- understand the concept of political movement
- comprehend different types of peasant movements
- discuss major issues in the growth of tribal movements
- identify the features of trade union movement
- analyse the nature of women's movement in India and its relationship with political parties and trade unions.

22.1 INTRODUCTION

As you know, democracy is more than an instrument for holding periodical elections. It is an instrument to build a participatory, egalitarian and just order, in which popular sovereignty rests with the people, and by which common people participate in the decision-making process to improve their socio-economic condition. The present institutional arrangements of the Indian political system provide scope for the expression of popular demands and grievances. But these arrangements are not adequate, and popular demands and discontent are often expressed outside the parliamentary mould through different types of protest and mass mobilisations: strikes, dharnas, gheraos and bandhs. Direct action by the masses, particularly the oppressed sections, is a technique of political action aimed at political change. It is part of an effort to transform the power structure in favour of the vast majority.

Over the last few decades, numerous social groups in India have made their presence felt through participation in different types of social and political movements. In this unit, we shall discuss the important features of political movements in India, particularly, the peasant, tribal, worker and women's movement.

22.2 MEANING AND FEATURES

The term social and political movement is used to denote a variety of collective attempts to bring about a change in the existing social and political structure through institutional and

non-institutional means. Generally, a movement has a class base and intends to alter the existing social order and power structure or influence policy decisions and distribution of resources at the national or regional level where it takes place. Most movements have an ideology to justify it. Collective action takes the shape of a movement only when it is sustained and organised.

A variety of approaches and typologies have been propounded to analyse and classify movements. Marxist approach focuses mainly on the class character, social fare and outcome of the movement. Some other approaches consider the role of values and ideology as the most important elements in the process of a social movement.

Movements aiming at a radically different social order develop an elaborate ideology and plan of action. These are often derived from larger theories of history and society. Some writers have argued that the presence of ideology distinguishes a movement from the general efforts of collective mobilisation and orientation towards change. In the absence of ideology, a strike or dharna becomes an isolated event, whereas all such actions based on ideology or critique of society become an event in the movement. Strikes organised by a trade union can be part of an organised attempt of the industrial workers to bring about a change in their wage structure and working conditions or a more far-reaching change in the structure of society based on an ideological understanding (e.g. the October Revolution).

All political movements need some kind of organisation that enables certain persons to act as representatives and spokespersons. The organisation of the movement can take the form of committees, labour unions or political parties. The relationship of social movements to political parties is of particular importance. Political party may (a) spearhead a movement as in the case of the Tebhaga and Telangana movement; (b) support several movements, such as workers, peasants and women's movements; (c) exert influence on the movement through its trade union and student wings. Then there are many movements such as the — Bhartiya Kisan Union in Uttar Pradesh, Shetkari Sangathana in Maharashtra, Kamagar Aghadi formed by Datta Samant in Bombay and various environmental movements that reject connection with any political party. Sometimes these movements are described as grassroot movements.

Closely linked with the ideology and form of organisation of a movement are its tactics and strategy. The choice of tactics as well as form of organisation are dependent on the political system within which the movement operates and also on the size and spread of the movement and its influence within the political system. Therefore, the tactics of a movement may change as the movement grows, it may become less revolutionary and more accommodating as the movement gains in influence. The strategy of the movement is essentially influenced by the type of social movement.

Check Your Progress I

Note : i) Use the space below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

Q.1 Describe some important features of a movement?

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Q.2 Can you identify some of the approaches to the study of movements?

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22.3 PEASANTS AND PEASANT MOVEMENT

Peasants can be described as people who engage in agricultural or related production and peasant movement is an attempt on their part to effect change in their social and political environment. Seventy-seven per cent of India's population live in rural areas and agriculture is their main source of livelihood. Land distribution is unequal with fifty-five per cent of the cultivators (small and marginal farmers owning five acres of land or less) owning only 11 per cent and the top 13 per cent of farmers owning 57 per cent of cultivated land. Agricultural labourers constitute 27 per cent of rural work-force.

The rural poor who constitute three-fourths of our population are socially oppressed and exploited by landlords and rich farmers who are invariably drawn from the ranks of the upper and middle castes. The rural poor themselves belong to the backward classes, Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes. But it should be noted that caste and community do not always correspond with class position of the peasants or landlords.

22.3.1 Framework and Background

The parameters of agrarian policy were defined by land reforms introduced in the first decade after independence. Primarily land reforms aimed at abolishing zamindars and other absentee landlords. They were not directly involved in cultivation and thus not directly interested in improving agricultural production. They were more interested in extracting surplus from their tenants and sub-tenants for conspicuous consumption.

New agrarian policies aimed at stimulating agricultural production were introduced in the mid-1960s. The goal of the new policies popularly known as the green revolution was increasing agricultural production. The earlier policies of land reforms, community development, agricultural extension and cooperative farming were not a marked success in facilitating and improvement in production or distribution. As is well known, the new agrarian policies were designed to subsidise the growth and profitability of land owners who were in position to facilitate rapid growth in output, in areas with assured supply and access to irrigation. In class terms, these were the middle and rich farmers who were in position to secure loans against land, invest in fertilisers, pesticides and high-yielding seeds. However, these policies did not enhance redistribution of agricultural wealth or contribute to the alleviation of poverty. Despite the growth in agricultural production, the economic conditions of agricultural labourers, and small and marginal farmers deteriorated in the last few decades. The rural poor though divided in various social, linguistic and religious groups, share a common inferior status and a common experience of oppression and exploitation by landlords, rich farmers and state machinery that is a binding force between them.

The rural poor who constitute the vast majority have at different times resorted to collective action and protest to express their aspirations and discontent against injustice perpetrated by the dominant classes and the state which does not always protect their rights. These agitations and movements were both localised and widespread, spontaneous and organised. The most widespread are the movements of poor peasants and agricultural labourers for higher wages and better working conditions. These movements are generally organised by the kisan sabhas and agricultural labour unions of the CPI, CPI (M) and CPI (ML). Seven major peasant uprisings in the Indian countryside have been organised by the communists in the last four decades. The first four were organised by the Communist Party of India before it split in 1964. These were Tebhaga uprising in the north Bengal in 1946, the Telangana peasant war in former Hyderabad State in 1946-48, a strike of tenants and landless labourers in eastern Thanjavur for several weeks in 1948, a series of short strikes and attacks on granaries and grain trucks in Kerala in 1946-48. The other major peasant struggles were organised by the Andhra Pradesh Revolutionary Communist Committee in 1966-71 and CPI (ML) in Naxalbari, Srikakulam, Mushahari and Debra-Gopivallabpur in 1967-70. Many of these movements began as demands for abolition of illegal extractions and levies imposed by feudal lords, cancellation of debt and remission and having of rents paid by peasants.

The Telangana struggle started with the demand for abolition of illegal extractions by the deshmukhs and nawabs and later for the cancellation of peasants debts. The struggle began in the mid-1946 and continued until 1951. Agricultural labourers, and poor peasants formed the core support base of the movement. In the Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, the

condition of small peasants was deplorable. They were compelled to do forced labour by the landlords. Besides, tenants were evicted by landlords because they feared tenants acquisition of occupancy rights on their lands. During the mid-forties, village committees were formed in various villages to resist the exploitation and tyranny of the landlords and the Nizam's administration. Sporadic strikes against forced labour and for securing better farm wages, were organised. The landlords, backed by the police, retaliated by firing at workers processions and rallies. These incidents culminated in Telangana insurrection in which the village committees grabbed the land of rich landlords in 300 villages and distributed among the peasants and the labourers.

The movement focussed on three programmes which were implemented by the village committees 1) the abolition of forced labour, 2) the abolition of illegal extractions and repayment of negotiated proportions of those exacted 3) the return of lands illegally seized by landlords from peasants through the manipulation of land records.

The Tebhaga movement which took place from 1946 to 1947 was a struggle launched by sharecroppers to retain two-thirds of agricultural produce for themselves to order to reduce the rent they paid to jotedars who generally appropriated from one-half to two-thirds of the agricultural produce as rent. The movement started in Dinajpur district from where it spread to eleven districts under the leadership of the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha. The sharecroppers organised processions and refused to pay any share of the crop to landlords. The most active participants in the movement came from the ranks of the poor peasants.

22.3.2 Peasant Movement in Independent India

The Tebhaga and Telangana struggles inspired similar movements in the different parts of the country. The major peasant mobilisation in the sixties was the Naxalbari revolt between 1967 and 1969. As many as 60 per cent of cultivators in this area were sharecroppers. Village communities were established to conduct the struggle. The main concern of the Naxalbari movement was to propagate the politics of agrarian revolution among the workers and peasants and to form a secret party. The movement decided to 1) seize the lands of jotedars, 2) seize the lands of the plantation workers who had purchased land from poor peasants, 3) cultivate these lands and retain all the produce from lands appropriated from the jotedars, but share half of the crop produced on plantation worker's lands. As in the more successful peasant insurrections referred to earlier, the peasant unions were able to secure temporary liberated zones which they controlled for several weeks under the supervision of the CPI (ML). However confrontations between the peasants and the landlords as well as police repression which followed crushed the movement resulted in the death and arrest of several hundred persons. In addition, the peasants became alienated, as the CPI (ML) followed the theory of annihilation of individual landlords.

Struggle against landlords organised on class lines by the poor as well as middle and rich peasants continued in different parts of the country after the Naxalbari uprising. According to government reports, there were 5424 agrarian agitations between 1967 and 1970. Parties and organisations opposed to the ideological and tactical lines of the CPI (ML) launched land grab agitations in different parts of the country. The CPI, CPI (M), SSP and PSP organised agitations in UP and Bihar to highlight the concentration of land in the hands of landlords, former princes, zamindars and monopolists and to alert the public to the need for radical agrarian reform. About 1,500,000 agricultural labourers and poor as well as middle peasants participated in the struggle spearheaded by the communists and occupied 334,000 acres of land in various parts. There was no uniform pattern to the struggle and the nature of mobilisation. For example, the CPI and CPI (M) organised against the big landlords, whereas the PSP and the SSP avoided the big landlords. In some places the struggle was organised on class lines leading to a united front of low castes and Muslims, mainly of the poor peasants and agricultural labourers. In other areas, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under the leadership of the CPI (M) struggled against the jotedars of their own caste. The land grab movement could not be sustained after a few months because the parties involved in the struggle were not united in their efforts to launch the movement. As in the case of earlier movements, the state used repression to curb the movement. Several states enacted land ceiling legislations in 1972 and 1973 to distribute surplus land among the landless. Besides, the Congress party raised radical slogan of Garibi Hatao in the 1971 elections to counter the popular appeal of the programmes and action of the opposition.

The agricultural labourers, who constitute 25 per cent of the work force have been involved

in localised revolts that challenged the local power structure. Most of these revolts are sporadic and spontaneous movements against payment of wages lower than those stipulated by the Minimum Wage Act, excessive work, molestation or rape of their women.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer given at the end of the unit.

Q.1 What are the main issues in the Naxalbari movements?

Q.2 Identify the main reason for the failure of the land grab movement.

22.4 TRIBALS

According to the 1981 Census, 51 million persons or 7 per cent of the total population are members of Scheduled Tribes. Over two thirds of the Tribal population live in the north eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura and the rest of the tribal population is concentrated in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, Bihar, Gujarat, Dadar and Nagar Haveli. Most of them live in rural areas in hilly tracts and forests. The main source of livelihood is agriculture and forest products and the majority of tribals are small farmers and agricultural labourers. Many others work as labourers in timber cutting, charcoal making and plantation labour.

22.4.1 Tribal Movements in Pre-Independence India

There were a number of tribal revolts against the British administration in the pre-independence period. The notable ones were the rebellion of the Malar of the Rajmahal Hills in 1772; the Kol uprising in 1831, the Santal rebellion of 1855; the Bhokta uprising and the Ra movement in 1857; the rebellion of the Kach Nagas in 1880; the Sardari or Mulhi Larai, and the Birsa movement among the Mundas in 1900. Many of these struggles were millennial and movements led by tribal leaders who used religious idioms and symbols to mobilise the tribals against economic exploitation and alien penetration. Some of them were directed against the colonial policy of reservation of forests for extraction of timber and other forest products to serve the needs of the railways and various industries.

Besides reservation of forests, the colonial administration created conditions in which tribals were dispossessed and alienated from agricultural lands. While the British administration made no efforts to introduce new modes of production in various sectors of the tribal economy, colonial penetration paved the way for the entry of moneylenders and traders who were eager to take over land belonging to the tribals. The cumulating effect of this process was a continuous alienation of lands of tribals. Some of the tribes, for example the Santal, Ho, Qraon, Munda and Bhumiji organised struggles against the alienation of their land.

22.4.2 Tribal Movements in Post-Independence India

During the last four decades tribals in different parts of the country have launched movements on various social and economic issues. A few of them were revivalist movements aimed at reviving tribal culture or a response to the disruption of traditional roles in the new set up. But the majority of movements dealt with threats to access and control of resources, threats to privacy of habitat, search for new forms of identity and for a more satisfactory system of organisation of community power at various levels. In the realm of economic and political issues, tribal movements could be broadly divided into