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Understanding the Changing Winds of Social Movements

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ABSTRACT

This world, throughout the entirety of its complicated history and continuous evolution, has been a witness to numerous social movements, some of which widely revolutionary while some uniquely empowering. The people of the world have been constantly wound up in balancing the inequalities and short-comings of the society. Their efforts and perseverance have managed to shape the landscape a little better and in doing so, have gradually created a more inclusive, considerate and progressive society. Even though the functioning and approaches towards carrying out a movement have faced tweaks and changes, the basic essence of social movements is as relevant today as it had been before. This paper is an attempt towards understanding a social movement in its bare sense, addressing the theories related to these movements and uncovering the changes that these movements have undergone. It also attempts to express the psyche of the people involved in a social movement and the factors which inspire them to fight resolutely in order to realize their objective.

Keywords: *Social Movements, Theories of Social Movements, Evolution of Social Movements.*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is the 7th of August, 1905, summer is long gone and the faint arrival of monsoon has brought along a strong sense of nationalism for the people of India, paired with an intention to fight back. The incessant attacks on the country's culture, beliefs and heritage along with the constant oppression and the absolute inconsideration towards the lives of the natives have made way for what will turn out to be one of the most successful movements against the British by a colonized India. Initially launched as a protest movement, the ***Swadeshi Movement*** thrived and eventually led to the Boycott Movement. By 1909, anti-partition and anti-colonial movements had also been initiated as a domino effect of the Swadeshi movement.

"Our nation is like a tree of which the original trunk is swarajya and the branches are swadeshi

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and boycott."

– Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

It is the early 1950s and African-Americans along with their like-minded allies have had enough of the continued discrimination, prejudice and extreme racial segregation even after the abolishment of slavery after the Civil war. The Jim Crow laws, Segregation laws, the Little Rock Nine incident and several other factors have pushed the people to continue their fight for an equal and humane place in the society and have thereby led to the decade-long *Civil Rights Movement*. A historic movement which saw several instances laced with revolt and resistance, the movement was given constant accelerations by the people, young and old alike. Be it college students who refused to leave the Woolsworth's lunch counter without being served and initiated the Greensboro sit-ins or activists who mounted a bus in Washington DC and went on a tour to protest segregation, [2]all of them painted a clear and impactful painting with their bruised yet revolutionary hands. The legacy of that painting is relevant to this day and continues to inspire people to pick up their brushes and fight against the strokes of injustice.

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!"

– Martin Luther King Jr., at the March on Washington.

It is 2021 and the entire world has taken a collective hit with long-lasting consequences due to the coronavirus. Life as we knew it has come to a standstill, lockdowns, quarantine and a transition to online mode of existence has been the unprecedented reality for more than a year now. More than thousands have succumbed to the virus and a lot more are struggling to fight it every single day. One would think that at a time like this when the global scenario is extremely vulnerable and depressing, the world would not see people fighting battles other than the one that they have abruptly been dealt with. However, that is not the case. Not more than a year ago the United States along with various other countries was witnessing a monumental time as the people had taken to the streets to protest the gruesome killing of *George Floyd* by a cop in broad daylight, hence marking the beginning of the *Black Lives Matter* movement. *Farmers* in India have been protesting the farm acts passed by the government in 2020 and have garnered international importance. Recently, people have been divided on the issue of *Israel and Palestine* in various countries and the supporters of each of them have been clashing during demonstrations.

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[2] History.com Editors, Civil Rights Movement, History, (May 21, 2021, 8:23 PM)
https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement

"Social movements are at once the symptoms and the instruments of progress. Ignore them and statesmanship is irrelevant; fail to use them and it is weak."

~ Walter Lippmann

What does this history of conflict and the subsequent resistance to conflict showcase? Centuries have gone by but even today, the essentiality of movements and social demonstrations have not strewn away. These movements are as relevant and powerful today as they had been before. There is a strong sense of passion and devotion that the people involved in these movements experience which encourages them to mobilize and continue their fight for justice and accountability. Not much has changed with respect to the essence of these social movements, but the methods of carrying them out have surely amplified. The internet and social media have been acting as major players for a lot of these movements due to their influence and the power to reach a wide audience within seconds. It is easier to encourage people to educate themselves regarding the social issues prevailing today, this leads to further engagement which helps in growing the movement at its core and further amplifying the objective to an even larger audience.

II. SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: AN INTRODUCTION

To begin with, let us try to understand what a social movement in it most bare and raw sense actually is. Human civilization has never been devoid of conflicts, ever since the beginning there have been a certain set of people who are accompanied with privilege and the other who are under the wheel. This stratification has led to several clashes throughout our history where the latter are seen fighting for an equal place in the society. Whether it is at a *local* level, *national* level or a *global* level, there have always been conflicts between different groups of the society and it is likely that the same trend will persevere for a long time, if not till eternity. Most of the times these movements are started off by a single incident that highlights the persisting faults of the society and by doing so, sets the movement and the people into motion. Heinous and sickening acts such as rape, abuse and violent hate-crimes have continued to be the cruel and harsh reality of the world and as a consequence, social movements condemning these acts and showcasing the rage of the common public regarding these acts have also been prevalent. Case in point: the ***Nirbhaya Movement*** of 2012 which sought to bring justice to the deceased victim and her family and was one of the most large-scale, passionately supported movements of India in its history.

Social Movements are passionate, determined and strive towards the achievement of a single or several goals. They are characterized by the spirit and intensity of the individuals involved

and are mostly striving either to bring about some change, to resist change or be a voice for the silenced and disenfranchised. These movements can be of various kinds ranging from ***reform movements,*** which seek to bring about a change in the social structure of the society, be it small or massive, ***revolutionary movements,*** which have the objective of bringing a complete change which reconstructs the entire functioning of the society, ***religious movements,*** which are generally concerned with spiritual aspects, ***resistance movements***, such as the *Ku Klux Klan*, which aim towards undoing the social changes brought by reform movements, and many more. [3]It is also likely that the aims of a particular movement changes with time and the movement in itself evolves and grows either after achieving its initial objectives or realizing new and more essential objectives. In the process, the movement goes through the addition of new members and sometimes loses the old ones as they do not identify with the newly recognized objective anymore.

Even when these movements fail to achieve their objectives, they still strike up a conversation. They force people to acknowledge their perspectives and their demands and by doing so they bring about a lasting change in the society. Social movements are made up of various threads woven intricately together by the same ideology and beliefs. Throughout history, there have been numerous attempts to understand these threads and the reasons that bind them together.

III. UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Sociologists have attempted to understand the society and social movements through various theories and perspectives. Several of them have tried to comprehend the way different individuals view these movements and the reasons that inspire them to be a part of said movements.

There have been three major paradigms through which the functioning of the society has been explained, one of them is the theory of ***Structural Functionalism***. According to this theory, various parts of the society are interdependent and they all work together to form the bigger picture, or the 'society'. The advocates of this theory would look at social movements and their first thought would be to understand the purpose for its existence and the reasons for its development. On the other hand, the advocates of ***Conflict Theory*** would focus on the systematic inequalities that generate these social movements. Conflict Theory looks at society through a severely realistic point of view, it believes that individuals must compete with each other for a better social and political position. An eternal rat race, at the end of which there are only those who were fortunate enough to fight till the end. The third theory of ***Symbolic***

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[3] Heather Griffins et. al., Introduction to Sociology 484, Openstax College (2015)

Interaction founded by George Herbert and interpreted by Herbert Blumer has a considerate viewpoint which sees individuals as active participants involved in shaping the world[4]. An interactionist would rather focus on the interaction between the people involved in social movements, the different meanings that different individuals attach to such movements and the reasons why people decide to be a part of these movements.

Sociologists have also tried to explain how social movements develop and the factors that seem to set them off. One of these theories is the *Deprivation Theory* according to which the people who lack some essential resources, goods or services are usually the ones to start a social movement in order to improve their conditions and receive the same resources that the privileged class does. Another theory is the *Mass-Society Theory* which argues that most social movements are consisted of individuals in societies who feel neglected, detached and insignificant. Being a part of these movements gives them a sense of belonging and enhanced empowerment. Whereas according to the *Structural Strain Theory,* people start to believe that there are shortcomings or 'strains' in their society and hence they seek to remedy these strains by the means of social movements. Other theories include *Resource-Mobilization Theory, Political Process Theory, Culture Theory*, etc. [5]

The contributions made by these theories into the understanding of social movements as a whole and all of its subsequent aspects are significant as they have helped in forming a better perception and hence, have improved the understanding of the same. It has helped us acknowledge the power that the people in a society hold and their reasonings behind organizing and participating in such movements.

"Never depend upon institutions or government to solve any problem. All social movements are founded by, guided by, motivated and seen through by the passion of individuals."

~ Margaret Mead.

IV. SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN A MODERN WORLD

The internet has come up to be a revolutionary tool which has changed the way a social movement functions and has opened up several doors for a better and more organized experience for the people involved. People now have a space for voicing out their opinions and speaking up in favor of things they believe in. By doing so, they are also able to find like-minded people who share the same interests and hence, mobilization becomes easier. Virtual

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[4] Heather Griffins et. al., Introduction to Sociology 478, Openstax College (2015)
[5] Rcragun Ryan T. Cragun, et. al., Introduction to Sociology 277-279, (2010)

petitions, online money-bombs, forums to debate issues, and the use of social media in order to recruit people for meetings and protests, these are all the various methods by which today's social, political or environmental activists try to engage the people and influence the society. Social movements across all of the spectrums (social, political, etc.) use these new technologies to bring about the change that they aim for. The previous obstacles that came along with organizing a social movement such as, organisation, communication, etc. have all been made easier, courtesy of the internet. It is easier to encourage participation and communicate with the audience on a more personal level and this in turn ensures real and loyal support.

Although there have been significant changes in social movements, these theories still remain relevant and helps shape our understanding of the same. A couple of European sociologists in the late 1960s attempted to understand post-modern and post-industrial movements and in the process of doing so, came up with the ***New Social Movement Theory***[6]. They tried to take the emphasis away from one specific theory and look at movements from a more flexible point of view as they relate to complex issues such as homosexuality, feminism, gender and identity, institutionalized racism, etc. For instance, the legalization of homosexual relationships by the modification of ***Section 377*** of the ***Indian Penal Code*** came after decades of struggle by the people of the community and their supporters. The legal battle consisting of impactful cases such as *Naz Foundation v. Govt. of NCT Delhi (2009)*, *Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation (2013)* and *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India (2018)* paired with a strong movement inclusive of determined individuals ready to fight for equality and sensitivity was a testament to the relevance of social movements in today's world and the extreme role that it plays in the battle for justice.

Another example that encapsulates both modern movements and the essentiality of social media in these movements is the global movement against sexual abuse and harassment termed as the ***'Me Too'*** movement which was started off by celebrities and popular personalities speaking up against disgraceful behavior, sexual innuendos, physical abuse and pointing out their abusers in order to hold them accountable. This movement saw hundreds of women all over the world sharing their stories on social media with the hashtag 'me too' and later turned into one of the most wide-spread and controversial movements of today's time. Instances of false allegations being made also came to light and as a consequence, the legitimacy of the allegations became a topic for debate. This can be seen as an apt example of how a movement

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[6] Heather Griffins et. al., Introduction to Sociology 488, Openstax College (2015)

which starts off with a particular objective can take various turns, some ugly some commendable, and by doing so, it accurately describes the complexity of such movements.

The protests against the **Indian Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)** which was passed on December, 2019 and the implementation of **National Register of Citizens (NRC)** also garnered international importance. The lack of information regarding the act and the future consequences of the same stirred up a lot of hysteria and anxiety amongst the people and led to massive protests which turned violent at times. The protests went on for several months and the saw constant clashes between people in support of the act and the ones against it. The movement saw various instances of people losing their cool and resorting to violent means in order to prove a point. Property damage, violence against each other, police brutality, etc. were constantly making headlines and there seemed no way to neutralize the situation without aggravating either side. This goes on to show how even if social movements start off as peaceful and stable, that does not mean that their potential to turn completely chaotic and harmful can be brushed off and ignored. Movements, especially the ones dealing with extremely aggravating issues, to be monitored and navigated carefully in order to prevent catastrophic consequences and this ought to be done in a way that does not interfere with the people's right to protest. Striking a balance between the two is a complicated task, but it needs to be done nonetheless.

V. CONCLUSION

"There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest."

- Elie Wiese.

This constant cycle of conflicts and the significant involvement of social movements in a society since time immemorial forces us to contemplate. Are the flaws of our society so complex and deeply rooted that eradicating them does not plausible? Or is the world so used to conflicts and injustice that the elements of the society act upon themselves and keep the cycle going? Whatever the reason may be, the fact remains that social movements will remain an active part of the society and accordingly, people will choose to be a part of the movements that speak to their conscience and promote the ideas that they wish to incorporate into the functioning of the society. A world without dissent and protests seems far-fetched and utopian, especially when it is a given fact that people are always going to have different opinions, opportunities and positions in a society. The people at the lower end will strive to achieve the equal position and adequate opportunities that they rightfully deserve and there will always be

someone at the top trying to hush their revolting voices. It's a complicated process, but it ensures change, be it minimal or significant and that is precisely the reason why social movements can never be allowed to die out. They are instrumental to a society's development and highlight the deeply entrenched flaws of the society. Often times these movements achieve something so monumental that a fraction of the society is changed forever and this contributes to the long process of reshaping the world into a better one. It is important to remember the power that the common public and people like you and I hold. If motivated by the right objective and inspired to follow the appropriate route towards change, we can collectively create an improved society for the generations to come.

"Every important social movement reconfigures the world in the imagination. What was obscure comes forward, lies are revealed, memory shaken, new delineations drawn over the old maps: it is from this new way of seeing the present that hope emerges for the future...Let us begin to imagine the worlds we would like to inhabit, the long lives we will share, and the many futures in our hands."

~ Susan Griffin.

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