
THE ROLE OF SOCIAL REFORMS IN REDEFINING POLICIES AND POLITICS

ROQIA SAID HOSAIN

Abstract: Every civilized community has a system of government to maintain peace and order. Yet, it often happens that citizens are dissatisfied with some issues; they may have to suffer incessantly due to some cause which they cannot fight for on the individual level. When a large number of people suffer on account of some cause, they are bound to come together and organize their efforts to fight for the cause collectively. This results in a social movement. This article explains how social movements are triggered and the stages that it goes through. The article reviews significant movements in history in different parts of the world at different times in order to decide the role of social movements in redefining policies and the extent of their impact.

Key words: Social Movement, Policies.

Introduction: Every individual enjoys a certain degree of freedom as a human being. He has a right to improve his life conditions and be free from any kind of oppressive rule. The very purpose of civilization in a community is to provide the basic and social needs of a citizen and an organization which will enable everyone to live together mutually. Every civilized community has a system of government to maintain peace and order. Yet, it often happens that citizens are dissatisfied with some issues; they may have to suffer incessantly due to some cause which they cannot fight for on the individual level. When a large number of people suffer on account of some cause, they are bound to come together and organize their efforts to fight for the cause collectively. When this happens on a large scale, it becomes a social movement. The restlessness and dissatisfaction of people sometimes simmers for a long period before they suddenly revolt when things become unbearable. Hence, a social reform movement may get triggered by a single incident or it may be a planned opposition by a group of people when they mobilize their resources and organize themselves.

Social movements develop on account of perceived gaps between existing reality and aspirations of the people. Social movements are not incorporated into the social order, hence they are unconventional. Social movements are large scale groupings of individuals who have shared interests. They focus on specific social or political issues with a view to bring about social change. Sometimes, separate groups work for a common cause. McAdam and Snow have defined a social movement as collectivity acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional channels for the purpose of promoting or resisting change in the group, society, or world order of which it is a part. They believe that groups sharing the same ideas for change are not social movements – unless they are involved in collective action. The ideas are only pre-conditions, (McAdam & Snow, 1998: xviii). This leads to the fact that every social movement goes through specific

stages. A successful social movement ends up in bringing about social reform by influencing policies and politics and redefining them. A reform movement is defined as a kind of social movement that aims to make gradual change, or change in certain aspects of society, rather than rapid or fundamental changes. It is different from radical or revolutionary movements.

The aim of this paper is to find out the role of social reform movements in redefining policies and politics. If social reform movements end up in redefining policies, it is a sure indication of the success of the movements. To understand the role of social movements and the extent of their success, it is first necessary to understand in brief how a social reform movement starts, progresses and culminates. Every social movement, with a few variations goes through more or less similar stages. One of the earliest scholars who studied social movements was Herbert Blumer who identified four stages in the lifecycle of a movement.

The Stages Of A Social Reform Movement: The first stage of the cycle is emergence. This is a preliminary stage when there is very little organization. It is the stage when widespread discontent is experienced. The participants may be unhappy or dissatisfied with some policy or social condition. When several people discover that it is an issue of common grievance, they come together. They realize that a collective effort would be beneficial to all instead of fighting on the individual level. The participants can be called agitators.

In the second stage the unrest becomes overt and coordinated. (Hopper R., 1950). Leadership emerges at this stage and various strategies are worked out. Demands are sometimes made clear through mass demonstrations and mass media. This is the stage of coalescence.

In the third phase of bureaucratization the social movements stop relying on leadership and rallies and begin to employ trained staff to carry out the functions of organizations. The initial emotional excitement may fizzle at this stage if continued

mobilization becomes too demanding for the participants.

The last stage is called 'decline' which does not necessarily mean failure. According to Macionis(2001), this stage end with establishment in the mainstream. It means that the goals and ideologies are accepted in the mainstream and there is no further need of a movement.

The four stages of social movement provide insight into the development and result of social movements. By analyzing social movements that occur at given points and stages, it is possible to trace the changes that take place in the social order.

The first stage of a social reform movement is very significant. The greater the number of people who feel discontent regarding a common issue, the greater will be the chances that they make collective efforts to gain what they want. Even if a large number of people share grievances about a particular matter, a movement will not begin if they fail to come together and organize their efforts. If a social reform movement does not proceed beyond the first stage it will not be able to effect any change. Its role will be limited to making people aware that they all share a common grievance.

A movement that proceeds to the second stage must harness the energies and enthusiasm of all the agitators under an able leadership. The efforts must be organized and protests made on a large scale. In competent, inexperienced leaders, failure to make protests, lack of widespread propaganda and loss of enthusiasm on the part of protestors cannot take the movement to the next stage. If at all a movement reaches the third stage, it will not succeed unless it takes a professional shape in matters of organization and develops a proper system. Hence, it will not be able to bring about the desired changes in policy matters. The last stage is very controversial; it is called the stage of decline. The word spells out clearly the role that social movements play in changing policies and politics.

An Overview Of Movements: Whether a social reform movement plays a significant role in changing policies and politics is something that cannot be hypothesized, guessed or imagined. It is something that can only be verified on the basis of past reform movements in history in different parts of the world. Some of the important social movements in the past will be reviewed in this section and their effects will be analyzed and discussed at the end of the article.

An example of a movement that did not survive beyond the first stage is The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) which was organized during the American Civil Rights Movement. The agitators raised consciousness about the issue and helped to spread a sense of discontent among the agitators. However, until other

organizations took the issues further and certain incidents took place, the cause could not move forward, for example, the Montgomery Bus Boycott incident. The American Civil Rights Movement is also a good example of emergence of leadership in the second stage, when prominent leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led the movement. The Gay Rights Movement serves as an example of the third stage when formal organizations are formed, for example, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination (GLAAD). This bureaucratic organization was formed as a result of the movement and it created a strong and permanent platform to voice the demands of the gay community. The labour movement and communist movement of the late 19th century are examples of social movements that led to the formation of communist and social democratic parties.

Revolutionary Movements like the French Revolution are movements that progress rapidly and do not stop until the goal is achieved. There may be several organizations fighting for the same cause and following different strategies, means and policies. The collective effort of great masses poses tremendous strength and opposition that have the power to make national changes. The Freedom Movement in India is another good example. The movement would not come to an end until freedom was achieved. Revolutionary movements are deeply dissatisfied with the social order and work for radical change. They advocate replacing the entire existing structure. Revolutionary movements aim at a reorganization of the society according to their designs and ideologies. They generally become violent. The Protestant Reformation Movement and the Communist Revolution of China serve as examples.

The social movements in Europe set a background for thinkers like Karl Marx to analyse social theories. In 1861, the feudal system was abolished in Russia as a result of reform movement. When pressure for reform continued, Unions were formed in 1905, followed by the collapse of the Russian State at the end of the First World War. Radical reform and change were noted in Great Britain after its victory in the Second World War. The workers' rights social movement dominated politics until Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979. While some reactionary movements aim to reverse social change, resistance movements are formed to resist a change that has already started taking place in society. For example, there are some organizations in India that work to stop the influence of western culture on the Indian youths.

Gender discrimination was a vital issue that caused unrest in the fairer sex after being victims for generations. The intensity may be less in some countries and very high in other countries like India,

but it was or rather is a worldwide issue. The Feminist Movement began first in the west and spread to different parts of the world, bringing about significant changes. Yet, this is an example of a movement which still continues because tribes and communities still exist where women are oppressed merely on account of gender. The movement drew the attention of the world towards the participation and contribution of women in various movements, struggles and wars. Scientific progress helped to support the fact that men and women are equal. This shows that if movements are supported by historical events or discoveries, they can bring about change in policies. The success in women's liberation movements lies in acquiring voting rights, equal job opportunities, right to education equal pay, reservations for women in government jobs and special facilities for encouraging women to pursue education, professions and careers which were restricted to men. Dowry demands and rape were not only severely condemned but the accused were severely punished. Laws were made against dowry and sati system. In short, women's movement played and continues to play a significant role in redefining policies and politics.

Another significant movement that had a permanent impact on policies and politics is the backward class movement, which can be compared to the Civil Rights Movement in America. The cause was the same – social discrimination, but on the basis of caste and not colour. There was a proper hierarchy in the social system and the untouchables as they were called occupied the lowest rung on the ladder. They did menial jobs and were not allowed to enjoy minimum privileges like access to water in wells, entry into temples and right to education. Backward class movements like SatyashodhakSamaj and Nadar Movement consolidated the masses. Today, there are special benefits and reservations for backward classes, scheduled tribes, scheduled castes and nomadic tribes in educational institutions and government as well as private sectors. A recent example is the pending issue of reservations for the Maratha caste in the state of Maharashtra. There are also recent examples of formations of new states as result of movements, like the states of Jharkhand and Telangana. Thus, movements have the power to change not only history, but the geography of a country.

The dalits were engaged in low level occupations and suppressed for centuries by the upper class Hindus. The dalit movement was organized for uplifting their status. Some of them abandoned Hinduism and adopted other religions like Buddhism or Islam. In 1923, Mahatma Gandhi started the All India HarijanSevakSangh to impart education to the dalits. Dr.Ambedkar also struggled to secure basic human

rights for the dalits. The Mahad Satyagraha for the right to use water was one of the outstanding movements of the dalits to win equal social rights.

Sometimes, certain accidents or tragedies trigger off movements. The issues responsible for the accidents are later taken up by activists who protest and try to improve conditions. The best example is the rape case of Damini, a young girl who was brutally treated and gang raped in a bus in India's capital city. The world was moved by the incident. There were protest marches in different parts of the country and an outcry against the security measures for women in the country. As a result, some legal changes and provisions were made. Several helpline services are now provided and the law supports every cause of women.

Factors That Contribute To Social Movements:

On the basis of the social reform movements reviewed above it can be observed that social movements play a vital role in redefining policies. The impact may be short lived or permanent; however, every social movement that is well organized and led by competent leaders does not go completely waste. It is bound to bring about at least a stir in the existing circumstances. Certain factors that are responsible for the success of a social movement can be identified. The larger the number of people involved actively and directly, the greater are the chances that the movement will proceed to change the conditions. If the morale of the participants is high and their spirit of enthusiasm is sustained till the end, they can attain their goal. If several groups are struggling for the same cause, their efforts must be mobilized for better results. Able leadership is another factor that affects social movements. The structure and organization of a social movement can also affect its working. Sometimes, factors which are not directly related to the cause may hinder or support a social movement. The environment movement aims to preserve the natural environment which is threatened by e-waste. At the same time, computers are proving so beneficial to human beings that the human race is relying more and more on computers with the passage of time. This situation hinders the objectives of the environmental movement. Similarly, scientific discoveries revealed that all human beings are equal. This discovery positively supported the feminist movement. The strategies employed by the participants are responsible for the impact of social revolutions. Only if things become unbearable violence is adopted. Generally people are against violence and prefer a sober method like demonstrations, distribution of pamphlets, strikes etc. The Maharashtra NavanirmanSena, a new political party in Maharashtra became initially popular for addressing important public issues. Its general way of showing

opposition was attacking toll booths, destroying public buses and other property and other violent means. People were not happy with its methods and the party lost miserably in the following elections. The preference for non-violent means and the effect of their strength can both be observed in Gandhiji's non-violent ways. Another means is a hunger protest. Anna Hazare was successful in moving the government authorities when he went on a hunger strike. It is said that the pen is mightier than the sword. Some poets, literary writers can create awareness through their impressive writings. Other art forms like paintings, films, videos etc can also be used effectively as means of social instruments. A number of poets and novelists wrote about the hazards of war during the first and second world wars.

Summary And Conclusion: Every human being has a right to protest against injustice. Public interests are best solved through collective public efforts. One of the best known ways is organization of social movements. Some movements aim at radical and complete change. Some movements end when the goals are achieved. Some movements are continuous and ongoing, like the environment and feminist movements. Some movements have limited goals like

the Slow Food Movement which opposes the Fast food trend but it does not advocate any policy change or economic change. On the contrary, it supports a healthy way of life for the entire society.

Social movements continue to be a make force to bring about change in the world, in spite of global changes in every aspect of life. New means of communication like internet and mobile applications like wassup, social network sites like facebook are provide new platforms for expressing agitations and organizing groups with common interests. The tools of social movements have changed but the method remains the same. New conditions will give rise to new complaints. The analysis and understanding of the success or failure of past social movements and responsible factors can help in tackling new situations. Sociologist can learn from the investigation of prior movements to prepare better for future possibilities.

Most of the research on political consequences of social movements has been carried out through case studies. There is a need for systematic and comparative research across cases of social movements. No two movements are alike. The socio-economic-politico conditions for each movement are different, which makes it difficult to study this topic.

References:

1. Christiansen, Jonathan. 'Four Stages of Social Movements'. *EBSCO Research Starters* (2009): 1-7. Print.
2. Giugni, Marco. 'Political, Biographical, and Cultural Consequences of Social Movements'. *Sociology Compass* 2.5 (2008): 1582-1600. Web.
3. Hopper, R. D. 'The Revolutionary Process: A Frame Of Reference For The Study Of Revolutionary Movements'. *Social Forces* 28.3 (1950): 270-279. Web.
4. Long, David et al. 'Social Movements: Perspectives And Issues'. *Teaching Sociology* 25.4 (1997): 365. Web.
5. Macionis, John J. *Sociology*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003. Print.
6. McAdam, Doug. *Freedom Summer*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.