



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN THE
HISTORY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social Movements, Media and Civil Society in Contemporary India

Historical Trajectories of Public Protest
and Political Mobilisation

Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha
Manas Dutta
Tirthankar Ghosh

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Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements

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Around the world, social movements have become legitimate, yet contested, actors in local, national and global politics and civil society, yet we still know relatively little about their longer histories and the trajectories of their development. This series seeks to promote innovative historical research on the history of social movements in the modern period since around 1750. We bring together conceptually-informed studies that analyse labour movements, new social movements and other forms of protest from early modernity to the present. We conceive of 'social movements' in the broadest possible sense, encompassing social formations that lie between formal organisations and mere protest events. We also offer a home for studies that systematically explore the political, social, economic and cultural conditions in which social movements can emerge. We are especially interested in transnational and global perspectives on the history of social movements, and in studies that engage critically and creatively with political, social and sociological theories in order to make historically grounded arguments about social movements. This new series seeks to offer innovative historical work on social movements, while also helping to historicise the concept of 'social movement'. It hopes to revitalise the conversation between historians and historical sociologists in analysing what Charles Tilly has called the 'dynamics of contention'.

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For
Manika Purakayastha
Smriti Rekha Dutta
Manika Ghosh

SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Around the world, social movements have become legitimate, yet contested, actors in local, national and global politics and civil society, yet we still know relatively little about their longer histories and the trajectories of their development. Our series reacts to what can be described as a recent boom in the history of social movements. We can observe a development from the crisis of labour history in the 1980s to the boom in research on social movements in the 2000s. The rise of historical interests in the development of civil society and the role of strong civil societies as well as non-governmental organizations in stabilizing democratically constituted polities has strengthened the interest in social movements as a constituent element of civil societies.

In different parts of the world, social movements continue to have a strong influence on contemporary politics. In Latin America, trade unions, labour parties and various left-of-centre civil society organizations have succeeded in supporting left-of-centre governments. In Europe, peace movements, ecological movements and alliances intent on campaigning against poverty and racial discrimination and discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation have been able to set important political agendas for decades. In other parts of the world, including Africa, India and South East Asia, social movements have played a significant role in various forms of community building and community politics. The contemporary political relevance of social movements has undoubtedly contributed to a growing historical interest in the topic.

Contemporary historians are not only beginning to historicize these relatively recent political developments; they are also trying to relate them to a longer history of social movements, including traditional labour organizations, such as working-class parties and trade unions. In the *longue durée*, we recognize that social movements are by no means a recent phenomenon and are not even an exclusively modern phenomenon, although we realize that the onset of modernity emanating from Europe and North America across the wider world from the eighteenth century onwards marks an important departure point for the development of civil societies and social movements.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the dominance of national history over all other forms of history writing led to a thorough nationalization of the historical sciences. Hence social movements have been examined traditionally within the framework of the nation state. Only during the last two decades have historians begun to question the validity of such methodological nationalism and to explore the development of social movements in comparative, connective and transnational perspective taking into account processes of transfer, reception and adaptation. Whilst our book series does not preclude work that is still being carried out within national frameworks (for, clearly, there is a place for such studies, given the historical importance of the nation state in history), it hopes to encourage comparative and transnational histories on social movements.

At the same time as historians have begun to research the history of those movements, a range of social theorists, from Jürgen Habermas to Pierre Bourdieu and from Slavoj Žižek to Alain Badiou as well as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to Miguel Abensour, to name but a few, have attempted to provide philosophical-cum-theoretical frameworks in which to place and contextualize the development of social movements. History has arguably been the most empirical of all the social and human sciences, but it will be necessary for historians to explore further to what extent these social theories can be helpful in guiding and framing the empirical work of the historian in making sense of the historical development of social movements. Hence the current series is also hoping to make a contribution to the ongoing dialogue between social theory and the history of social movements.

This series seeks to promote innovative historical research on the history of social movements in the modern period since around 1750. We bring together conceptually informed studies that analyse labour movements, new social movements and other forms of protest from early

modernity to the present. With this series, we seek to revive, within the context of historiographical developments since the 1970s, a conversation between historians on the one hand and sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists on the other.

Unlike most of the concepts and theories developed by social scientists, we do not see social movements as directly linked, a priori, to processes of social and cultural change and therefore do not adhere to a view that distinguishes between old (labour) and new (middle-class) social movements. Instead, we want to establish the concept 'social movement' as a heuristic device that allows historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to investigate social and political protests in novel settings. Our aim is to historicize notions of social and political activism in order to highlight different notions of political and social protest on both left and right.

Hence, we conceive of 'social movements' in the broadest possible sense, encompassing social formations that lie between formal organizations and mere protest events. But we also include processes of social and cultural change more generally in our understanding of social movements: this goes back to nineteenth-century understandings of 'social movement' as processes of social and cultural change more generally. We also offer a home for studies that systematically explore the political, social, economic and cultural conditions in which social movements can emerge. We are especially interested in transnational and global perspectives on the history of social movements, and in studies that engage critically and creatively with political, social and sociological theories in order to make historically grounded arguments about social movements. In short, this series seeks to offer innovative historical work on social movements, while also helping to historicize the concept of 'social movement'. It also hopes to revitalize the conversation between historians and historical sociologists in analysing what Charles Tilly has called the 'dynamics of contention'.

Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha, Manas Dutta and Tirthankar Ghosh's *Social Movements, Media and Civil Society in Contemporary India—Historical Trajectories of Public Protest and Political Mobilisation* adopts what the authors call a 'historicist hermeneutics'. They explore how contemporary Indian protest movements are both linked to historical 'repertoires of contention' (Charles Tilly), but also represent new imaginaries of democratic mobilization that are framed in the context of digital social media. In short, this book is an attempt to connect long-term structural histories with the eventfulness of contemporary protests.

The protests the authors analyse unfold in the context of a broadly neoliberal political economy that has taken shape in India since the late 1990s and that has led to a growing chasm between the subsistence economy of a growing group of very poor people and an increasingly affluent urban middle class. This constellation has influenced the Maoist insurgencies as well as recent mobilizations linked more directly to mainstream labour movement mobilizations. This neoliberal constellation has also grounded the new waves of protests against state infrastructure projects such as dams. Here, rural populations campaign not only against the growing influence of foreign companies in such infrastructure projects. They are fundamentally directed against the 'developmentalist' conception on which such projects are founded. In that sense, these are also protests for the internal decolonization of Indian politics and society.

These movements led to the opening-up of new protest spaces that form the backdrop of contemporary mobilizations: the medialization of these protests meant that politicians could no longer simply ignore these protests. This study shows a key dialectic underlying these processes of medialization: the protests have relied on digital social media whose growth was itself part of the neoliberal agenda in order to oppose that agenda. So, while social media platforms, SMS or WhatsApp as well as the constant discussion of Bollywood culture in and through those media were initially grounded in a purely commercial agenda, they also gave rise to the media culture that enabled contemporary protests to thrive. The protests against the sexual assault and murder of a college student in New Delhi in 2012 constituted the key turning point in that history. This book follows the protests since then and highlights the interaction between mobilization, digital media and public awareness against the backdrop of a longer history of protests in India.

This book's main contribution lies in two key aspects. First, the book provides a fascinating example of a theoretically informed way of writing the history of the present, one that highlights both the importance of specific mobilizations and protest events but that is nonetheless open to exploring long-term structural factors. Second, this volume invites us to see the Indian protest landscape over the last decades or so in the context of the growth of medialized movements after the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street within the neoliberal constellation.

Stefan Berger (Ruhr University Bochum) and Holger Nehring (University of Stirling)

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Asansol, October 2021

Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha
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Introduction: Past Dissidence and Contemporary Cyber-Publics—Popular Protests in India

This book examines different grounds of transformative dissent, turning points or shifts in popular mobilization patterns in India in the current conjuncture. In doing that, it also adopts a historical analysis of previously existing trends or traditional ‘elementary aspects’ (Guha, 1999) of public dissidence, practised in India since long. History of social and political unrest and insurrectionary trends in Indian society in precolonial, colonial and early postcolonial era are quite well documented, are already comprehensively examined and therefore do not warrant further recounting at length. We, therefore, forge a telescoped view of that long history, only to curve out major strands and core areas of popular dissent in India. This historical trajectory equips us to understand the current disjunctions and transformations impacting popular mobilization trends in India. We collate all the major historical threads in this domain before entering into the contemporary, locating in that way, different continuities and discontinuities in mobilizing patterns, dissident agency, emerging areas of dissidence and new organizing tools integrating with new temporalities.

We adopt a historicist hermeneutics to decode changing patterns and shifting ideologies and inter-connected imaginaries. Needless to say, that different historical periods in India witnessed heterogeneous insurrectional patterns of social mobilizations but in general, social churning in India

largely pivoted around issues of caste, class, religion, community identity, land-related rights, taxation and territorial control. The scenario got further compounded during the long colonial rule as years of British colonialism complicated the cultural, demographic and political economic systems of India through their policy of ‘divide and rule’ reinforced through their methodology of Orientalist coercion.

The genesis and prolonged evolution of anti-colonial movements during the colonial rule built the foundation of Indian nationalism, culminating in India’s freedom in 1947. Early postcolonial India throws up different historical moments of simmering discontents on democratic governmentality or on the failures of constitutional democracy as promised by the postcolonial state. Till the 1980s, social mobilizations in India generally deployed conventional methods of organized protests and by and large, the major issues that galvanized people together were issues of identity, labour rights, jobs, hunger and food rights, linguistic rights and land reform. Post-1990s, in the aftermath of liberalization, those traditional methods of organized labour movements continued with much vigour but newer templates of mobilization and fresh trends began to surface as with growing marketization and technological advancement, unprecedented changes in social relation, economic opportunities and cultural transfusion were witnessed. India’s advocacy for market economy fuelled the need for an unbridled march towards techno-capitalism, allowing consumer culture to thrive along with massive technologization of the public sphere. Cable Television, multiple news channels, phenomenal rise in mobile telephone use and comprehensive spread of Internet connections formed a ‘Brand New Nation’ of digital power and economic aspirations (Kaur, 2020).

This was a New India that however retained its abysmal record in poverty, malnutrition and political corruption, and yet looked for possible economic ascension through *laissez faire*—an aspiring prosperous India, globally connected and sustained by the rising middle class, a big market, entrepreneurship drive run by technocracy. This was the early phase of the *Info-nation* in the making, a public space shared by more than one hundred billion people, flooded with the allurements of free market economy, gadgetry and concomitant civil society activities. In a way, this was the beginning of a Networked-India, run by multiple ICT (Information and Communication Technology)-driven networks and cyber cafes, call centres and software boom. It was no longer the India that was content with its slow or ‘Hindu rate of growth’ in economic performance,

or what economists or political scientists described as India's initial image of a poor, developing country located in the Third World. The post-1999 New India aspired to be a global player and newer sectors were opened further for economic deregulation or direct foreign investment, resulting in relative economic advancement as well as fierce outburst of dissidence from the disenfranchised section or the underdogs who were unable to utilize the fruits of economic liberalization (Kohli, 2012; Kukreja, 2008; Shrivastava & Kothari, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012).

The clash between unbridled market-driven pursuits of accumulation economy and the 'need economy' or subsistence economy of the poor continued to afflict the political spectrum of India in the form of Maoist insurgency and class-based or labour-oriented mobilizations (Chakrabarti et al., 2015; Sanyal, 2007). Another major fallout of neoliberal policies were the unprecedented mobilizations against 'developmentalism', against government policy of sanctioning foreign companies to build big dams in India, evicting large indigenous populations in the process and plundering forests and rich natural resources (Werner, 2015). All these emergent dissident optics capitalized the newly formed civil society space, spearheaded by NGOs, civic activists and incredible media coverage. The early 2000 mediatized political campaign for face lift, described as 'India Shining' generated a lot of media hype and international marketizing advertisement. As this slogan of 'India Shining' reflects, this was an official policy of heightened simulacrum, an exercise in image manoeuvring and media hype to draw global attention for foreign investment. This had twofold effects, the middle class, the corporate lobby and the bourgeoisie were euphoric and excited about new possibilities, while the dispossessed bottom of Indian population were apprehensive of the inevitable outcome of liberalization—people were gripped by the fear of the rich becoming richer, the poor becoming poorer as a fall out of marketization. The neoliberal formula of the trickle-down effect of profits and capital benefits flowing down to the bottom was therefore, initially viewed through scepticism and anger, creating a rift between, what scholars describe, India and *Bharat*, or between anglicized upper middle class aspiring India, consisting of the moneyed section of the population and the vastly poor, uneducated rural population of India/*Bharat* who make most of the work force of India's informal and unorganized sector and the highly debt ridden agrarian economy. With the demise of the welfare state and the retreat of governmental subsidy, large number of farmers committed suicide in India because of their hardship and ignominy arising out of their

failure to pay back their agrarian loans. Booker winning author Arundhati Roy has perfectly captured this devastating outcome of market economy for Indian farmers in her book *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* (2014), subsequently this catastrophic impact on farmer's lives became a big political issue, motivating various stakeholders to mobilize the poor and others on this issue of peasant suffering and death.

INFO-PUBLICS AND PUBLIC SPHERE DEBATES, NEW MOBILIZATIONS

Another field of contention in liberalized India was the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) under various World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) inspired policies of deregulation and foreign direct investment. Forest lands and mountainous regions rich with minerals and populated by indigenous tribes were opened up in the 1990s as SEZs, leading to fierce mobilization and conflicts between the Indian government and dissenting constellations, formed by civil society actors, tribal groups and some mainstream political organizations. These anti-SEZ mobilizations received significant media coverages and public opinion across the nation was mobilized on the question of *accumulation economy* supplanting traditional *need economy* of India. A famous example of this conflict between market forces and peasant rights, manifested through the change of power in the Indian state of West Bengal where the main opposition party the Trinamul Congress defeated the then Left Front Government in 2011 for their pro-SEZ policy of setting up car factories in fertile agricultural lands, lands almost forcefully snatched away from the peasants of Singur, a village in West Bengal. The Anti-POSCO movement in the Indian state of Odisha also comes within this rubric of Anti-SEZ movement during 2005 and 2011. These debates over deregulated economy continue even today and constitute a significant part of political mobilization in India even in the current conjuncture. However, with the passage of time, because of the significant rise in media coverage and massive reporting on the plight of tribals and farmers, a new *Info-publics* was born. People began debating on these issues in greater numbers, public opinion varied and the government of the day had to take on board these dissenting public sentiments and popular opposition.

This was no longer the India of the 1980s or early 90s, a new public sphere based on media debates and opinion exchanges emerged and it was no longer possible for any government to ignore this new

phenomenon called ‘public perception’ spawned by media coverage. Other new terminologies—‘citizen journalist’, ‘Tele-public’ and ‘breaking news’ also gained popularity during this time signifying how ordinary people were given the chance to articulate their grievances and opinions. Popular TV shows like *Indian Idol*, *Hero Honda Sare Ga Ma Pa*, *Big Boss*, *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, *MTV Glamour shows* and *Channel V music*, regular telecast of highly commercialized popular cricket matches like IPL (Indian Premier League) along with regular colourful doses of televised One Day Cricket matches, and newly energized Bollywood movies, modelled on American showbiz and popular programmes created a nation of tele-citizens in India and all these programmes unified the entire nation on questions of glamour, entertainment, visual image, show biz and popular emotion (cricket generated national feelings of pride and Indian identity). These glitzy media events also catered to the image of a shining, resurgent, entertainment and fun-loving upwardly mobile nation enjoying the fruits of rapid urbanization and global capital flow. This was the gestation of ‘aspirational India’, fetishizing on opulence and social status, notwithstanding the glaring gap between urban glitter and rural squalor. Various Television shows asked for nation-wide spectator votes through mobile sms-es to elect champions for these reality show competitions and these marketizing voting strategies too created a surge in tele-consumption and reality show participation. This was a phenomenal shift as rural India too was affected by this tele-glamour fever. These popular programmes significantly changed India as a *unified-media-publics* sustained by daily doses of fun, and celebrity craze came into being. The indirect fall out of this nation-wide media and commercial entertainment-consumption interface forged unique national sentiments of unity and viewer-community bonding.

Interestingly, contemporary political mobilizations since then have relied a lot on these social media platforms and on SMS or WhatsApp message circulation in India. So, what initially began as a purely commercial exercise has now become familiar templates and tools for political and social mobilization. Bollywood, the prime source of Indian entertainment also witnessed rapid transformation during this phase, reflecting similar trends of new stories, new sentiments and new ‘boldness’. Taboos were shown to be broken, social mores were loosened and cine-ideologies of colour and social boldness percolated into the larger public domain too. Global terrorism and local terror activities also figured in a big way in 24×7 media coverages. Round-the-clock circulation of images of terror

attacks also unified the nation through media projection of victims, a sense of collective insecurity and outrage and through the arousal of nationalist sentiment. This was a unique moment of nationalism combined with capitalist dream, packaged through media, forging a public sphere abuzz with media gossip, celebrity culture, consumer ideologies, nationalist sentiments and individual rights. Unless we understand this sociology of techno-capitalism and its appropriation by ethno-nationalist forces, we cannot decode the transformative changes in public protest in New India.

Scholars have written on this transformation of the Indian public sphere in the aftermath of television and mobile phone but to understand this New India that we are theorizing here these details are to be collated to understand its cumulative after-effect on subsequent patterns of popular mobilizations. This became evident when we witnessed the 2012 nation-wide outrage against the brutal gender assault and murder of a college girl in the Indian national capital, New Delhi. Never in the history of India did we come across such a pan-Indian outcry against sexual violence. The whole nation was unified in its reaction against this barbaric act and new forms of civil society mobilizations such as candle light marches and civic gatherings were witnessed. All these happened because of wide media coverage and media spawned debates on gender security and citizen's rights in a democracy. One must understand that this was also the time of the post-Occupy Wall Street and post-Arab Spring world, in which we watched ordinary people gathering on the city streets, collectively protesting against something that afflicts their life. The Occupy movement and the Arab Spring also inspired new experimentations in leadership roles and in the methods of protests. The conventional modes of top-down leadership, in which a political leader will inspire the party cadres for protest movements was abandoned for new axioms of leaderless-leadership or horizontal leadership models in which all the stakeholders were collectively rising for a civil society initiative. Post-2012, gender emerged for the first time in India as an important electoral issue and all prospective political parties were forced to make their position clear on issues of gender security and gender protection. India, post-2010 also experienced sustained and unique mobilizations across the country against issues of political corruption and that caught the imagination of the entire nation. Armed with new legislative measures such as the *Right to Information Act* (RTI), the innovative mobilizing skills of the 'India Against Corruption Movement' led by a quasi-Gandhian figure called

Anna Hazare, initiated an unprecedented new shift in popular mobilization techniques, dissenting vocabularies and ideologies of dissent. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter began playing crucial roles in forming public opinion and in circulation of insurrectional narratives.

Newer domains of protest also emerged, areas which were previously considered taboo such as rights for Homosexuals and Trans-gendered persons came out in the open. There was an invigorated spirit of new agency and public empowerment, a new public sphere, an Info-publics who dared the establishment and rallied around to garner public support and popular opinion for a worthy cause were visible. This is not to claim that the entire country and all its people changed overnight and India became a nation of protesting citizens, all we are suggesting is, there was a clear shift in public outrage patterns and compared to earlier eras, people could be mobilized more quickly through the techno-sphere of media and social networking sites. All these happened in the aftermath of global events like the Occupy Wall Street movements and close in the heels of the Arab Spring. Another outcome of this newly earned liberation energy was the emergence of new constellations of student mobilization on a vast range of issues like caste, secularism, gender security, governance efficiency, communal harmony, free education and economic liberalization. All these new mobilizations departed from erstwhile templates and operating principles.

CHANGING DYNAMICS AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM

These changing dynamics of protest and popular mobilization in New India demand closer analysis to understand its transformative vectors and to do that we have to situate our analytical frame to decode this new aspirational India. The NITI Ayog, the highest official planning body of the Government of India in its new policy statement in 2018 made the following observation and this might provide us some idea of the ‘New India’ that we are talking about:

The 2018 “Strategy for New India @ 75” a policy document of the Government of India published by the Niti Aayog, the Constitutional body set up for policy formation clearly envisages a “New India” on its seventy fifth year of independence. The collective effort of 1.25 billion Indians is transforming the country. People’s quest for building a New India by 2022. Build an ecosystem which will help all Indians to reach their own

potential. Policy architecture will be built. “The ‘strategy for New India @ 75’ put together by NITI Aayog is an attempt to bring innovation, technology, enterprise and efficient management ... we believe that economic transformation cannot happen without public participation. Development must become a Jan Andolan.” (available at <https://www.niti.gov.in/the-strategy-for-new-india>)

This governmental policy statement on New India@75 interestingly talks of new policy architecture, technology, enterprise and public participation or public mobilization (*Jan Andolan*). All these are important categories when it comes to democratic mobilization or transformations in newer formats, in fact the policy statement at the very end mentions how it envisages development culminating into a ‘Jan Andolan’ or public mobilization, or what one might describe as citizen’s participation or citizen activism. A 2014 study report on ‘New Citizens’ Activism In India: Moments, Movements, and Mobilisation—An Exploratory Study’, conducted by Richa Singh of the *Centre for Democracy and Social Action*, Delhi has focused a lot on changing India, however this study only focuses on some major strands of recent mobilizing patterns such as anti-corruption movements, popular mobilizations on gender, but the report does not account for new imaginaries like *Twitterati*, *WhatsApp-publics* and new campus or student mobilizations in India. This book attempts a focus on these newer and relatively unexplored domains of recent popular mobilizations in India, something that analyses new constellations of dissenting voices, made possible through the interface of media, public awareness and greater agonism in various digital public platforms.

Recent scholarly studies on the widening interface between media, public awareness and an agonistic public sphere in India have engaged with interesting insights on the changing role of media and the Indian public sphere. Saima Saeed in her *Screening the Public Sphere: Media and Democracy in India* (2013) has analysed this new intersection of democratic practices and new media in contemporary India. Democracy, Saeed argues, without free media is a contradiction and recent changes in news media platforms and exchange of information technologies have deepened democratic practices in India. The power and significance of contemporary media in determining public opinion in India has been highlighted by many commentators and one needs to *deconstruct* conventional ideas of news and news-making on Indian television. With the recent boom in digital news platforms and resurgent numbers of news channels,