Identity Movements and Identity Politics: Indian Constitutional Framework

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Abstract

Every society is, in some or the other way, a product of a region, ethnicity, gender, race, polity or any other social construct and therefore developing some form and shape of identity is but an essential eventuality. Here the concept of society is expanded to the totality of social phenomena and is recognized by common identity. Therefore, the severe partitions and divisions in India have led to the increase in the scenario of identity politics. Consider the concepts of Pluralism and Multiculturalism that has transformed into identity politics and defined certain groups by their race or ethnicity, where those identities became the catalyst for desiring political power. Identity formation is a process that involves the advancement of social identities based on various parameters including ethnicity and religion. There are ways in which identity creates divisions between heterogeneous groups. For instance, in present day Indian polity the factors like caste, language and even religion do not remain subtle but dominate the politics of the region. Further, this type of concentration on the issue creates a serious imbalance regarding the processes of development in Indian states dominated by the liberal politics. These minorities' national, ethnic or religious rights are codified in the laws of various multi-national states, where the attention for the cultures of the 'others' is notably peripheral. Such considerations, regarding the nationalities and regarding cultural diversities, have social, political and economical consequences.

Keywords: Identity, Social Movements, Collective Actions, Recognition, Democratisation

Introduction:

The history of the world with regard to its civilization has gone through a number of movements which have brought a significant change in the social systems in place. There have been several movements that have also ended in failure. These movements have varied greatly in their ideologies, where some are radical in their objectives, some call for changes in conservatism, and still, there are some whose extent has also been diverse. For instance, some are just local while some are global in their scope. Although they differ in various respects, a lot of research work has been carried out by experts to understand the origins of these activities, the people whose interests are incorporated in them and those who do or do not take part in them, the reasons for their success and most importantly, failure. From the perspective of the history of social movements, the word was first used in a European language in the early 1800s (Shah, 2002). To the earliest historians, collective action was always aimed at modifying the existing status quo. One of the earliest works of social movements was analyzing the broad phenomenon of collective action and understanding what conditions would be required to encourage social movement. Latino-Jewish scholar on the social movement's process was Herbert Blumer who delineated the life cycle of social

movements in four sequential stages. The four stages he described were: "social foment", "popular excitement", "formalization", and "institutionalization" (Diani and De La Porta, 2006).

Defining what a social movement is can be quite challenging. It is neither a political party nor an interest group, both of which are stable political entities with regular access to power and political elites. It also isn't just a passing fad or trend, which tends to be unorganized and lacking clear goals. Instead, social movements occupy a space in between (Freeman and Johnson, 1999). The characteristics of social movements include being "involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; linked by dense informal networks; [and they] share a distinct collective identity" (De La Porta and Diani, 2006). Therefore, a social movement can be understood as an organized yet informal social entity engaged in extra-constitutional conflict, oriented toward specific goals or objectives that may be narrow or broadly aimed at comprehensive change. According to Paul Wilkinson, two fundamental elements are crucial for a social movement: a certain level of organization and a commitment to change (Shah, 2002). Social movements emerge when social conditions lead to dissatisfaction with the current system. Individuals join these movements for a myriad of reasons, including idealism, compassion, political motivations, and even neurotic frustration. There are primarily three competing theories that explain the origins of social movements: Relative Deprivation theory, Strain theory, and the theory of Revitalization (Rao, 1978).

"Relative Deprivation" is a concept introduced by Stauffer in 1949. It suggests that individuals feel deprived based on the difference between their expectations and their actual experiences. For instance, a person who desires little and has little will feel less deprived than someone who has much but expects even more. A key point made by theorists of relative deprivation is that simply being in a state of relative deprivation does not automatically lead to social movement. The structural conditions surrounding relative deprivation are essential. Sufficient conditions arise from how individuals perceive their situation and the belief among leaders that they can take action to improve it, as noted by Rao in 1978. Neil Smelser's Strain Theory, proposed in 1962, posits that structural strains are fundamental factors driving collective behavior. These strains can manifest at various levels, including norms, values, and social mobility. Smelser's examination of social movement origins fits within a structural functional framework, viewing strain as a threat to the relationships within a system, potentially leading to its dysfunction. This theory also emphasizes feelings of deprivation. Both Relative Deprivation and Strain Theory suggest that social movements typically emerge from negative circumstances like deprivation and strain. In contrast, Wallace, who advocated for the theory of Cultural Revitalization, argues that social movements arise from a conscious and organized effort by society's members to create a more fulfilling culture. This perspective indicates that adaptive processes are used to achieve a balanced situation. These movements can be seen as a double-edged sword; they not only voice dissatisfaction and protest against current conditions but also propose constructive actions to address the issues at hand, as highlighted by Rao in 1978.

Identity movements, a recent development in social movements, vary in nature. These movements primarily consist of collective actions aimed at advocating for the interests and rights of specific groups who feel marginalized, as well as seeking symbolic recognition from others. This paper will explore the concept of identity, outline the characteristics of identity movements, and discuss their impacts on Indian states.

Identity Movements:

The identity movements that emerged in the twentieth century are quite distinct, as they represent two complementary types of collective demands: (a) the defense of the interests of individuals who feel

discriminated against, and (b) the quest for symbolic recognition from a significant other. These movements have three main and very distinctive objectives. First, they highlight injustices faced by minorities. Second, they emphasize the importance of considering specific cultures when developing public policies to address the unique needs of these groups. Third, they seek greater control over their institutions, with some advocating for self-government (Smelser, 2001). T. K. Oommen, in his edited volume 'Social Movements I – Issues of Identity', argues that none of the founding fathers—Durkheim, Weber, and Marx—offered clear and concise theories of social movements or collective actions. However, it is clear to a discerning observer that their early explanations of collective actions are deeply embedded in their analyses of society. Scholars in the fields of social science and humanities today refer to their contributions as foundational to the theory of collective action. Emile Durkheim lived in a European society marked by disintegrating social life, discontented individuals, and widespread conflict. His key concepts of collective conscience and collective representation underpin the notion of collective action; without the former, collective action cannot begin, and without the latter, the changes that occur cannot be effectively communicated. Durkheim first introduced a theory of collective action and social change in his work "The Division of Labour in Society" (1883). Later, in "Elementary Forms of Religious Life" (1915), he examined the types of solidarity that foster, ritualize, and legitimize forms of collective action. He depicts a society caught in a constant struggle between disintegrating forces (rapid differentiation) and integrating forces (new and renewed commitments to shared beliefs).

Identity Movements and India Politics

The post independent India (1947-48) witnessed the country to get divided into two nations based on religious ground- India and Pakistan. The country after independence was faced with the vital problem of arranging the boundaries of Indian states which are divided on several groups- religious, caste, ethnicities, cultural, regional and linguistic ground. The major task of the newly formed government was to maintain the unity and integrity of a country which was divided into numerous ethno-cultural and linguistic groups. The post independent era the first census in 1951 listed 782 mother tongues and in 1961 it increased to 1,652. The number decreased to 1,019 in 1971, and again increased to 1,576 in 1991(*Oommen, nd. www.sciencedirect.com*). Under such culturally and linguistically differentiated society the major task of the newly independent India was to alleviate and contain ethno-cultural conflicts and problems. The major objective of a country at that time was to promote rapid and balanced economic growth with equity and justice. In spite of the best effort of the government of India the growth and development of different regions were hardly balanced. This led among the different groups or communities a feeling of deprivation which in turn took the form of protests and movements. Today after sixty six years of independent, India finds itself living in a midst of widespread unrest and disturbances. It has faced communal riots and a hardening of religion-based affiliation among some of the minorities- like, it has witnessed class/caste based movements for the protection and reservation, to mention other such movements as worker's movements, farmers'/peasants' movement has characterises the present Indian states. The most important of all has been the serious secessionist movement in part of the country.

Although the various movements in these states present a complex and diverse picture, in terms of their goals and aims, ideology and methodology, most, if not all, possess one similarity – the recognition of their distinct ethnic identities. These movements are generally for the demand of granting collective rights and privileges for the protection and recognition of group or community based on their distinct *identity*

(ethnicity, caste, cultural, linguistic, regional etc.), sometimes through the creation of separate state within Indian union.

Given the nature of Indian states characterise by the presence of the populations divided into numerous ethno-cultural groups and communities, it is obvious that India after independent is left with huge and a serious task of maintaining and sustaining its unity and integrity. One of the outcomes of such diversity is the rising socio-political movement in different corner of the country. Presence of such movements has its impact on whole of Indian politics ranging from the drafting of the Indian constitution to the rise of regional political parties.

India's choice of development model after independence was also aimed to contain and mitigate ethnic problems and conflicts. The model was based —upon a system of indicative plans within a mixed economic structure in which both private capital and a state-owned public sector played a major role (*Currie, 1996*). The major objective of the model was to —promote rapid and balanced economic growth with equity and justice (*Dandekar, 1988)*. This commitment to social welfare accorded a significant role to the Indian centre in the socio-economic development of ethnic communities and allowed it to directly regulate both politics and economy in India. In practice, however, development of different ethnic groups and regions of the country was hardly balanced, thereby raising feelings of relative deprivation across communities and provinces.

In 1950s, in order to strengthen and to accept the demand of ethno-cultural and regional identities the administrative reorganization of the Indian state was resorted. In 1953, State Reorganisation Commission was established, which led to the enactment of the State Reorganisation Act of 1956. The Act created 14 new states and 5 Union Territories. The creation of new states in 1956, could not solve the problem of ethno cultural conflicts, rather, it was followed by numerous movements for separate statehood based on ethno-cultural, regional and linguistic ground. The Indian state was again faced with the threat to the existence of democracy. As a result in 1960, the Bombay Reorganisation Act was passed creating Maharashtra and Gujarat on linguistic ground. In 1962, Nagaland was created out of Assam. In 1966, Haryana was created by dividing Punjab. In North East region three states were created Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura in 1971. However the demand for new state on the basis of their distinct ethnic *identity* could not stop there. There are still movements in different parts of the country demanding separate state based on their distinct *identity*.

The politics of reservation in Indian states that has captured a major attention among the leaders of political parties and the academicians is nothing but the result of *identity* politics. In pursuance of the Commitment to social, economic and political justice, as enumerated in the Preamble to the constitution, an intricate system of quotas and reservations in various sectors, especially in educational institutions, government employment, and representation in legislatures, has emerged over the years to promote a more inclusive society. At the first place, the Indian constitution recognise two groups- schedule caste and schedule tribe keeping in view that these group of people are historically deprived of their rights and privileges. India since independent has set aside a reserved seats in the parliament for this historically backward people-schedule caste and schedule tribe. The policy of 'positive discrimination' has not only brought a major debate on the reservation issue in India on these historically backwards. But it has also highlighted the idea of OBC (other backward community). Such policies have at times generated political tensions within states, mainly because more group seek entry into categories that confer advantages of positive discrimination.

Conclusion

Despite the efforts of Indian leaders to establish institutions and processes that address identity aspirations and demands fairly, ethnic conflicts have frequently arisen in India. The administrative reorganization of the Indian state in the 1950s reinforced ethno-linguistic and regional identities by responding to calls for new states based on broad ethno-linguistic criteria. These demands had been expressed prior to independence but were never acted upon by the British, who feared they would fuel ethno-nationalist sentiments. For instance, the residents of the Darjeeling hill areas have long sought a separate state of Gorkhaland outside West Bengal. Similarly, the Kamtapur movement by the Rajbonshi community in Cooch Behar has a rich history, as do the Bodoland movement in Assam, the Telangana movement in Andhra Pradesh, the push for the creation of Vidarbha in Maharashtra, and the demand for a separate Jammu state, all of which pose significant challenges to the unity of India.

These movements are not only noticed for their insurgence activities but have been able to lobby their cause effectively and therefore playing an important role in bringing change and influencing the politics of Indian states, both at regional and national level. However, even though these movements have not affected the Indian pluralism to a substantial extent, they have made their impact felt and to be reckoned with. The provision/provisions as underlined in the Indian constitution have made a fair deal to counter the claims of such groups, such as- the Fifth and Sixth Schedule of the constitution stands for special administrative structures at district levels, Article 370 a special arrangement for the state of Jammu and Kashmir by providing separate constitution, Articles like 371A, 371F and 371G, provides for special privileges for the North East states of Nagaland, Sikkim and Mizoram. Apart from these, there are provisions in the constitution for the creation of new states on the ground of distinct group identity within the Indian union.

These movements are recognized not just for their insurgent activities but also for their effective lobbying efforts, which play a significant role in driving change and influencing politics in Indian states at both regional and national levels. While these movements have not substantially impacted Indian pluralism, their influence is certainly felt and cannot be ignored. The provisions outlined in the Indian constitution have made considerable efforts to address the claims of such groups. For instance, the Fifth and Sixth Schedule of the constitution establishes special administrative structures at the district level, while Article 370 provides a unique arrangement for Jammu and Kashmir with its own constitution. Additionally, Articles 371A, 371F, and 371G grant special privileges to the northeastern states of Nagaland, Sikkim, and Mizoram. Furthermore, the constitution includes provisions for the creation of new states based on distinct group identities within the Indian union.

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