

**Fourth session of the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), Bombay, 1930**  
Sarojini Naidu, then President of AIWC, is sitting in the second row, 10th from the right (in a dark sari). To her left is Lady Vidyagauri Nilkanth Bhadra. In the same row, to the extreme right (the woman with a hat) is Margaret E. Cousins, an Irish suffragette, theosophist, associate of Annie Besant, and founder-member of AIWC. In this session she was one of the Vice-Presidents of the organization. The AIWC was set up in 1920 and was involved in the freedom struggle and addressed issues of women's education and their right to vote.

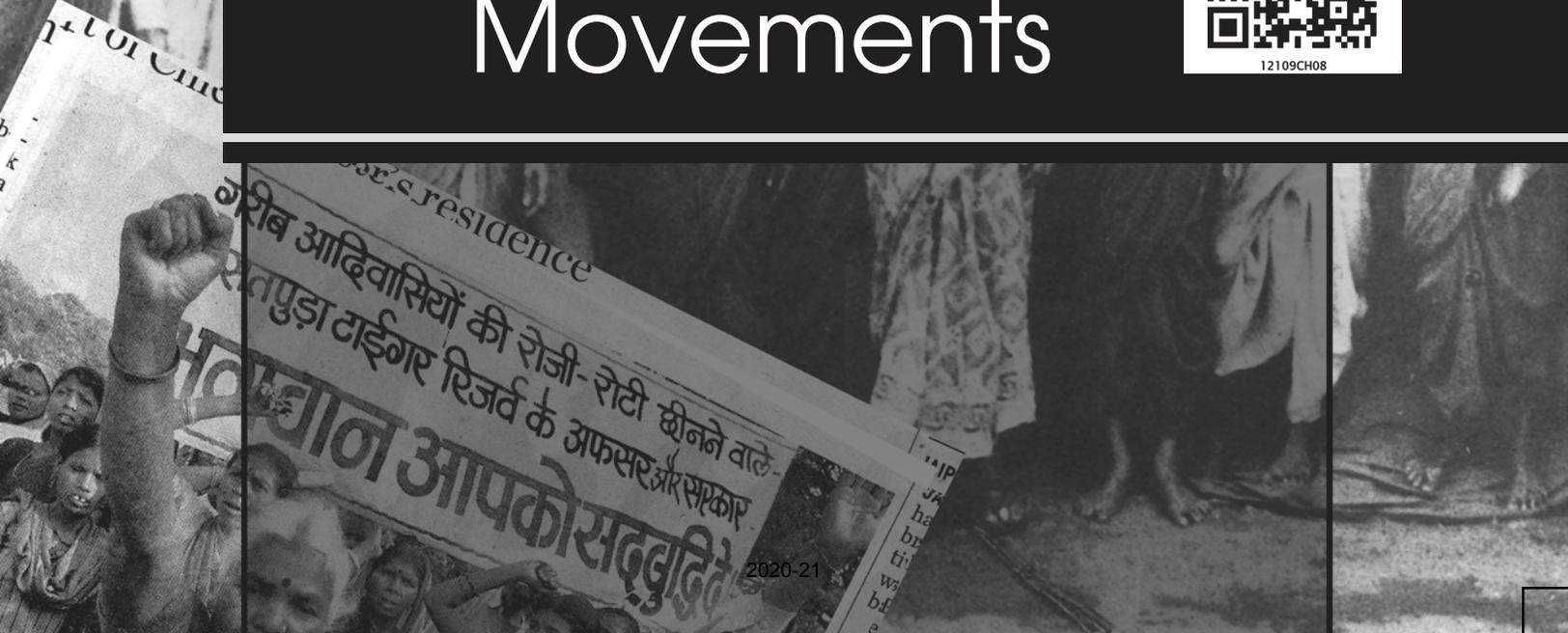
Courtesy: Aparna Basu, New Delhi



# 8 Social Movements



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A great many students and office-workers around the world go to work only for five or six days. And rest on the weekends. Yet, very few people who relax on their day off realise that this holiday is the outcome of a long struggle by workers. That the work-day should not exceed eight hours, that men and women should be paid equally for doing the same work, that workers are entitled to social security and pension – these and many other rights were gained through social movements. Social movements have shaped the world we live in and continue to do so.

### The Right to Vote

### Box 8.1

Universal adult franchise, or the right of every adult to vote, is one of the foremost rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. It means that we cannot be governed by anyone other than the people we have ourselves elected to represent us. This right is a radical departure from the days of colonial rule when ordinary people were forced to submit to the authority of colonial officers who represented the interests of the British Crown. However, even in Britain, not everyone was allowed to vote. Voting rights were limited to property-owning men. *Chartism* was a social movement for parliamentary representation in England. In 1839, more than 1.25 million people signed the People's Charter asking for universal male suffrage, voting by ballot, and the right to stand for elections without owning property. In 1842, the movement managed to collect 3.25 million signatures, a huge number for a tiny country. Yet, it was only after World War I, in 1918 that all men over 21, married women, women owning houses, and women university graduates over the age of 30, got the right to vote. When the *suffragettes* (women activists) took up the cause of all adult women's right to vote, they were bitterly opposed and their movement violently crushed.

### ACTIVITY 8.1

Compare your life with your grandmother. How is it different from yours? What are the rights you take for granted in your life and which she did not have? Discuss.

We often assume that the rights we enjoy just happened to exist. It is important to recall the struggles of the past, which made these rights possible. You have read about the 19<sup>th</sup> century social reform movements, of the struggles against caste and gender discrimination and of the nationalist movement in India that brought us independence from colonial rule in 1947. You are familiar also with the many nationalist movements around the world in Asia and Africa and Americas that put an end to colonial rule. The socialist movements world over, the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s that fought for equal rights for Blacks, the anti apartheid struggle in South Africa have all changed the world in fundamental ways. Social movements not

only change societies. They also inspire other social movements. You saw in chapter 3 how the Indian national movement shaped the making of the Indian Constitution. And how in turn the Indian Constitution played a major role in bringing about social change.

### ACTIVITY 8.2

Try and think of any example that will show you how society is changed by social movements and also how a social movement can lead to other social movements.

## 8.1 FEATURES OF A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

People may damage a bus and attack its driver when the bus has run over a child. This is an isolated incident of protest. Since it flares up and dies down it is not a social movement. A social movement requires *sustained collective action* over time. Such action is often directed against the state and takes the form of demanding changes in state policy or practice. Spontaneous, disorganised protest cannot be called a social movement either. Collective action must be marked by some degree of *organisation*. This organisation may include a *leadership* and a *structure* that defines how members relate to each other, make decisions and carry them out. Those participating in a social movement also have *shared objectives* and *ideologies*. A social movement has a general orientation or way of approaching to bring about (or to prevent) change. These defining features are not constant. They may change over the course of a social movement's life.

Social movements often arise with *the aim of bringing about changes on a public issue*, such as ensuring the right of the tribal population to use the forests or the right of displaced people to settlement and compensation. Think of other issues that social movements have taken up in the past and present. While social movements seek to bring in social change, *counter movements* sometimes arise in defence of status quo. There are many instances of such counter movements. When Raja Rammohun Roy campaigned against sati and formed the Brahma Samaj, defenders of sati formed Dharma Sabha and petitioned the British not to legislate against sati. When reformers demanded education for girls, many protested that this would be disastrous for society. When reformers campaigned for widow remarriage, they were socially boycotted. When the so called 'lower caste' children enrolled in schools, some so called 'upper caste' children were withdrawn from the schools by their families. Peasant movements have often been brutally suppressed. More recently the social movements of erstwhile excluded groups like the Dalits have often invoked retaliatory action. Likewise proposals for extending reservation in educational institutions have led to counter movements opposing them. Social movements cannot change society easily. Since it goes against both entrenched interests and values, there is bound to be opposition and resistance. But over a period of time changes do take place.

### ACTIVITY 8.3

Make a list of different social movements that you have heard or read of. What changes do they want to bring about? What changes do they want to prevent?

While protest is the most visible form of collective action, a social movement also acts in other, equally important, ways. Social movement activists hold meetings to mobilise people around the issues that concern them. Such activities help *shared understanding*, and also prepare for a feeling of agreement or consensus about how to pursue the collective agenda. Social movements also chart out campaigns that include lobbying with the government, media and other important makers of

public opinion. You will recall this discussion from chapter 3. Social movements also *develop distinct modes of protest*. This could be candle and torch light processions, use of black cloth, street theatres, songs, poetry. Gandhi adopted novel ways such as *ahimsa*, *satyagraha* and his use of the *charkha* in the freedom movement. Recall the innovative modes of protest such as picketing and the defying of the colonial ban on producing salt.

#### The repertoire of satyagraha

Box 8.2

The fusion of foreign power and capital was the focus of social protest during India's nationalist struggle. Mahatma Gandhi wore *khadi*, hand-spun, hand-woven cloth, to support Indian cotton-growers, spinners and weavers whose livelihoods had been destroyed by the government policy of favouring mill-made cloth. The legendary *Dandi March* to make salt was a protest against British taxation policies that placed a huge burden on consumers of basic commodities in order to benefit the empire. Gandhi took items of everyday mass consumption like cloth and salt, and transformed them into symbols of resistance.



#### Breaking the Salt Laws, 1930

As part of civil disobedience Gandhi chose to break the Salt Laws as a mode of protest. In the first photograph, women are seen bearing pots containing brine on their way to the salt pans.

Photographs courtesy: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi

**Vimal Dadasaheb More (1970)**

*Speech by Ankush Kale who was born in a pardhi community at a public meeting*

The pardhis are very skilful hunters. Yet society recognises us only as criminals....Our community has to undergo police torture under the charge of theft. Whenever there is a theft in the village, it is we who get arrested. The police exploit our womenfolk and we have to witness their humiliation. Society tries to keep us at a distance because we are called thieves. But have people ever tried to give us a thought? Why do our people steal? It is this society that is responsible for turning us into thieves. They never employ us because we are pardhis.

*Source: Sharmila Rege Writing caste/writing gender: narrating dalit women's testimonies (Zubaan/Kali, New Delhi, 2006)*

**Box 8.3****EXERCISE FOR BOX 8.3**

Read the narrative above. How is a new shared understanding developed? How is the dominant society's perception being questioned?

**DISTINGUISHING SOCIAL CHANGE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

It is important to distinguish between *social change* in general and *social movements*. Social change is continuous and ongoing. The broad historical processes of social change are the sum total of countless individual and collective actions gathered across time and space. Social movements are directed towards some specific goals. It involves long and continuous social effort and action by people. To draw from our discussion in chapter 2 we can view sanskritisation and westernisation as social change and see the 19<sup>th</sup> century social reformers' efforts to change society as social movements.

**8.2 SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS****WHY THE STUDY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IS IMPORTANT FOR SOCIOLOGY**

From the very beginning, the discipline of sociology has been interested in social movements. The French Revolution was the violent culmination of several movements aimed at overthrowing the monarchy and establishing 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. In Britain, the industrial revolution was marked by great social upheaval. Recall our discussion on the emergence of sociology in the west in Book 1 NCERT class XI. Poor labourers and artisans who had left the countryside to find work in the cities protested against the inhuman living conditions into which they were forced. Food riots in England were often suppressed by the government. These protests were perceived by elites as a

major threat to the established order of society. Their anxiety about maintaining social order was reflected in the work of sociologist *Emile Durkheim*. Durkheim's writings about the division of labour in society, forms of religious life, and even suicide, mirror his concern about how social structures enable social integration. Social movements were seen as forces that led to disorder.

Scholars influenced by the ideas of *Karl Marx* offered a different view of violent collective action. Historians like E. P. Thompson showed that the 'crowd' and the 'mob' were not made up of anarchic hooligans out to destroy society. Instead, they too had a 'moral economy'. In other words they have their own shared understanding of right and wrong that informed their actions. Their research showed that poor people in urban areas had good reasons for protesting. They often resorted to public protest because they had no other way of expressing their anger and resentment against deprivation.

## THEORIES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

According to the *theory of relative deprivation*, social conflict arises when a social group feels that it is worse off than others around it. Such conflict is likely to result in successful collective protest. This theory emphasises the role of psychological factors such as resentment and rage in inciting social movements. The limitations of this theory are that while perceptions of deprivation may be a necessary condition for collective action, they are not a sufficient reason in themselves. All instances where people feel relatively deprived do not result in social movements. Can you think of any example where people do feel deprived but do not start or join a social movement to redress their grievance?

To mobilise collectively in a sustained and organised manner, grievances have to be discussed and analysed in order to arrive at a shared ideology and strategy. That is, there is no automatic causal relationship between relative deprivation and collective action. There are other factors such as leadership and organisation that are equally important.

Mancur Olson's book *The Logic of Collective Action* argues that a social movement is an aggregation of rational individual actors pursuing their self-interest. A person will join a social movement only if s/he will gain something from it. S/he will participate only if the risks are less than the gains. Olson's theory is based on the notion of the rational, utility-maximising individual. Do you think people always calculate individual costs and benefits before undertaking any action?

### ACTIVITY 8.4

Think of the any social movement. You can take the case of the Indian freedom movement, any tribal movement, any anti racist movement and discuss whether people joined them by thinking of the pros and cons of joining it, of calculating rationally what they would gain individually.

McCarthy and Zald's proposed *resource mobilisation theory* rejected Olson's assumption that social movements are made up of individuals pursuing their self-interest. Instead, they argued that a social movement's success depends on its ability to mobilise resources or means of different sorts. If a movement can muster resources such as leadership, organisational capacity, and communication facilities, and can use them within the available political opportunity structure, it is more likely to be effective. Critics argue that a social movement is not limited by existing resources. It can *create* resources such as new symbols and identities. As numerous poor people's movements show, scarcity of resources need not be a constraint. Even with an initial limited material resources and organisational base, a movement can generate resources through the process of struggle. Think of examples from both the past and the contemporary period.

Social conflict does not automatically lead to collective action. For such action to take place, a group must consciously think or identify themselves as oppressed beings. There has to be an organisation, leadership, and a clear ideology. Often, however, social protest does not follow on these lines. People may have a clear idea of how they are exploited, but they are often unable to challenge this through overt political mobilisation and protest. In his book *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott analysed the lives of peasants and labourers in Malaysia. Protest against injustice took the form of small acts such as being deliberately slow. These kinds of acts have been defined as everyday acts of resistance.

Studies on poor women in South Asia has shown that often they are forced to give their small savings to their husbands who demand it for their drinks. They then devised a way out by hiding their money in two places. When they were forced to give up their hard earned saving, they gave the money from of one of the hiding places. And thereby ensured the safety of the other saving.

**Box 8.4**

**EXERCISE FOR BOX 8.4**

Is this an act of resistance or a survival strategy, a coping mechanism? Discuss.

## 8.3 TYPES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

### ONE WAY OF CLASSIFYING: REFORMIST, REDEMPTIVE, REVOLUTIONARY

There are different kinds of social movements. They can be classified as: (i) redemptive or transformatory; (ii) reformist; and (iii) revolutionary. A *redemptive* social movement aims to bring about a change in the personal consciousness and actions of its individual members. For instance, people in the Ezhava community in Kerala were led by Narayana Guru to change their social practices. *Reformist* social movements strive to change the existing social

## ACTIVITY 8.5

Find out about social movements such as the:

- Telangana struggle
- the Tebhaga movement
- the Swadhyaya Parivar movement
- the Santhal Hool
- the Ulgulan led by Birsa Munda
- the campaign against dowry deaths
- the movement to allow Dalits to enter temples
- the movement for separate statehood for Uttaranchal and Jharkhand
- the movement for widow remarriage in Bengal and Maharashtra and others
- any other social movement you have read about.

Can you classify these social movements in terms of the categories given above?

and political arrangements through gradual, incremental steps. The 1960s movement for the reorganisation of Indian states on the basis of language and the recent *Right to Information* campaign are examples of reformist movements. *Revolutionary* social movements attempt to radically transform social relations, often by capturing state power. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia that deposed the Tsar to create a communist state and the Naxalite movement in India that seeks to remove oppressive landlords and state officials can be described as revolutionary movements.

As you might discover when you try to classify a social movement in terms of this typology, most movements have a mix of redemptive, reformist and revolutionary elements. Or the orientation of a social movement may shift over time such that it starts off with, say, revolutionary objectives and becomes reformist. A movement may start from a phase of mass mobilisation and collective protest to become more institutionalised. Social scientists who study the life cycles of social movements call this a move towards '*social movement organisations*'.

How a social movement is perceived and classified is always a matter of interpretation. It differs from one section to another. For instance, what was a

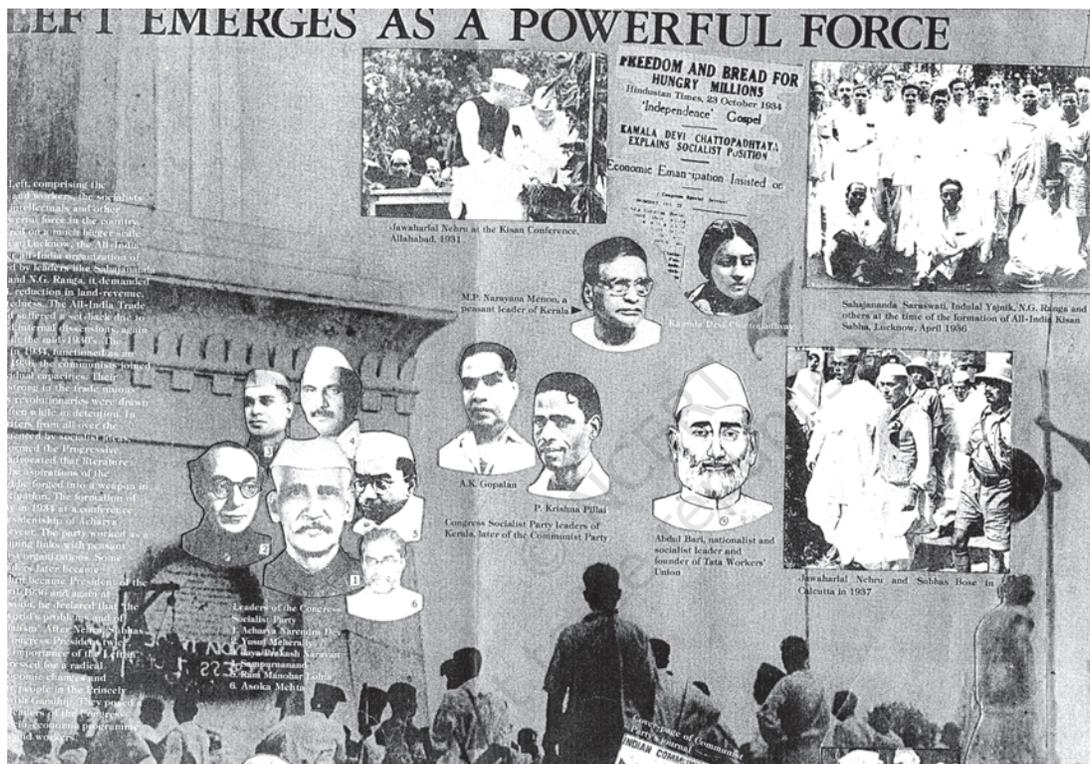
'mutiny' or 'rebellion' for British colonial rulers in 1857 was 'the first war of Independence' for Indian nationalists. A mutiny is an act of defiance against legitimate authority, i.e., the British rule. A struggle for independence is a challenge to the very legitimacy of British rule. This shows how people attach different meanings to social movements.

## ANOTHER WAY OF CLASSIFYING: OLD AND NEW

For much of the twentieth century social movements were class based such as working class movements and peasant movements or anti-colonial movements. While anti-colonial movements united entire people into national liberation struggles, class-based movements united classes to fight for their rights.

The most far-reaching social movements of the last century thus have been class-based or based on national liberation struggles. You have read in your history books about the workers' movements in Europe that gave rise to the international communist movement. Besides bringing about the formation of communist and socialist states across the world, most notably in the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, these movements also led to the reform of capitalism.

The creation of welfare states that protected workers' rights and offered universal education, health care and social security in the capitalist nations of Western Europe was partly due to political pressure created by the communist and socialist movements. The movement against colonialism has been as influential as the movement against capitalism. Since capitalism and colonialism have usually been inter-linked through forms of imperialism, social movements have simultaneously targeted both these forms of exploitation. That is, nationalist movements have mobilised against rule by a foreign power as well as against the dominance of foreign capital.



The decades after the Second World War witnessed the end of empire and the formation of new nation-states as a result of nationalist movements in India, Egypt, Indonesia, and many other countries. Since then, another wave of social movements occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s. This was the time of the war in Vietnam where forces led by the United States of America were involved in a bloody conflict in the former French colony against Communist guerrillas. In Europe, Paris was the nucleus of a vibrant students' movement that joined workers' parties in a series of strikes protesting against the war. Across the Atlantic, the United States of America was experiencing a surge of social protest. The civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King had been followed by the Black Power movement led by Malcolm X. The anti-war movement was joined by tens of thousands of students who were being compulsorily drafted by the government to go and fight in Vietnam. The women's movement and the environmental movement also gained strength during this time of social ferment.

It was difficult to classify the members of these so-called 'new social movements' as belonging to the same class or even nation. Rather than a shared class identity, participants felt that they shared identities as students, women, blacks, or environmentalists. How are the old social movements, often based on class related issues like the trade union or peasant movements different from the new social movements like the environmental or women or tribal movements?

You are already familiar with the many instances of trade union movements and workers' struggles in chapter 5.

### **DISTINGUISHING THE NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT FROM THE OLD SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

We have already seen that *the historical contexts* were different. That was a period when nationalist movements were overthrowing colonial powers. And working class movements in the capitalist west were wresting better wages, better living conditions, social security, free schooling and health security from the state. That was also a period when socialist movements were establishing new kinds of states and societies. *The old social movements clearly saw reorganisation of power relations as a central goal.*

*The old social movements functioned within the frame of political parties.* The Indian National Congress led the Indian National Movement. The Communist Party of China led the Chinese Revolution. Today some believe that 'old' class-based political action led by trade unions and workers' parties is on the decline. Others argued that in the affluent West with its welfare state, issues of class-based exploitation and inequality were no longer central concerns. *So the 'new' social movements were not about changing the distribution of power in society but about quality-of-life issues such as having a clean environment.*

In the old social movements, *the role of political parties* was central. Political scientist Rajni Kothari attributes the surge of social movements in India in the 1970s to people's growing dissatisfaction with parliamentary democracy. Kothari argues that the institutions of the state have been captured by elites. Due to this, electoral representation by political parties is no longer an effective way for the poor to get their voices heard. People left out by the formal political system join social movements or *non-party political formations* in order to put pressure on the state from outside. Today, the broader term of civil society is used to refer to both old social movements represented by political parties and trade unions. And to new nongovernmental organisations, women's groups, environmental groups and tribal activists.

As you read about the various dimensions of social change in India you would have been struck by the fact that *globalisation* has been re-shaping peoples' lives in industry and agriculture, culture and media. Often firms are trans-national. Often legal arrangements that are binding are international such as the regulations of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Environmental and

health risks, fears of nuclear warfare are global in nature. Not surprisingly *therefore many of the new social movements are international in scope*. What is significant, however, is that the old and new movements are working together in new alliances such as the World Social Forum that have been raising awareness about the hazards of globalisation.

### **CAN WE APPLY THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN OLD AND NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT?**

India has experienced a whole array of social movements involving women, peasants, dalits, adivasis, and others. Can these movements be understood as 'new social movements'? Gail Omvedt in her book *Reinventing Revolution* points out that concerns about social inequality and the unequal distribution of resources continue to be important elements in these movements. Peasant movements have mobilised for better prices for their produce and protested against the removal of agricultural subsidies. Dalit labourers have acted collectively to ensure that they are not exploited by upper-caste landowners and money-lenders. The women's movement has worked on issues of gender discrimination in diverse spheres like the workplace and within the family.

At the same time, these new social movements are *not just about 'old' issues of economic inequality*. Nor are they organised along class lines alone. *Identity politics, cultural anxieties and aspirations* are essential elements in creating social movements and occur in ways that are difficult to trace to class-based inequality. Often, these social movements unite participants across class boundaries. For instance, the women's movement includes urban, middle-class feminists as well as poor peasant women. The regional movements for separate statehood bring together different groups of people who do not share homogeneous class identities. In a social movement, questions of social inequality can occur alongside other, equally important, issues.

This will be clear when we discuss the Chipko movement later.

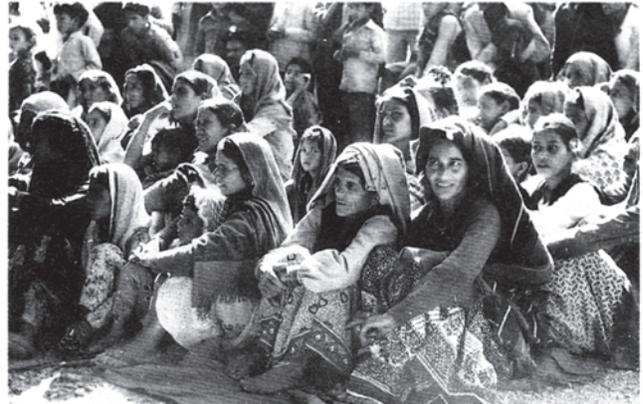
## **8.4 ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS**

For much of the modern period the greatest emphasis has been laid on development. Over the decades there has been a great deal of concern about the unchecked use of natural resources and a model of development that creates new needs that further demands greater exploitation of the already depleted natural resources. This model of development has also been critiqued for assuming that all sections of people will be beneficiaries of development. Thus big dams displace people from their homes and sources of livelihood. Industries displace agriculturalists from their homes and livelihood. The impact of industrial pollution is yet another story. Here we take just one example of an ecological movement to examine the many issues that are interlinked in an ecological movement.

## ACTIVITY 8.6

Find out some instances of environmental pollution from your region. Discuss. You can also have a poster exhibition of all your findings.

The Chipko Movement, an example of the ecological movement, in the Himalayan foothills is a good example of such intermingled interests and ideologies. According to Ramachandra Guha in his book, *Unquiet Woods*, villagers rallied together to save the oak and rhododendron forests near their villages. When government forest contractors came to cut down the trees, villagers, including large number of women, stepped forward to hug the trees to prevent their being felled. At stake was the question of villagers' subsistence. All of them relied on the forest to get firewood, fodder and other daily necessities. This conflict placed the livelihood needs of poor villagers against the government's desire to generate revenues from selling timber. The economy of subsistence was pitted against the economy of profit. Along with this issue of social inequality (villagers versus a government that represented commercial, capitalist interests), the Chipko Movement



Chipko activists gather on World Environment Day at Saklana in 1986



Discussing deforestation, Junagadh, Himachal Pradesh

also raised the issue of ecological sustainability. Cutting down natural forests was a form of environmental destruction that had resulted in devastating floods and landslides in the region. For the villagers, these 'red' and 'green' issues were interlinked. While their survival depended on the survival of the forest, they also valued the forest for its own sake as a form of ecological wealth that benefits all. In addition, the Chipko Movement also expressed the resentment of hill villagers against a distant government headquartered in the plains that seemed indifferent and hostile to their concerns. So, concerns about economy, ecology and political representation underlay the Chipko Movement. Trees are necessary for the conservation of environment. Similarly, clean water is necessary for a healthy environment. In the light of this, the Government of India has recently, through the 'Intergrated Ganga Conservation Mission' (*Namami Gange*) and *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* initiated systematic efforts to create a balance, structure and quality in India's ecology.

### Chipko Movement

#### Box 8.5

The unusually heavy monsoon of 1970 precipitated the most devastating flood in living memory. In the Alaknanda valley, water inundated 100 square kilometres of land, washed away 6 metal bridges and 10 kilometres of motor roads, 24 buses and several other vehicles; 366 houses collapsed and 500 acres of standing paddy crops were destroyed. The loss of human and bovine life was considerable.

...The 1970 floods mark a turning-point in the ecological history of the region. Villagers, who bore the brunt of the damage, were beginning to perceive the hitherto tenuous links between deforestation, landslides and floods. It was observed that some of the villages most affected by landslides lay directly below forests where felling operations had taken place....

...The villagers' cause was taken up by the Dashauli Gram Swaraja Sangh (DGSS), a cooperative organisation based in Chamoli district.

...Despite these early protests, the government went ahead with the yearly auction of forests in November. One of the plots scheduled to be assigned was the Reni forest....

...The contractors' men who were travelling to Reni from Joshimath stopped the bus shortly before Reni. Skirting the village, they made for the forest. A small girl who spied the workers with their implements rushed to Gaura Devi, the head of the village Mahila Mandal (Women's Club). Gaura Devi quickly mobilised the other housewives and went to the forest. Pleading with the labourers not to start felling operations, the women initially met with abuse and threats. When the women refused to budge, the men were eventually forced to retire.

#### EXERCISE FOR BOX 8.5

- Is this social movement raising 'old' issues of class-based inequality and resource distribution?
- Or is it raising other concerns such as ecological sustainability and the cultural rights of people?

In our current information age, social movements around the globe are able to join together in huge regional and international networks comprising non-governmental organisations, religious and humanitarian groups, human rights association, consumer protection advocates, environmental activists and others who campaign in the public interest. ...The enormous protests against the World Trade Organisation that took place in Seattle, for example, were organised in part through internet-based network.

#### Box 8.6

#### EXERCISE FOR BOX 8.6

Read the text given above and discuss how even social movements get globalised. How does technology help? How does it change the role social movements can play?

## 8.5 CLASS BASED MOVEMENTS

### PEASANT MOVEMENTS

Peasant movements or agrarian struggles have taken place from pre-colonial days. The movements in the period between 1858 and 1914 tended to remain localised, disjointed and confined to particular grievances. Well-known are the Bengal revolt of 1859-62 against the indigo plantation system and the 'Deccan riots' of 1857 against moneylenders. Some of these issues continued into the following period, and under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi became partially linked to the Independence movement. For instance, the Bardoli Satyagraha (1928, Surat District) a 'non-tax' campaign as part of the nationwide non-cooperative movement, a campaign of refusal to pay land revenue and the Champaran Satyagraha (1917-18) directed against indigo plantations. In the 1920s, protest movements against the forest policies of the British government and local rulers arose in certain regions. Recall our discussion on structural changes in Chapter 1.

Between 1920 and 1940 peasant organisations arose. The first organisation to be founded was the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (1929) and in 1936 the All India Kisan Sabha. The peasants organised by the Sabhas demanded freedom from economic exploitation for peasants, workers and all other exploited classes. At the time of Independence we had the two most classical cases of peasant movements, namely the Tebhaga movement (1946-7) and the Telangana movement (1946-51). The first was a struggle of sharecroppers in Bengal in North Bihar for two thirds share of their produce instead of the customary half. It had the support of the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party of India (CPI). The second, directed against the feudal conditions in the princely state of Hyderabad and was led by the CPI.

#### ACTIVITY 8.7

Find out more about the Naxal Movement:

- The early years
- The current phase
- The issues
- The mode of protest

Discuss. Go back to chapter 4 and identify what could be the social causes responsible for the movement.

Certain issues which had dominated colonial times changed after independence. For land reforms, zamindari abolition, declining importance of land revenue and public credit system began to alter rural areas. The period after 1947 was characterised by two major social movements. The Naxalite struggle and the 'new farmer's movements.' The Naxalite movement started from the region of Naxalbari (1967) in Bengal.

The central problem for peasants was land. You have a clear understanding of the sharp divisions within the agrarian structure in rural India from chapter 4. Boxes 1 and 2 provide two brief accounts of the movement.

...the Siliguri subdivision peasants' conference proved to be a great success. The peasants, quickened and strengthened by their earlier militant struggles, looked forward expectantly. Faces deadened and dulled with the grinding routine of labour on the *jotedars'* fields in sun and rain glowed with hope and understanding. According to Kanu Sanyal's later claims, from March 1967 to April 1967, all the villagers were organised. From 15,000 to 20,000 peasants were enrolled as wholtime activists. Peasants' committees were formed in every village and they were transformed into armed guards. They soon occupied land in the name of peasants' committees, burnt all land records 'which had been used to cheat them of their dues', cancelled all hypothecary debts, passed death sentences on oppressive landlords, formed armed bands by looting guns from landlords, armed themselves with conventional weapons like bows, arrows and spears, and set up parallel administration to look after the villages...

**Box 8.7**

*Source: Sumanata Banerjee "Naxalbari and the Left Movement" in ed. Ghanshyam Shah Social Movements and the State (Sage, Delhi 2002) pp.125-192*

The guerrilla movement was heralded by the forcible cutting of crops from the land of a rich landlord at Garudabhadra, near Boddapadu in the plains area on 24 November 1968. More significant was the action in the hill tracts the next day, when in Pedagottili village of the Parvatipuram Agency area, about 250 Girijans from several villages armed with bows, arrows and spears... raided the house of a ...landlord cum moneylender.. .and took possession of his hoarded paddy, rice, other food grains and property worth about Rs. 20,000. They also seized documents.

**Box 8.8****EXERCISE FOR BOX 8.7 AND 8.8**

Read box 8.7 and 8.8 carefully. Identify the issues and the tactics.

Many of the agrarian problems persist in contemporary India. Chapter 4 has discussed these in detail. The Naxal movement is a growing force even today.

The so called 'new farmer's movements began in the 1970s in Punjab and Tamil Nadu. These movements were regionally organised, were non-party, and involved farmers rather than peasants. (farmers are said to be market-involved as both commodity producers and purchasers) The basic ideology of the movement was strongly anti-state and anti-urban. The focus of demand were 'price and related issues' (for example price procurement, remunerative prices, prices for agricultural inputs, taxation, non-repayment of loans). Novel methods of agitation were used: blocking of roads and railways, refusing politicians and bureaucrats entry to villages, and so on. It has been argued that the farmers' movements have broadened their agenda and ideology and include environment and women's issues. Therefore, they can be seen as a part of the worldwide 'new social movements'.

## **WORKERS' MOVEMENTS**

Factory production began in India in the early part of the 1860s. You will recall our discussion on the specific character of industrialisation in the colonial period. The general pattern of trade set up by the colonial regime was one under which raw materials were procured from India and goods manufactured in the United Kingdom were marketed in the colony. These factories were, thus established in the port towns of Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai). Later factories were also set up in Madras (Chennai). Tea plantations in Assam were established as early as 1839.

In the early stages of colonialism, labour was very cheap as the colonial government did not regulate either wages or working conditions. You will remember the manner in which the colonial government ensured supply of labour in the tea plantations (Chapter 1)

Though trade unions emerged later, workers did protest. Their actions then were, however, more spontaneous than sustained. Some of the nationalist leaders also drew in the workers into the anti colonial movement. The war led to the expansion of industries in the country but it also brought a great deal of misery to the poor. There were food shortage and sharp increase in prices. There were waves of strikes in the textile mills in Bombay. In September and October 1917 there were around 30 recorded strikes. Jute workers in Calcutta struck work. In Madras, the workers of Buchingham and Carnatic Mills (Binny's) struck work for increased wages. Textile workers in Ahmedabad struck work for increase in wages by 50 per cent. (Bhowmick 2004)

The first trade union was established in April 1918 in Madras by B.P. Wadia, a social worker and member of the Theosophical Society. During the same year, Mahatma Gandhi founded the Textile Labour Association (TLA). In 1920 the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was formed in Bombay. The AITUC was a broad-based organisation involving diverse ideologies. The main ideological groups were the communists led by S.A. Dange and M.N. Roy, the moderates led by M. Joshi and V.V. Giri and the nationalists which involved people like Lala Lajpat Rai and Jawaharlal Nehru.

The formation of the AITUC made the colonial government more cautious in dealing with labour. It attempted to grant workers some concessions in order to contain unrest. In 1922 the government passed the fourth Factories Act which reduced the working day to 10 hours. And in 1926, the Trade Unions Act was passed, which provided for registration of trade unions and proposed some regulations. By the mid 1920s, the AITUC had nearly 200 unions affiliated to it and its membership stood at around 250,000.

During the last few years of British rule the communists gained considerable control over the AITUC. The Indian National Congress chose to form another union called the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) in May 1947. The split in the AITUC in 1947 paved the way for further splits on the line of



*Top: Bombay textile worker's strike 1981-82*

*Right: Women workers at a Union Demonstration, Arwal, Bihar 1987*



political parties. Apart from the working class movement being divided on the lines of political parties at the national level, regional parties too started to form their own unions from the late 1960s.

In 1966-67 the economy suffered a major recession which led to a decrease in production and consequently employment. There was a general unrest. In 1974 there was a major railway workers' strike. The confrontation between the state and trade unions became acute. During the Emergency in 1975-77 the government curbed all trade union activities. This again was short lived. The workers' movement was very much part of the wider struggle for civil liberties.

In the contemporary context of globalisation you have read about the changes affecting labour. The challenges before the trade unions are also of a new nature. You need to go back to chapter 5 and 6 to understand these.

### ACTIVITY 8.8

- Follow the news regularly and collect information on the issues that trade unions are taking up.
- Discuss in the context of globalisation

## 8.6 CASTE BASED MOVEMENTS

### THE DALIT MOVEMENT

*The sun of self-respect has burst into flame-  
Let it burn up these castes!  
Smash, break, destroy  
These walls of hatred.  
Crush to smithereens this eons-old school of blindness,  
Rise, O people!*

Social movements of Dalits show a particular character. The movements cannot be explained satisfactorily by reference to economic exploitations alone or political oppression, although these dimensions are important. This is a struggle for recognition as fellow human beings. It is a struggle for self-confidence and a space for self-determination. It is a struggle for abolishment of stigmatisation, that untouchability implied. It has been called a struggle to be touched.

The word Dalit is commonly used in Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati and many other Indian languages, meaning the poor and oppressed persons. It was first used in the new context in Marathi by neo-Buddhist activists, the followers of Babasaheb Ambedkar in the early 1970s. It refers to those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate way. There is, in the word itself, inherent denial of pollution, karma and justified caste hierarchy.



There has not been a single, unified Dalit movement in the country now or in the past. Different movements have highlighted different issues related to Dalits, around different ideologies. However, all of them assert a Dalit identity though the meaning may not be identical or precise for everyone. Notwithstanding differences in the nature of Dalit movements and the meaning of identity, there has been a common quest for equality, self-dignity and eradication of untouchability. (Shah 2001:194) This can be seen in the Satnami Movement of the Chamars in the Chattisgarh plains in eastern MP, Adi Dharma Movement in Punjab, the Mahar Movement in Maharashtra,

the socio-political mobilisation among the Jatavas of Agra and the Anti Brahman Movement in south India.

In the contemporary period the Dalit movement has unquestionably acquired a place in the public sphere that cannot be ignored. This has been accompanied by a growing body of Dalit literature.

**ACTIVITY 8.9**

Find out more about Dalit literature. Discuss any poem or story of your choice from within the body of Dalit writings.

Dalit literature is squarely opposed to the Chaturvarna system and caste hierarchy which it considers as responsible for crushing the creativity and very existence of lower castes. Dalit writers are insistent on using their own imageries and expressions rooted in their own experiences and perceptions.

Many felt that the high-flown social imageries of mainstream society would hide the truth rather than reveal it. Dalit literature gives a call for social and cultural revolt. While some emphasise the cultural struggle for dignity and identity, others also bring in the structural features of society including the economic dimensions.

*An unknown poet's poem (1890s) on his fellow Mahars.*

Their houses are outside the village;  
There are lice in their women's hair;  
Naked children play in the rubbish;  
They eat carrion;  
The faces of the untouchables have a humble look;  
There is no learning among them;  
They know the names of the village goddesses and the demon gods;  
But not the name of Brahma.

**Box 8.9**

Sociologists, attempts to classify Dalit movements have led them to believe that they belong to all the types, namely reformative, redemptive, revolutionary.

**Box 8.10**

...the anti-caste movement which began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the inspiration of Jotiba Phule and was carried out in the 1920s by the non-Brahmin movements in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu and then developed under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar had characteristics of all types. At its best it was revolutionary in terms of society and redemptive in terms of individuals. In partial context, the 'post Ambedkar Dalit movement' has had revolutionary practice. It has provided alternative ways of living, at some points limited and at some points radical and all-encompassing, ranging from changes in behaviour such as giving up eating beef to religious conversion. It has focussed on changes in the entire society, from radical revolutionary goal of abolishing caste oppression and economic exploitation to the limited goals of providing scope for members of Scheduled Caste to achieve social mobility.

But on the whole...this movement has been a reformist movement. It has mobilized along caste lines, but only made half hearted efforts to destroy caste; it has attempted and achieved some real though limited societal changes with gains especially for the educated sections among Dalits, but it has failed to transform society sufficiently to raise the general mass from what is still among the most excruciating poverty in the world.

**EXERCISE FOR BOX 8.10**

- Identify the reasons why the Dalit movement can be termed reformist as well as redemptive.
- Do you agree with the observation given in the text. Discuss.

## BACKWARD CLASS CASTES MOVEMENTS

The emergence of backward castes/classes as political entities has occurred both in the colonial and post-colonial contexts. The colonial state often distributed patronage on the basis of caste. It made sense, therefore, for people to stay within their caste for social and political identity in institutional life. It also influenced similarly placed caste groups to unite themselves and to form what has been termed a 'horizontal stretch'. Caste, thus, began to lose its ritual content and become more and more secularised for political mobilisation (recall the discussion on secularisation in Chapter 2).

The term 'Backward Classes' has been in use in different parts of the country since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It began to be used more widely in Madras presidency

since 1872, in the princely state of Mysore since 1918, and in Bombay presidency since 1925. From the 1920s, a number of organisations united around the issue of caste sprang up in different parts of the country. These included the United Provinces Hindu Backward Classes League, All-India Backward Classes Federation, All India Backward Classes League. In 1954, 88 organisations were counted working for the Backward Classes.

The following observations were made by G.B. Pant during a speech that moved the constitution of the Advisory Committee on fundamental rights, minorities, etc. We have to take particular care of the Depressed Classes, the Scheduled Castes and the Backward Classes... We must do all we can to bring them up to the general level...The strength of the chain is measured by the weakest link of it and so until every link is fully revitalised, we will not have a healthy body politic.

### Box 8.11

Recent years have seen renewed debate about the state decision on reservation to this section.

## THE UPPER CASTE RESPONSE

The increasing visibility of both Dalits and other backwards classes has led to a feeling among sections of the upper caste that they are being given short shrift. The government,

they feel, does not pay any heed to them because they are numerically not significant enough. As sociologists, we need to recognise that such a 'feeling' does exist and then we need to scrutinise to what extent such an impression is grounded on empirical facts. We also need to ask why earlier generations from the so called 'upper castes' did not think of 'caste' as a living reality of modern India? Box 8.12 provides an obvious sociological explanation.

By and large, when compared to the situation prevailing before Independence, the condition of all social groups, including the lowest caste and tribes, has improved today. But by how much has it improved? How have the lowest castes/tribes fared in comparison to the rest of the population? It is true that in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the variety of occupations and professions among all caste groups is much wider than it was today. However, this does not change the massive social reality that the overwhelming majority of those in the 'highest' or most preferred occupations are from the upper castes, while the vast majority of those in the

To the generations born in Nehruvian India, and specially to those who (like me) were brought up in traditionally upper caste but newly urban and newly professional middle-class environment, caste was an archaic concept. True, it would be brought out figuratively mothballs to preside over traditional rites of passage, specially marriage, but it seemed to have no active role in urban everyday life.

It is mainly now — after Mandal so to speak — that we are beginning to understand why caste was almost invisible in urban middle-class contexts. The most important reason, of course, is that these contexts were overwhelmingly dominated by the upper castes. This homogeneity made caste drop below the threshold of social visibility. If almost everyone around is upper caste, caste identity is unlikely to be an issue, just as our identity as 'Indians' may be relevant abroad but goes unnoticed in India. (Deshpande 2003: 99)

## Box 8.12

menial and despised occupations belong to the lowest castes. Issues of discrimination and exclusion have been discussed at some length in Book 1.

## 8.7 THE TRIBAL MOVEMENTS

Different tribal groups spread across the country may share common issues. But the distinctions between them are equally significant. Many of the tribal movements have been largely located in the so called 'tribal belt' in middle India, such as the Santhals, Hos, Oraons, Mundas in Chota Nagpur and the Santhal Parganas. The region constitutes the main part of what has come to be called Jharkhand. We will not be able to go into any detailed account of the different movements. We take Jharkhand as an example of a tribal movement with a history that goes back a hundred years. We also briefly touch on the specificity of the tribal movements in the North East but fail to deal comprehensively the many differences that exist between one tribal movement and another within the region.

### JHARKHAND

Jharkhand is one of the newly formed states of India, carved out of south Bihar in the year 2000. Behind the formation of this state lies more than a century of resistance. The social movement for Jharkhand had a charismatic leader in Birsa Munda, an adivasi who led a major uprising against the British. After his death, Birsa became an important icon of the movement. Stories and songs about him can be found all over Jharkhand. The memory of Birsa's struggle was also kept alive by writing. Christian missionaries working in south Bihar were responsible for spreading literacy in the area. Literate adivasis began to research and write about their history and myths. They documented and



Struggles of the tribals continue

disseminated information about tribal customs and cultural practices. This helped create a unified ethnic consciousness and a shared identity as Jharkhandis.

Literate adivasis were also in a position to get government jobs so that, over time, a middle-class adivasi intellectual leadership emerged that formulated the demand for a separate state and lobbied for it in India and abroad. Within south Bihar, adivasis shared a common hatred of *dikus* – migrant traders and money-lenders who had settled in the area and grabbed its wealth, impoverishing the original residents. Most of the benefits from the mining and industrial projects in this mineral-rich region had gone to *dikus* even as adivasi lands had been alienated. Adivasi experiences of marginalisation and their sense of injustice were mobilised to create a shared Jharkhandi identity and inspire collective action that eventually led to the formation of a separate state.

The issues against which the leaders of the movement in Jharkand agitated were:

- acquisition of land for large irrigation projects and firing ranges;
- survey and settlement operations, which were held up, camps closed down, etc.
- collection of loans, rent and cooperative dues, which were resisted;
- nationalisation of forest produce which they boycotted

## THE NORTH EAST

The process of state formation initiated by the Indian government following the attainment of independence generated disquieting trends in all the major hill districts in the region. Conscious of their distinct identity and traditional autonomy the tribes were unsure of being incorporated within the administrative machinery of Assam.

The rise of ethnicity in the region is thus a response to cope with the new situation which developed as a consequence of the tribe's contact with a powerful alien system. Long isolated from the Indian mainstream the tribes were able to maintain their own worldview and social and cultural institutions with little external influence. ...While the earlier phase showed a tendency towards secessionism, this trend has been replaced by a search for autonomy within the framework of the Indian Constitution. (*Nongbri 2003: 115*)

One of the key issues that bind tribal movements from different parts of the country is the alienation of tribals from forest lands. In this sense ecological issues are central to tribal movements. Just as cultural issues of identity and economic issues such as inequality are. This brings us back to the question about the blurring of old and new social movements in India.

## 8.8 THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

### THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS AND EARLY WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

You are already familiar with the 19<sup>th</sup> century social reform movements that raised various issues concerning women. Chapter 2 had dealt with it as did the earlier book. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the growth of women's organisations at the national and the local level. The Women's India Association (WIA) (1917), All India Women's Conference (AIWC) (1926) National Council for Women in India (NCWI) (1925) are ready names that we can mention. While many of them began with a limited focus, their scope extended over time. For instance, the AIWC began with the idea that 'women's welfare' and 'politics' were mutually exclusive. Few years later the Presidential address stated, "...Can the Indian man or woman be free if India be a slave? How can we remain dumb about national freedom, the very basis of all great reforms?" (Chaudhuri 1993: 149)

It can be argued that this period of activity did not constitute a social movement. It can be argued otherwise too. Let us recall some of the features that characterise social movements. It did have organisations, ideology, leadership, a shared understanding and the aim of bringing about changes on a public issue. What they succeeded together was to create an atmosphere where the women's question could not be ignored.

#### AGRARIAN STRUGGLES AND REVOLTS

It is often assumed that only middle class educated women are involved in social movements. Part of the struggle has been to remember the forgotten history of women's participation. Women participated along with men in struggles and revolts originating in tribal and rural areas in the colonial period. The Tebhaga movement in Bengal, the Telangana arms struggle from the erstwhile Nizam's rule, and the Warli tribal's revolt against bondage in Maharashtra are some examples.

#### POST-1947

An issue that is often raised is that if there was an active women's movement before 1947, whatever happened afterwards. One explanation has been that



*In the North Cedar Hills, a woman named Gufiallo became famous for her part in the Civil Disobedience Movement.*

many of the women activists who were also involved in the nationalist movement got involved in the nation building task. Others cite the trauma of Partition responsible for the lull.

In the mid-1970s, there was a renewal of the women's movement in India. Some call it the second phase of the Indian women's movement. While many of the concerns remained the same that there were changes both in terms of organisational strategy, as well as, ideologies. There was the growth of what is termed as the autonomous women's movements. The term 'autonomy' referred to the fact that they were 'autonomous' or independent from political parties as distinct from those women's organisations that had links with political parties. It was felt that political parties tended to marginalise issues of women.

Apart from organisational changes, there were new issues that were focussed upon. For instance, violence against women. Over the years, there have been numerous campaigns that have been taken up. You may have noticed that application for school forms have both father's and mother's names. This was not always true. Likewise, important legal changes have taken place thanks to the campaign by the women's movement. Issues of land rights, employment have been fought alongside rights against sexual harassment and dowry.



Struggle against dowry



Shahjehan Begum 'Ape' with a photograph of her daughter, allegedly murdered for dowry

There has been a recognition too that while all women are in some way disadvantaged vis-a-vis men, all women do not suffer the same level or kind of discrimination. The concerns of the educated middle class woman is different from the peasant woman, just as the concern of the Dalit woman is different from the 'upper caste' woman. Let us take the example of violence.

There has also been greater recognition that both men and women are constrained by the dominant gender identities. For instance, men in patriarchal societies feel they must be strong and successful. It is not, manly, to express oneself emotionally. A gender-just society would allow both men and women to be free. This of course rests on the idea that for true freedom to grow and develop, injustices of all kind have to end. The idea of gender-just society is based upon two important factors — educated women with multiple roles and improved sex

## Box 8.13

In the face of widespread unemployment, ecological degradation, and rampant poverty, ... a new ferment of political action began in the country. In some cases, the struggles were launched from party fronts or from joint fronts of coalitions of parties. An example of the latter kind of action is provided by the Anti Price Rise Movement of Mumbai and Gujarat in the late 60s....

During the early 70s, in crisis-ridden Bihar, a massive upsurge of students...supported Jayapraksh Narayan's call for a 'Total Revolution'...A large number of questions about power structures was raised, which included many about women — questions about family, work, distribution and family violence, unequal access to resources enjoyed by men and women, issues of male-female relationship, and women's sexuality.

The 1970s also witnessed the emergence of the 'autonomous' women's movement. During the mid-1970s, many educated women took to radical, active politics, and simultaneously promoted an analysis of women's issues. Groups of women came together in many cities. Among the incidents that played catalytic roles in crystallising these meetings into organisational efforts were the Mathura rape case (1978) and the Maya Tyagi rape case (1980). Both were cases of custodial rape by the police, and led to nationwide protest movements...

Source: Ilina Sen "Women's Politics in India" in ed. Maitrayee Chaudhuri *Feminism in India (Women Unlimited/Kali, New Delhi, 2004) PP. 187-210.*

## Box 8.14

An analysis of the practices of violence against women by caste would reveal that while the incidence of dowry deaths and violent controls and regulations on the mobility and sexuality by the family are frequent among the dominant upper castes. Dalit women are more likely to face the collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence at the workplace and in public.

Source: Sharmila Rege "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position" in Maitrayee Chaudhuri ed. *Feminism in India (p.211-223) (Women Unlimited/Kali Delhi 2004)*

## EXERCISE FOR BOX 8.14

- Think what other kinds of difference would exist between one section of women and another.
- Would there still be something common for all women as women? Discuss

ratio. The programme of the Government of India, *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Yojana* is an important effort in the actualisation of a gender-just society.

## CONCLUSION

As we reach the end of the book, it is perhaps relevant to go back to where we began in our first sociology book in Class XI. We had begun by discussing the dialectical relationship between the individual and the society. Social movements perhaps best shows this relationship. They arise because individuals and social groups seek to change their conditions. Thereby, they change both themselves and the society.

# Questions

1. Imagine a society where there has been no social movement. Discuss. You can also describe how you imagine such a society to be.
2. Write short notes on:
  - Women's Movement
  - Tribal Movements
3. In India it is difficult to make a clear distinction between the old and new social movements. Discuss.
4. Environmental movements often also contain economic and identity issues. Discuss.
5. Distinguish between peasant and New Farmer's movements.

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