

# Social movements in India

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India

The study of social movements has changed the disciplinary orientation of the social sciences in India. The present volume is a comprehensive introduction to the field, and to debates among political scientists, historians, anthropologists and sociologists.

By Manish K. Thakur

While *Social Movements in India* is a by-product of the Indian Council of Social Science Research's survey of the literature in political science, it is not confined to the works of political scientists. Within its scope are studies on social movements since the establishment of the British Raj.

Besides the introduction and 'conclusions and future research', the volume contains nine chapters focusing on peasant, tribal, Dalit, backward caste/class, women's, industrial working class, students', middle class, and human rights and environmental movements. The introduction traces the genesis of social movement studies over the past three decades in relation to the trajectories of social science disciplines in India. It also touches upon the problematic of 'old' and 'new' movements, though very briefly, as 'this monograph is a review of literature and not a research study and analysis of social movements in India' (p. 18).

## A late entrant

The author is quite right in asserting that social movement studies crystallised on the Indian academic scene with the emergence of the new sub-

discipline of political sociology. Shah is candid in his admission that political science has been a late entrant to the field, as that it has concentrated more on the 'inner conflicts of power elites' (p. 12) than on conflicts between elites and masses. The author at times goes too far in his enthusiastic contextualisation of movement studies. For example, he blames Indian scholars' indifference to various movements to explain the near absence of social movements literature in the first few decades after independence: 'The Indian scholars who approved of the agitations for independence from foreign rule, did not approve of agitations in the post-independence period' (p. 25).

The chapters on the Dalit, women's and student movements are particularly interesting. Quoting Gail Omvedt, Shah concludes on the Dalit movements: 'The "post-Ambedkar Dalit movement" was ironically only that in the end – a movement of Dalits, challenging some of the deepest aspects of oppression and exploitation, but failing to show the way to transformation' (p. 131). Likewise, Shah invokes Epstein to characterise contemporary women's movements in India as 'more an idea than a movement' (p. 170). His comments on the

diminishing scholarly interest in student movements are particularly apt: 'since the mid-1980s, as student movements are almost absent in the university campuses, the interest of social scientists in the area is also waning' (p. 217). In addressing middle class movements, Shah questions why nativist movements emerge and sustain themselves in certain states of the Indian Union and not others.

## Missing theory

In his concluding note, Shah underlines the dearth of theoretical studies on social movements in India. Indian scholars' attempts to theorise social movements have, in fact, never moved beyond typologies and classifications. The typologies offered remain too problematic to be theoretically useful. The definition of concepts, too, lacks rigour and precision. No wonder, as one witnesses in the literature the interchangeable use of 'movement', 'agitation', 'revolution', 'protest', 'social movement' and 'political movement'. Another grey area concerns methodological issues of data collection and the scale and level of observation and analysis. With the growing popularity and consolidation of the field, a formulaic treatment of social movements is discernable among the studies – certain

movements get designated mass movements on the predilections of individual researchers.

Shah has pointedly brought out the unevenness of content in the existing literature. Peasant movements, for example, have attracted much scholarly attention whereas work on working class movements lags behind. The coverage of regions also varies – peasant movements in Orissa, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh have not been adequately studied. Similarly, tribal movements in the Northeastern states, Rajasthan and Orissa have received less scholarly attention. Movements of agricultural labourers, fishermen and forest workers have yet to be systematically studied by social scientists.

Given its extensive coverage of the field, the present volume offers a dependable point of entry for undergraduates and a resource for specialists interested in reviewing critical debates without scurrying for disparate works in the field. Besides being a valuable bibliographic guide to an unwieldy field, its brevity of presentation and lucidity of style make it an ideal textbook for graduate students.

However, one is surprised to find so many proof-reading errors in an otherwise competent review of the literature:

Chakravarti becomes Chakravarthi (p. 78), Atis Dasgupta becomes Arts Dasgupta (p. 79), Henningham's 1979 paper appears in volume 16 of IESHR whereas his 1981 reference is in volume 13 of the same journal (p. 82), Mandal becomes Mandalb (p. 84), M.N. Karna becomes M.L. Karna (p.88 & p.179), S.K. Chaube becomes S.C. Chaube (p.110), 'and political' appears twice in the title against the editor's own 1975 reference (p. 145), CPI becomes CIP (p.160), and finally prawn becomes pawn (p. 257). On page 180 'modern powered industries ...in the mid-1950s of the nineteenth century', the opening sentence of Chapter 7, thoroughly confuses the reader. Surely, the production team at Sage have got to be more careful. ◀

Shah, Ghanshyam, 2004. *Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature* (Second and Enlarged Edition). New Delhi: Sage Publications; Pp. 281, Rs. 550, ISBN 0-7619-9833-0 (hard cover).

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