

People's Movements in India
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The post-Independence period in India did not mark an end to the social movements that helped to overturn British colonial rule. Instead, the last sixty years of democracy have been characterized by the emergence not only of a robust electoral system, but also activity by a diverse set of actors in society with an interest in shaping the policy arena. These representatives of society, or people's movements, have played important roles in directing attention to areas of concern and shaping policy outcomes across a vast array of issues, from the environment and women's rights to lower-caste empowerment and anti-corruption. In the last forty years, in particular, people's movements have grown in size (Katzenstein et al. 2001) and emerged as an important locus for political debate. Yet, the strategies used by these groups have differed both across organizations and across issue areas and the nature of movements themselves has evolved considerably over this period.

In this essay, I consider the evolution of people's movements in India and the ways in which actions of societal actors differ across groups and time. I consider first those groups that emerged in the early post-Independence period, focused on issues such as the environment and women's rights, drawing on research that has identified differing strategies for shaping policies among these groups. In the subsequent section, I focus on a more recent people's movement, efforts in the last fifteen years to increase transparency and reduce corruption in government.

Before discussing specific movements and organizations, however, it is important to clarify what we mean by "people's movements" and how this term relates to broader conceptions of civil society in India. McAdam and Snow define a social movement as "a 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 of which it is a part (McAdam and Snow 1997: xviii). This definition applies well to the movements we observe in India, but in this context there is a tendency to place greater emphasis on the individuals who are threatened or constrained by some external actor or institution and, as a result, are not able to fully express themselves as free individuals in a democratic society. As the [Indian] National Alliance of People's Movements puts it, "[a] diverse range of individuals, groups and movements have opted to stay out of the structure of state power and work for the unfulfilled promise of a democratic, egalitarian and independent India. These efforts have extended from local issues based campaigns and agitations to lobbying for policy changes, to nation-wide mobilization on broader issues" (1996). "People's movements," then, encompasses a vast array of individuals and organizations focused on a diverse set of issues.

People's movements can also be differentiated from non-governmental organizations, whose presence has increased significantly since the end of the colonial period. For our purposes here, NGOs may play a role in a people's movement, in that they are associated with a particular issue area, and may, in some cases, serve as a prominent representative of a movement, but they are conceptually distinct from movements themselves. In other words, the existence of a NGO does not imply the existence of a people's movement, and vice versa. NGOs are formal organizations, while people's movements are, in most cases, more organic entities with diffuse boundaries and ever changing participants. This conceptualization does not in any way discount

the importance of people's movements, it simply serves to set them apart from the parallel, and at times integrated, realm of NGOs.

People's Movements in the Post-Independence Period

Katzenstein et al. (2001) provide an insightful analysis of the strategies taken by diverse social (or people's) movements over the last few decades. Their discussion highlights efforts that have promoted policy changes via the legislative branch of the Indian government versus through the actions of the judiciary and bureaucracy. In the former case, identity-based movements, or those groups that base their goals on ascriptive characteristics and the nature of the group "have captured (or have been captured by) electoral politics" (Katzenstein et al. 2001: 252) and are often embedded, to differing degrees, in political parties. Alternatively, interest-oriented movements are those that emphasize a particular issue or set of issues that may be identified with a particular group, but are not uniquely based on a concept of identity.¹ What differentiates an identity movement from one based on interests is "that any particular issue is likely to be fungible, replaceable by some other issue that does the work of securing recognition for a community's selfhood" (251-2). I draw on this distinction for the purposes of organizing the following analysis and emphasize in particular those movements focused on interest-based goals. This is not meant to privilege one type of movement over the other, but rather to focus the discussion about early people's movement in the post-Independence period.

Interest-based movements

Livelihoods and the environment

Many people's movements emerged from the daily experiences of citizens threatened by a proposed change to their local environment. Perhaps the most well known experience of this type was the Chipko Andolan. This movement began in the Himalayan areas of Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarakhand) in the 1970s, in response to deforestation activities that were perceived to threaten the livelihoods of local residents. This was not an "environmental" movement, per se, but rather one in which individuals resisted government actions that would potentially threaten their way of life. When the Forest Department planned to cut down trees in their vicinity, groups of women resisted because "[t]heir own lives were so intertwined with the existence of the trees that their very culture and survival was at stake without them" (Agarwal 2000). The movement spread throughout the region in the early 1970s (Shiva 1989: 70-74) and on a particularly memorable occasion in 1974, women in Reni village were faced with labourers intent on logging trees in the area. While the men of the village were away and could not resist the loggers, the women, led by Gauri Devi and Gunga Devi, formed "vigilance parties" (Shiva 1989: 74) and hugged the trees to prevent them from being felled. They continued this protest for four days, until the loggers were successfully turned back (Tehelka 2004).

This movement is pertinent to our understanding of people's movements on multiple levels. The actions of these activists highlighted the continued relevance of non-violent protests in the post-Independence period, with the movement emerging out of earlier social actions led by women in the area, a number of whom had been disciples of Gandhi (Shiva 1989: 67-70). In addition, these efforts were substantially important in that "Chipko helped to shift attention to the centrality of renewable resources – soil, air, water, and trees – at a time of swift industrialization in India" (Haynes 2002: 230). The ideas of the movement resonated across the country, and

inspired similar actions as far afield as Karnataka and Rajasthan, and resulted in legislation preventing the felling of trees for commercial purposes in areas of north, south, and western India (Right to Livelihood 1987). At its heart a movement about livelihoods, Chipko nonetheless inspired a broader range of activists in the realm of both the environment and sustainability more generally.

A second movement, that to oppose the Sardar Sarovar dam across the Narmada river, has also evoked concerns of both livelihoods and environmental preservation. In this case, the threat posed was to those individuals living in areas that would be flooded by the dam and increases in its height. Yet this movement also highlights the complications and trade-offs in development. Here, “supporters see the project as a means of delivering critically needed water to drought-prone areas of north western Gujarat and Rajasthan, and electrical power to thousands of other rural and urban communities in Gujarat” Fisher (1995: ix). In contrast, “[c]ritics of the project cite its potentially negative environmental and social impacts, particularly the relocation of tens of thousands of people, the majority of them members of lower socioeconomic communities” (ibid.). The main opposition to the initiative has been led Medha Patkar through the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and has entailed solidarity marches, hunger strikes, and petitions to the Supreme Court, but the central government and judiciary have repeatedly approved plans to increase the height of the dam. Nonetheless, this movement is notable for its success in encouraging the World Bank to withdraw its funding for the project as well as the international attention and support it received, which underlined the emerging importance in the 1980s “of transnational alliances of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to local resistance movements and the ability of such alliances to promote public accountability and responsibility” (Fisher 1995: x).

Women’s rights

Movements to promote the rights of women in India, while often regionally based (Katzenstein et al.), were prevalent across the country after Independence. In this case, the issues raised by activists have been, at various points in time, both diverse and general. While certain issues found early, broad-based support, such as women’s suffrage, others appeal only to sub-groups and debates over these issues can at times lead to disagreement among parts of the broader women’s movement (Sen 2000). Initial efforts to promote women’s rights emerged alongside the independence movement and successfully resulted in equal rights within the constitution and universal adult suffrage. However, these outcomes, like many later legislative decisions, “did little to bring about social and material change in the lives of most Indian women.” (Sen 2000: 1).

It was in the 1970s that a range of efforts by women emerged to fill the spaces left by the early movement and to combat issues such as domestic violence, workers’ rights, and consumer protection (Butalia 1997; Katzenstein et al. 2001; Sen 2000: 25). New organizations such as the Self-Employed Women’s Association began to promote the interests of women in pockets across the country. These activities encompassed both efforts to improve legislation and to advocate directly on behalf of women themselves. In the case of domestic violence, this meant “awareness raising or conscientisation so that violence against women could be prevented, rather than only dealt with after it had happened” (Butalia 1997).

This period also saw renewed emphasis on more general issues, including the potential for reservation of seats in Parliament and other legislative bodies for women. The 1974 report of the Committee on the Status of Women recommended reservations across a range of bodies

(Government of India 1974). Yet, women were divided on this issue during the 1970s and 1980s, due to disagreements about the likely benefits of reservation, and these disagreements reflected broader cleavages in the movement, based on differing preferences over particular issues and preferred outcomes (Sen 2000: 46-47). As a result, the movement as such remains a diverse and multifaceted entity, which is perhaps better understood as multiple sub-movements that advocate for particular issues in particular regions and moments in time, and not always in complementary ways.

Identity-based movements

The movements discussed to now emphasize a particular, in most cases more bounded, issue and differ in substance from those that emphasize the relevance, and rights, of a particular identity. The importance of identity-based social movements in India is substantial, with Katzenstein et al. positing that “India’s three most powerful social movements all derive their coherence from identity claims” (Katzenstein et al. 2001: 251). The linguistic states’ movement, dalit rights, and Hindu nationalism all derive from an assumption of identity through birth, rather than identification with a particular idea or cause (ibid.).

Because in the following section I will focus on an interest-based movement, that emphasizing government transparency and anti-corruption, I will devote less time here to identity-based movements. Key to understanding the nature of these movements, however, is the way that identity-based movements have been institutionalized within India’s political system (Katzenstein et al. 2001: 252). Rather than pursuing their goals through the bureaucracy or judiciary, identity movements are more likely to become a part of the policy-making process, through the establishment of political parties founded on the notion of identity, such as the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party or the dalit-oriented Bahujan Samaj Party. For these parties, and the social movements that they reflect, representation of the community is primary to any particular issue.

The notion of “people’s movements” in India, then, is one that encompasses a wide range of substantive issues spanning the political spectrum. While people’s movements emerged, in many cases, from the independence movement and legacy of Gandhian social protest, they reflect the diversity of interests within the country and utilize a range of institutional and informal practices to promote their agendas. In the next section, I consider a more recent movement and the ways in which this movement reflects the dynamic nature of Indian politics and society today.

People’s Movements in the 1990s and forward

While people’s movements promoting the issues discussed earlier continue to play a role in shaping both political and market outcomes in the present era—the successful efforts to prevent Tata Motors from manufacturing Nano cars in Singur, West Bengal being just one example (Financial Express 2008)—one of the potentially most significant sets of people’s movements to emerge in recent years is that focused on increasing transparency and reducing corruption in government. These efforts, which reflect the activities of a wide range of Indian citizens, have resulted in one major national policy reform to date, the Right to Information Act, and are currently shaping debates on a second piece of potential legislation, the Lokpal Bill. Yet, this is not a single movement and the various movements that make it up reflect diverse subgroups of

the Indian public. The practices of these movements, and their relationship to other people's movements currently active in India, help to shed light on the evolving nature of civil society activities in democratic India.

Transparency, good governance, and anti-corruption

The right to information campaign can be seen as one of the most successful efforts to promote policies to increase transparency in government operations. This movement, whose beginnings are associated with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS – Workers and Farmers Power Organization) in Rajasthan, resulted in state-level and then national policy to increase the availability of government documents to citizens. What was initially an effort to improve access to information about government expenditures at the local level evolved into a broader vision that “access to official documents was an essential part of the struggle to demand accountability from local authorities” (Jenkins and Goetz 1999: 604). If individuals had documentation of the injustices they faced in the delivery of public services, then they would be better prepared to demand justice in cases of fraud or malfeasance. In 1996, the MKSS joined with organizations pursuing similar goals in other parts of the country to form the National Campaign for People's Right to Information, which promoted a national law to ensure citizen access to government documents (Jenkins and Goetz 1999: 606-607). It was in 2005 that the central government responded to the pressure of these organizations with the Right to Information Act, which provides that any citizen can request information from a government body and the body, often through a Public Information Officer, must provide the information within thirty days.

The success of the Right to Information movement in establishing national-level legislation was only the first step. The movement has continued with campaigns to educate citizens about the RTI Act and how to use it, but a study conducted in five states in 2009 found that only 13% of rural respondents and 33% of urban respondents had knowledge of the act (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2009: 6). Assistance is also needed for those individuals who have been persecuted as a result of their efforts to gain access to information. A disturbing trend of violence toward individuals exercising the rights established in the RTI Act is emerging (Bhattacharya 2011) and this threatens any benefits of the reform.

In addition to, and perhaps in part because of, the difficulties in operationalizing the act, the RTI movement and related efforts have not been sufficient on their own to stem the corrupt behaviour of India's politicians and bureaucrats. International efforts to measure corruption continue to rank India as one of the world's most corrupt functioning democracies (Transparency International 2008), and domestic surveys highlight the presence, albeit varied in scale, of corruption in all of India's states (Transparency International India and Centre for Media Studies 2005, 2008). In 2010 and 2011, the prevalence of corruption was brought to the attention of the Indian public through a number of high profile cases, including claims of fraud in preparations for the 2010 Commonwealth Games (Sexton 2010), a report estimating losses of 1.76 trillion Rupees (~U.S.\$40 billion) due to alleged mishandling of 2G spectrum license allocation (NDTV 2010b), and questionable provision of apartment units in a major Mumbai residential development to government bureaucrats and politicians, rather than military veterans (NDTV 2010a).

Anti-corruption and Anna Hazare

In response to these cases, a number of individuals, many of whom had been involved in anti-corruption activities in the past, began to coalesce into a new national movement. At the centre of this movement was Anna Hazare, a social activist known for many activities including RTI activism and reforming his home area in Maharashtra as a “model” village. The primary goal of this new anti-corruption movement was to convince the central Indian government to enact a law instituting an ombudsman organization that would have the power to accept complaints and investigate charges of corruption against government actors. While Parliament had its own draft *Lokpal* bill, the anti-corruption campaign promoted an alternative version, the *Jan* (people’s) Lokpal, and demanded that representatives of civil society be given a role in drafting the bill. These efforts were successful, with the government acquiescing to the group’s demands for representation, largely in light of Hazare’s use of a hunger strike as a cornerstone of the protest. A Joint Committee was set up to draft the bill, with Anna Hazare and four other representatives of civil society invited to join (NDTV 2011a). However, the state and the anti-corruption movement have continued to disagree over the content of the bill and a draft bill is yet to be tabled in Parliament at the time of this writing.

Of particular interest here is the role of “Team Anna’s” campaign in bringing together diverse elements of civil society while also standing apart from some of the most prominent people’s movements active today. The success of this anti-corruption campaign, in achieving the goals set forth by the activists as well as in fostering a nationwide upsurge in protests against corruption, can arguably be attributed to its ability to appeal to a number of diverse groups. Sitapati (2011) argues that this movement saw the coming together of multiple intellectual strands of the middle class, which had rarely promoted an issue together and found strength in a common cause. Legal activists; those wanting a smaller, more efficient government; and “neo-Gandhians” all found elements of the campaign that resonated with their goals and strategies of action (ibid.). This, combined with mass discontent regarding the prevalence of corruption in daily life and the spate of recent high-level corruption scams, made for a potent combination of leaders and supporters in the movement.

At the same time, other elements of the middle class, as well as large portions of other people’s movements, have not played a direct role in the anti-corruption campaign, even where their basic goals are aligned. Sitapati highlights the critiques of the Indian left, who want to look beyond the state, rather than reform it, and for whom “[l]ighting candles at India Gate is the very picture of glib middle class activism that repels them” (Sitapati 2011: 43). Mohanty (2011), in contrast, emphasizes the gaps between the Anna movement and other active social movements today. He highlights that “[a]ll major streams of the dalit and adivasi movements in the country remained outside this campaign” (2011: 16), as did movements against mining and industrial projects in east India, forest rights activists, and others (ibid.). The anti-corruption message either did not resonate with these movements or activists were dissatisfied with the campaign’s middle class image (Mohanty 2011: 17-18), something that was not an issue for Baba Ramdev’s parallel campaign against black money (NDTV 2011b). Media coverage of Hazare’s hunger strike helped to encourage mass support, but this was rarely filtered through existing structures of other movements (Mohanty 2011: 17-18).

An additional set of critiques about the ways in which this movement approached its goals were raised by analysts and bring into question, more generally, the role of people’s movements within democracy. To date, most people’s movements in India have pursued their goals through means that maintain the role of civil society as acting in “the organizational space between the family on one hand and the state on the other” (Varshney 2011). In this case,

however, critics have argued that Anna Hazare and his colleagues have crossed at least two lines by demanding input, through the use of a hunger strike, on both participation by representatives of “civil society” on a committee for drafting the bill and the contents of the bill itself.ⁱⁱ First, the strategic use of a hunger strike is deemed questionable by multiple observers. Pratap Bhanu Mehta invokes B.R. Ambedkar, himself a vital element of the people’s movement for dalit rights, to critique to coercive nature of a fast-until-death and argues that, “in a functioning constitutional democracy, not having one’s preferred institutional solution to a problem accepted, does not constitute a sufficient reason for the exercise of such coercive moral power” (Mehta 2011).

Second, the inclusion of unelected individuals on a drafting committee for a bill is critiqued as inappropriate.ⁱⁱⁱ Vyasulu (2011) posits that the actions of this movement, rather than providing a solution to a deeply-rooted problem, pose a threat to democracy itself. By demanding representation on a drafting committee, these actors have used coercion, rather than an electoral campaign, to become legislators. As he puts it, India “is a representative democracy, and bills must originate in Parliament. Bypassing Parliament and contempt for elected representatives – however well deserved it may be in individual cases – is destructive of the institution of representative democracy” (Vyasulu 2011: 9). Key to both of these critiques is the underlying assumption that India maintains a functioning state, one that can execute its duties within the realm of established institutions and thus should be allowed to do so. Whether this is the case is a key question for analysing the appropriate role of people’s movement today.

Conclusion

People’s movements are important for the attention they bring to underpublicized issues and threats to both people and the environment in which they live. Yet, this discussion highlights the diversity of these issues and of the tools and techniques used by activists to advocate on behalf of people’s interests. These strategies, and the purposes to which they are put, evolve over time and in response to shifts in political, social, and economic conditions.

In the current era, the dynamics of the anti-corruption and transparency movements highlight what is perhaps one emerging shift in the nature of people’s movements in India. While representatives of the upper and middle classes have often played a role in earlier people’s movements, those being represented were often poorer, disadvantaged groups in society. In this case, while the poor would most surely benefit from reduced government corruption, recent growth in the size of the middle class implies that activists today are often acting on their own direct interests, rather than representing another group.

The ramifications of this shift are yet to be seen, but people’s movements will continue to evolve, both in response to new issues, changes in the nature of old threats, and innovations in the tools available to channel a movement’s message. Many movements of the mid-Twentieth century responded to the livelihood threats of industrialisation and these efforts continue today, but in ways that reflect new pressures on land and urban space. The anti-corruption movement utilized traditional techniques such as the hunger strike, but also mounted a substantial Internet and mobile phone-based campaign to rally support for their agenda. Thus, people’s movements at once represent a constant element of Indian political society at the same time they are a dynamic reflection of India’s rapidly changing socio-economic character.

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ⁱ Katzenstein et al. clarify in their discussion that neither the environmental nor women's movement is purely interest-based, but that their tendency is in this direction. In the case of women's rights, they note that, "[w]e see gender claims in India as being framed more often as interest claims than identity ones in the sense that issues of women's 'difference' are rarely raised by women activists, whereas the language of women's 'oppression' is the more widely employed frame" (Katzenstein et al. 2001: 255).

ⁱⁱ For these purposes I set aside claims and critiques about the quality of the anti-corruption campaign's Jan Lokpal bill itself as, while of central importance to the current debate, this particular issue is of less direct relevance to a discussion about people's movements in general.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is not the only occasion on which non-elected individuals have participated in the drafting of a bill. Within this same broad movement, representatives of MKSS and the NCPRI were involved in the drafting of Rajasthan's RTI Act (Mishra 2003: 45).