

POPULAR STRUGGLES AND MOVEMENTS

- Democracy evolves through popular struggles. It is possible that some significant decisions may take place through consensus and may not involve any conflict at all. But that would be an exception. Defining moments of democracy usually involve conflict between those groups who have exercised power and those who aspire for a share in power. These moments come when the country is going through transition to democracy, expansion of democracy or deepening of democracy.
- Democratic conflict is resolved through mass mobilisation. Sometimes it is possible that the conflict is resolved by using the existing institutions like the parliament or the judiciary. But when there is a deep dispute, very often these institutions themselves get involved in the dispute. The resolution has to come from outside, from the people.
- These conflicts and mobilisations are based on new political organisations. True, there is an element of spontaneity in all such historic moments. But the spontaneous public participation becomes effective with the help of organised politics. There can be many agencies of organised politics. These include political parties, pressure groups and movement groups.

Mobilisation and Organisations

In a democracy several different kinds of organisations work behind any big struggle. These organisations play their role in two ways. One obvious way of influencing the decisions in a democracy is direct participation in competitive politics. This is done by creating parties, contesting elections and forming governments. But every citizen does not participate so directly. They may not have the desire, the need or the skills to take part in direct political activity other than voting. There are many indirect ways in which people can get governments to listen to their demands or their point of view. They could do so by forming an organisation and undertaking activities to promote their interest or their viewpoint. These are called interest groups or pressure groups. Sometimes people decide to act together without forming organisations.

Pressure Groups and Movements

Pressure groups are organisations that attempt to influence government policies. But unlike political parties, pressure groups do not aim to directly control or share political power. These organisations are formed when people with common occupation, interest, aspirations or opinions come together in order to achieve a common objective.

Some examples of popular movements in India are: Narmada Bachao Andolan, Movement for Right to Information, Anti-liquor Movement, Women's Movement, Environmental Movement. Like an interest group, a movement also attempts to influence politics rather than directly take part in electoral competition. But unlike the interest groups, movements have a loose organisation. Their decision making is more informal and flexible. They depend much more on spontaneous mass participation than an interest group.

Sectional Interest Groups and Public Interest Groups

Usually interest groups seek to promote the interests of a particular section or group of society. Trade unions, business associations and professional (lawyers, doctors, teachers, etc.) bodies are some examples of this type. They are sectional because they represent a section of society: workers, employees, businesspersons, industrialists, followers of a religion, caste group, etc. Their principal concern is the betterment and well being of their members, not society in general.

Sometimes these organisations are not about representing the interest of one section of society. They represent some common or general interest that needs to be defended. The members of the organisation may not benefit from the cause that the organisation represents.

These second type of groups are called promotional groups or public interest groups. They promote collective rather than selective good. They aim to help groups other than their own members. For example, a group fighting against bonded labour fights not for itself but for those who are suffering under such bondage. In some instances the members of a public interest group may undertake activity that benefits them as well as others too. For example, BAMCEF (Backward and Minorities Community Employees Federation) is an organisation largely made up of government employees that campaigns against caste discrimination.

Movement Groups

As in the case of interest groups, the groups involved with movements also include a very wide variety. The various examples mentioned above already indicate a simple distinction. Most of the movements are issue specific movements that seek to achieve a single objective within a limited time frame. Others are more general or generic movements that seek to achieve a broad goal in the very long term.

In India, Narmada Bachao Andolan is a good example of this kind of movement. The movement started with the specific issue of the people displaced by the creation of Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river. Its objective was to stop the dam from being constructed. Gradually it became a wider movement that questioned all such big dams and the model of development that required such dams.

Movements of this kind tend to have a clear leadership and some organisation. But their active life is usually short. These single-issue movements can be contrasted with movements that are long term and involve more than one issue. The environmental movement and the women's movement are examples of such movements. There is no single organisation that controls or guides such movements. Environmental movement is a label for a large number of organisations and issue-specific movements. All of these have separate organisation, independent leadership and often different views on policy related matters. Yet all of these share a broad objective and have a similar approach. That is why they are called a movement. Sometimes these broad movements have a loose umbrella organisation as well. For example, the National Alliance for Peoples' Movements (NAPM) is an organisation of organisations. Various movement groups struggling on specific issues are constituents of this loose organisation which coordinates the activities of a large number of peoples' movements in our country.

Pressure Groups' and Movements' Influence on Politics:

- They try to gain public support and sympathy for their goals and their activity by carrying out information campaigns, organising meetings, file petitions, etc. Most of these groups try to influence the media into giving more attention to these issues.
- They often organise protest activity like strikes or disrupting government programmes. Workers' organisations, employees' associations and most of the movement groups often resort to these tactics in order to force the government to take note of their demand.
- Business groups often employ professional lobbyists or sponsor expensive advertisements. Some persons from pressure groups or movement groups may participate in official bodies and committees that offer advice to the government.

- While interest groups and movements do not directly engage in party politics, they seek to exert influence on political parties. Most of the movement groups take a political stance without being a party. They have political ideology and political position on major issues. The relationship between political parties and pressure groups can take different forms, some direct and others very indirect.

- In some instances the pressure groups are either formed or led by the leaders of political parties or act as extended arms of political parties. For example, most trade unions and students' organisations in India are either established by or affiliated to one or the other major political party. Most of the leaders of such pressure groups are usually activists and leaders of party.

- Sometimes political parties grow out of movements. For example, when the Assam movement led by students against the 'foreigners' came to an end, it led to the formation of the Asom Gana Parishad. The roots of parties like the DMK and the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu can be traced to a long drawn social reform movement during the 1930 and 1940s.

- In most cases the relationship between parties and interest or movement groups is not so direct. They often take positions that are opposed to each other. Yet they are in dialogue and negotiation. Movement groups have raised new issues that have been taken up by political parties. Most of the new leadership of political parties comes from interest or movement groups.