

Protests, Mass-Movements and Politicised Identities: A Relook at Social Conflicts in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

In recent years India has been witnessing an upsurge of conflicts over myriad issues such as displacement related to development projects, legislative changes, claim over natural resources, environmental issues and the like. Though each conflict situation is unique and demands a detailed research exploration in its own right, the need for evolving a paradigm based on underlying commonalities and basic principles cannot be denied. Such a framework would facilitate not only the researchers, but also the policymakers, and has the potential to create pathways for conflict containment and resolution. Even a cursory perusal of the underlying dynamics of most conflicts at local, national or international levels indicates a contestation over limited resources that eventually transforms into contestations for power and identity. Many such conflicts often appear to undermine national security and are often construed as 'anti-development', 'anti-establishment' or even 'anti-state'. The present paper posits that it is important to reveal the subtler processes of negotiation in a conflict situation, to understand conflict as a co-constructed social reality and to highlight the reciprocal impact made by the dynamics of such constructions on identities of the parties involved. Along with examining the role of identity dynamics in perpetuating conflicts, the paper argues for incorporating both identity and instrumental pathways in theorizing conflicts. Emphasising upon the role played by politicisation of identities in conflict situations, the paper proposes a theoretical model for deconstructing conflicts and working towards conflict resolution.

Keywords: Protest; Conflicts; Politicised identities

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a lack of consensus on the meaning of conflict¹, however, a working definition as provided by Coser² serves as a starting point for the present purpose. Coser defines social conflict as "a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals." (P. 8). It is helpful to accept the definition as it acknowledges not only the context of a struggle for scarce resources but also the struggle for power that arises out of the hegemony of certain groups that undermine alternative perspectives and resistance of the adversely affected groups. It defines the conflict, not as a confrontation of oppositional forces, rather as a multi-level, multi-dimensional interaction of varied discourses, created by these actors that constantly draw and redraw the contours of conflict. Such a wide definition of social conflict allows for including varied contestations under the umbrella term of 'conflict', including short term localised protests on one hand, to widespread long-duration movements for social and political change on the other. A research study undertaken to understand a conflict thus needs to define the field of research dynamically, tapping and deconstructing the range of discourses generated by varied parties involved at multiple levels and all such spaces that provide for interactions of all such discourses. Simultaneously,

any comprehensive understanding of social conflict must also take notice of the negotiations amidst the various stakeholders involved in the conflict, and the ensuing transformations of their identity that constantly changes the dynamics of conflict.

2. PROTESTS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Social movements are a means to an end³. An understanding of the social movements at any moment in history facilitates an understanding of the agency, action, intention and subjectivity prevalent in the given period. In this sense, social movements act as mirrors that have the potential to reflect the prevalent social processes. The research literature on social movements provides multiple lenses for understanding social movements. Various typologies and process views have been utilized for explicating social movements. Aberle⁴ for example, describes four types of social movements based upon the interaction of two dimensions- a) who does the movement attempt to change? and b) what is the extent of change desired. Similarly, Oomen⁵ has attempted to classify the social movements based upon their ideological component and their perceived legitimacy. Some scholars⁶ have commented upon a general dearth of theoretical studies on social movements in India. The insufficiency of typologies and categorizations has often been perceived by scholars as providing an insufficient tool for fully understanding their inherent dynamics. Movements have often been classified as old social movements and new social

movements, or social and political movements. It is convenient to classify the ‘new’ movements concerning issues of caste, gender, community, ethnicity and identity as opposed to the ‘old’ movements that had their concern with ‘class struggle’ and power over means of production⁷, however, the overlap between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ paradigms has been significant in the Indian context. Guha⁸, for example, comments upon the overlap of ‘green’ (environment centred) and ‘red’ (livelihood centred) movements in India and emphasises upon the insistent combining of red and green politics. Another classification distinguishing social movements from the political has also been contested. Scholars⁶ have emphasised the need to recognize the political implications of all movements even if their members do not strive for political power⁹. Referring to authors like Andre Gunder Frank and Marta Fuentes¹⁰ who demarcate ‘new’ movements as social and not political, Shah⁶ raises the problematic issue inherent in such a categorization that glosses over the contemporary reality of complex political processes and depoliticises the social realm. It is therefore essential to acknowledge the inherent political processes in mass mobilisations and construe such mass movements for their social as well as political impact. As Shah⁶ conveys it, “Any collective endeavour, we believe, to bring about social transformation—change in the labour and property relationship—and to struggle for justice, and rights, involves capturing or influencing political authority, though it may not be on the immediate agenda.” (P. 23). Acknowledging the political inherent within the social facilitates in deriving an expanded analytical framework that goes beyond the apparent dichotomies of ‘old and new’ or social and political movements. Evolving such a broader analytical framework also makes it possible to look beyond the given identity categories and conceptualise identity as a process that evolves and is transformed through participation in collective mobilisations. As Das¹¹ emphasises, it is through the protest movements that the community arises as a political actor and initiates the process of politicisation of identities that in turn have the potential to change the nature of political democracy. Accepting the dual pathways (identity and instrumental) to mass movement participation provides a heuristic model towards achieving this understanding as it creates grounds for bridging the gap between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’, acknowledges the power struggles inherent within identity dynamics and unearths the inherently political nature of all mass mobilisations. The collective identity framework provides a potent analytical lens in this regard.

3. IDENTITY DYNAMICS IN A CONFLICT ENVIRONMENT

The role played by identity processes in protest dynamics has been acknowledged by scholars¹². Identity along with instrumentality and ideology form the three core reasons why people participate in political protest¹³. People’s decision to participate or not participate in protest does not only stem from the motive to express their opinions and beliefs (ideological motive) or from the motive to change the unfavourable circumstances (instrumental motive), but also predominantly to act and be included as a member of their group (identity motive). Identity is socially rooted as it describes a place in

society, and people occupy different places simultaneously. Situations of protest and conflict emphasise certain identities and divide the community by making collective identities salient over personal identities. As people engage in political struggle on behalf of the group the collective identity politicizes, increasing the group members’ willingness to¹⁴ “engage, as a mindful and self-conscious collective (or as a representative thereof), in ...a power struggle knowing that it is the wider, more inclusive societal context in which this struggle takes place and needs to be orchestrated accordingly” (P. 323). It becomes essential, hence to explore the socio-historical roots of identity for gaining a deeper understanding of protest and conflict.

Identities emerge and are consolidated in the process of interactions with significant others in the social space. Social and political conflicts create and shape opportunities for such interactions through which identities are negotiated and morphed. Conflict is not only defined by opposition and protest, but also by negotiations at multiple levels. The interactive spaces thus created provide opportunities for negotiating outcomes and in the process generate and expedite negotiation of identities. The constant flux of stability and change that marks conflict environments is also reflected in the dynamics of interaction among various parties involved in a conflict, with normative expectations regarding status, role and position from each side affecting the other. Thus, the identities remain in constant flux, especially with the power wielded by one party over the other for creating and emphasising a specific identity over all others. An understanding of the power dynamics and the negotiated nature of identities thus becomes imperative for explaining conflict.

3.1 Conflict and Collective Identity

Collective identity is a term used to denote the identity of a person as a member of a group. Collective identity denotes a socially relevant dimension shared with other people in an inclusive manner¹⁵. Though emanating from the subjective sense of belonging to a group or groups, identity is generally anchored in objective features, such as territory, language, history and culture¹⁶. As opposed to social identity which is construed as static and given, the notion of collective identity denotes a dynamic and evolving sense of identity in situations of social contestations and conflicts. At a given point in time, there is a choice of collective identities available to an individual, and which one of these gains salience depends on which group membership moves into psychological foreground structured by an interplay of personal variables and societal context.

Conflict situations embedded in a social context involve protagonists acting not as individuals but as members of specific social groups involved in power struggles for gaining control in wider socio-political arenas often involving and impacting third parties or general public¹⁴. Engagement in power struggles as self-conscious members on behalf of their group results in specific collective identities gaining salience for individual members. Conflict situations are marked by constant struggle and contestations for power by social groups and entail a struggle for gaining control over one’s own fate as well as that of the other groups functioning in the given social

context¹⁷. Collective identities are emergent in response to the dynamics of struggle and are constantly shaped and reshaped through the push and pull of such power struggles, at the same time conscious motivations of the group members to engage in such power struggles leads to the politicization of the given collective identity. Evolution of politicised collective identities depends on members of a group intentionally engaging as a mindful and self-conscious collective in a power struggle intending not only to modify the behaviour of an antagonist group but also with a recognized need to influence the wider social context and restructure opinions in its favour.

Feeling aggrieved as a group is a necessary first step for people to engage in power struggles on behalf of their group and thus a necessary step towards politicized collective identity¹⁴. Shared grievances take different forms, including illegitimate inequality, suddenly imposed grievances, violated principles, and threatened privileges¹³. Collective identity facilitates the perception of such grievances or adverse life conditions as affecting one's own group and putting it at a disadvantage. At the same time, in a reciprocal process, such perceptions of selective disadvantage foster and strengthen the collective identity. Social movements are built upon such perceptions of shared grievances and these are often conceptualized as a necessary condition for constituent mobilization. Grievances can also be conceptualized as a general cover term for underlying indignations, resentment and a sense of being wronged¹⁸, and the emergence and progression of a particular social mobilization are mediated by the level of efficiency with which the leaders succeed in articulating these grievances and utilize these for fostering a sense of collectivity among the aggrieved people. A concomitant process that leads to the politicization of the group is adversarial attributions that involve blaming an opponent, enemy, authority figure or the system for the predicament faced by the group¹⁹⁻²⁰. Adversarial attributions are crucial for the politicization of a social group and turn it into a social movement. Various means might be used for the purpose.

Another crucial precondition for the emergence and consolidation of politicized collective identities is the expansion of a bi-party conflict through the involvement of larger society by triangulation¹⁴. Any social movement, protest or a confrontation group is formed and exists within the larger socio-political context. The politicization of a movement gets consolidated when the confrontation transcends the boundaries of the groups engaged in an immediate confrontation, moves beyond seeking immediate gratification of demands or attempting to influence the antagonistic other or the authority, and reaches out to the society at large for structuring its opinions in its favour, as a result converting a limited confrontation to a larger struggle for power within society. Various media are utilized for the purpose including protest literature, print media including newspapers, and bringing in social movement leaders as authority figures for influencing opinions.

3.2 Struggle for Power and Politicization of Identity

Politicization actively consolidates and intensifies collective identities. As a result of the politicization, two

important consequences occur- Meaning-making and Agency¹⁴. Meaning-making implies the process of sharpening of collective self-understanding by the group of its predicament and giving meaning to the common fate faced by group members in terms of a shared explanation or ideology. Such raised consciousness of shared grievances and progressively clear conceptualizations of who or what is responsible for the group's predicament reflects a cognitive elaboration of one's world view, providing the members of social movements with a perspective on the social world and helps delineate their place within it¹⁴. Recent research has also shown that internalization of politicized identity leads to qualitative changes in the self-concept²¹. Further, self-perceptions as members of a collective with clearer consciousness of purpose provides the members with a sense of agency that motivates them for participation in an active struggle for power and provides a sense of control over one's social environment. The process of consciousness-raising often involves intensified efforts by a few leaders or core members whose behaviour becomes normative. Leaders have been termed as 'entrepreneurs of identity'²² whose example is followed by the group members in order to verify and consolidate their own collective identity and who facilitate the politicization process. It is the leaders who provide the group members with a framework for interpreting the shared grievances, for identifying the external enemy and for defining the third party or the larger societal context which provides the nestling context for the protest movement.

4. CREATING ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES AND ACTION FRAMES

Not much research has focused on the psychological processes that mediate between collective action and collective action. One such proposition has been made by van Stekelenburg and Klandermans²³⁻²⁴. Identifying these basic mediating psychological mechanisms as social identity, cognition, emotion and motivation, they also emphasize that collective identities are dynamic and changing constantly, a major contributor in this process of change being participation in collective action. Trying to explain the antecedents of collective action Simon and colleagues²⁵ suggest that there are dual pathways to social movement participation- the identity pathway and the instrumental pathway. The instrumental pathway is based on a rational analysis of cost and benefits of participation, and the identity pathway is facilitated by the process and strength of identification

Identity has been accepted within social sciences as an important lens of analysis for political behaviour²⁶. However, the identity of a people does not provide a sufficient explanation in itself for collective action. Choup²⁷ discusses how specific histories of a people combine with collective identity to create collective action frames, and explains how these collective action frames are utilised for initiating collective action and for structuring interaction with the state. Collective action frames are tools created by the movement leaders to redefine the existing reality and to provide a new cognitive understanding for the individuals who feel stuck in disadvantaged situations²⁸. Collective action frames change the discourse on the contentious issues by redefining the variables involved and realigning

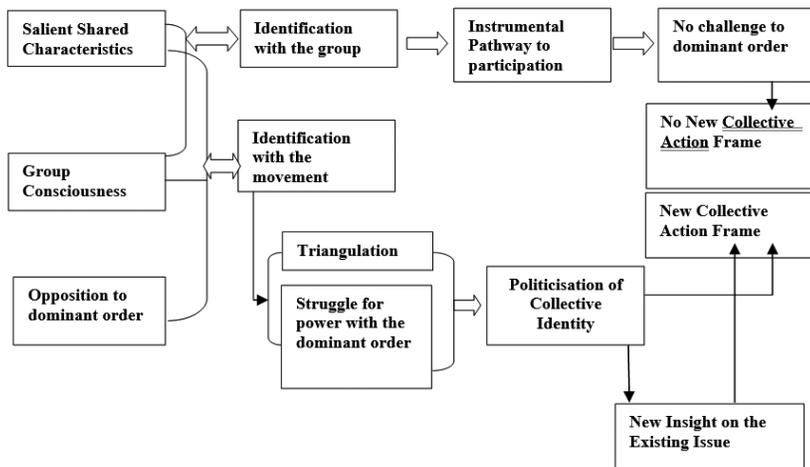


Figure 1. A framework for emergence of new collective action frames.

these with the broader framework of justice being sought by the social movement. In a manner, these action frames bring together the identity and instrumental pathways and thus facilitate participation. This gains importance especially in the context where, besides the obvious tangible material goals the social movement strives to attain subtle and broader goals related to social justice, and for the purpose evokes and makes use of collective identities.

Combining the insights about emerging collective action frames in accordance with Chouh's²⁷ conceptualisation, and the two different pathways to collective action, a theoretical framework can be proposed for understanding the emergence of protest movements. The framework provides an appropriate structure within which the processes of emergence of collective identities, as well as the instrumental action propensities of the groups, find an explanation. The framework also helps override the constraints placed by the superficial dichotomy of 'old' and 'new' movements and recognises the 'political' within the 'social'. Using this lens, any conflict situations can be portrayed through the following figure.

As demonstrated by the following figure, there are three preconditions for the emergence of collective identity-

- Awareness of salient shared characteristics,
- Group Consciousness, and
- Opposition to the dominant order.

The people involved in a protest may share certain common characteristics and commonality of goals. Such shared characteristics result in feelings of solidarity. Their shared characteristics may also be made salient by the protest discourse prevalent in the area about contentious issues. The group consciousness is further enhanced by an invocation of common history and is made salient through contrast with an inimical other, other group or the government. Identification with the collective may further be strengthened by the invocation of the connection with the ideology of 'new social movements', that generates a discourse about larger social issues and civil concerns.

The collective identity emerges in response to the preconditions and is strengthened in proportion to the degree of invocation of the preconditions. Awareness of shared

characteristics and group consciousness lead to identification with the social group but it is acceptance of adversarial attribution (holding the other responsible for all difficulties faced by oneself) and determination to oppose the dominant order that leads one to identify with the protest movement. Identification with the larger social group leads to a weaker identity pathway to protest participation than instrumental decisions based on cost-benefit analysis of participation. Participation based on cost-benefit analysis does not seek to challenge the dominant order, rather focuses on rationally gaining maximum benefits. Though the protest movement draws its strength from the larger group, its identification with the collective is transformed as it is mediated by focusing not only on gaining immediate goals but challenges the

dominant order seeking larger change. In the process it engages in a power struggle with the dominant order (eg. the government or the policy-makers) by way of challenging the legitimacy of its orders and decisions, countering the legitimacy creating ideologies and by engaging in assertive action by preventing implementation of government orders. A parallel process of involving the third party (general public or the courts of law) brings in triangulation in the face-off between the protesters and the government. The protest movement facilitates and is in turn facilitated by the processes of power struggle and triangulation that lead to the emergence of politicized collective identities. The process of politicization leads to the emergence of new collective action frames that create solidarity with the larger protest discourse and provide platforms for negotiations with the government for equitable justice. A mediatory pathway is created by the processes of politicisation that generates new perspectives on the existing issues. Alternative perceptions and identities emerge that facilitate self-perception as an empowered collective that is strong enough to bridge the power distance created by the government and creates possibilities of change in the existing power arrangements.

5. CONCLUSIONS

A major aim of any social research is to find social utility. Conceptualization and theorization are of no use if these fail to provide helpful insights for ameliorating and resolving conflicts. Certain pointers may be provided in this vein.

Identity has been accepted as an important tool of analysis for political behaviour²⁶, and a study that provides insights into the roots of identities in a conflict area is useful for structuring policies in a manner that would make them more acceptable to the local populations. Identity is a compelling concept for theorizing conflict²⁹, however, the relationship between identity and conflict is complex and nuanced. It is convenient to accept the identity categories as given and static, continuous across time and persons, yet the social constructionist perspective that conceptualizes identities as fluid, transient and situation based creates possibilities for resolution of long-standing conflicts by accepting negotiable nature of identities. It has been emphasised that the way local leaders utilise the specific aspects of local histories to construct localised identities can provide important

insights to the non-local government agencies for designing policy interventions that are likely to have a better acceptance of the people²⁷. However, the discourse perpetuated by protest movements that promotes an adversarial relationship with the government agencies, if not accompanied by a new and useful insight on the problematic issues only serves to perpetuate the conflict. The antagonistic perceptions and communications thus generated in a vicious cycle can only be broken by breaking the identity stereotypes. It is important to break the cyclic process of 'othering' that operates on both sides of the conflict, for any possibilities of negotiated outcomes to emerge.

Though identities are often experienced and expressed as rigid and non-negotiable by the group or the collective, or are imposed as rigid categorizations by the dominant order, an unquestioned acceptance of these given categories as research categories defeats the purpose of research. Acceptance of fluidity and malleability of identities also allows and recognizes differences within the collective despite a subjective and objective experience of solidarity with the collective based on group consciousness and shared ideologies. Internal divisions and differences within the collective are acknowledged and theorized questioning the assumed or imposed categorizations. In the context of a nascent social movement, acknowledging the identity process that underlies apparent categorizations becomes important as it provides a key to understanding the dual negotiations not only for desired outcomes but also for desired identities.

A major advantage of recognising and acknowledging the identity negotiations in a conflict situation is that it has the potential to lead towards probable solutions to a conflict. In order to gain a nuanced understanding of a conflict, it is preferable to conceptualise identity both as a process and a product³⁰. Examining the processes through which identities are created and transformed from soft and flexible to rigid unchangeable categories provides for identifying possibilities of intervention for resolving conflict issues. Conceptualising identities as products allows for an understanding of identity transformations during conflicts. An analysis of conflict using identity dynamics needs to be careful of reproducing and reinforcing particular conceptualizations of identity, questioning the categories adopted for analysis and allowing for variations in identity experiences and expressions, and recognizing the underlying projects that benefit by creating specific identity categories.

Further, for achieving any resolution to a conflict, it is important to acknowledge both the identity pathway as well as the instrumental pathway to protest and also the interaction between the two. It is important to provide alternative action frames leading towards new insights into a given situation and bringing in constructive change for containing conflicts and ensuring peaceful pathways to social-political action.

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