Social Action in Relation to Community Work and Social Movement

Introduction

Human society is dynamic and constantly changing. These changes may lead to betterment and progress or may worsen the situations. Also, uncontrolled and unthoughtful changes may carry with them inequality and exploitation to certain sections of the society. On the other hand, consciously and carefully designed interventions bring peace and social justice in the society. Social action is one such effort to bring about changes in the social system for mass betterment. Let us take a look at the relation between social action vis-à-vis social structure and social conflict vis-à-vis social change.

Social Action in Relation to Social Structure

In order to understand the relation between social action and social structure, we need to look into the concept of social structure. From sociological perspective, social structure refers to basic social institutions of a society. It is an abstract concept. In order to have a better understanding of social structure, Herbert Spencer and others conceived of society as an organism the parts of which are interdependent and therefore form a structure. Social
structure, like body structure, denotes ‘permanence’ but also refers to dynamism and does not necessarily indicate lack of change. For example, kinship structure of a society (the typical composition of household units, rules governing marriage and line of descent) is maintained. However, there is continuous change in the families, as marriages are conducted, children are born, grow up and become adults, and people die. These social processes are always on, more or less in a cyclic manner. These social structures give a base or foundation, a pattern, guidelines and regulations, and a way to lead human life. Kinship, economic structure, caste, class, legal and political structure are a few constituents of social structure.

The concept of social structure indicates that human beings form social relations that are not arbitrary or coincidental but exhibit some regularity and persistence. The notion of social structure implies that human beings are not completely free in choosing their activities but the social structure in which they live limit their freedom. In any society, furthermore, there are arrangements within the structure to regulate and guide the behaviour and activities of humans like setting up family, reproduction, care and education of the young, etc. During the process of social change, certain social systems, within the social structure start creating conflicts influencing the harmony of life. Such social changes need to be prevented or rectified. Social action is one form of social change, which is controlled, guided and guarded, meant to re-establish social harmony within the social structure.

Let us take an example. Caste system has stratified Indian society giving privilege to a fewer sections of the community than the others. People belonging to upper caste, more or less, have accumulated land and power resources in their hands. Members of lower caste, as a result, are exploited in several
ways. Land reform movement is a form of social action meant to rectify the processes in social structure so that landless farmers also get their share of equality, in terms of resources and power.

Social action is a method of social work meant for bringing about radical changes in the social structure. It denotes radical activism, which questions the existing basis of society and proposes alternatives. It aims at development of the democratic process through more effective communications, participation and sharing of decisions within the present administrative and economic system. Social action targets the achievement of specific reforms through community action in the form of pressure groups and consumer organisations. It helps in the promotion of community groups as a means to enrich the life of members by fellowship, self-help and community service.

The relevance of social action as an important method of social work lies within the fact that it is meant for bringing about the essential changes in the social structure. It is very much needed in developing countries like India. However, it is important to note that social action does not intend to 'change the social structure' itself but it aims to amend certain social processes inherent in the social structure which is detrimental to cohesive and harmonious social life. For instance, social action does not intend to call for abolition of institution of marriage but would aim at removing social evils like dowry system associated with it.

Some of the social evils that are deep-seated in our social structure can be tackled through social action like dowry problem, child labour, untouchability, prostitution, zamidari system, illiteracy, child marriage and restrictions on widow remarriages, etc. These problems not only affect a few individuals, but the
groups or communities and call for public awareness, mass mobilization and radical solutions. Social action, as a radical action, is needed to put social processes and social systems in place in a social structure for maintaining social harmony.

**Social Action in Relation to Social Conflict**

Social conflict is inherent into the social fabric of any society. Social change, controlled and arbitrary, invariably results in social conflict. Though peace and harmony are always the goal of social planners and the people, social conflict is also the inevitable reality. Social conflict arises whenever there is any disturbance between coordination and collaboration of different social units of social structure. So, the dynamism of social process rests on two pillars: social harmony and social conflict.

Social action is a process, which intends to minimise social conflict and enhance social harmony. Though it appears contradictory as social action itself is considered a 'conflictual' process intending to 'confront' authorities. However, the ultimate goal of social action is to provide relief to the masses from exploitation, despair and frustration. It aims at creating an environment of peace, social justice and dignity of all humans. Social action intends to re-distribute power and resources which calls for confrontation with those who possess these resources and power and most often are unwilling to give due share to their fellowmen. As a result, 'soft steps' do not help in removal of pain and exploitation of the masses. Such situations call for radical solutions and course quality conflict with authorities is needed.

Here, it is important to note that social action does not mean agitations, violence or any other coercive approach to bring out a solution. Social action,
essentially, has two central characteristics as its philosophy. Firstly, it rejects the deficit blaming and victim blaming approaches. It means that it does not hold anybody responsible for and condemn him/her for creating social conflict. It believes in the inherent goodness and worthiness of all people. Secondly, it grounds this action on a process of open participation in which people, preferably collectively, explore the underlying social issues of their circumstances as foundation for action. It encourages people to participate and take actions for the well-being of the entire community or masses. Though ‘conflict’ is inherent in social action, emphasis is on adoption of peaceful strategies as far as possible and making use of ‘harder’ steps as the last resort. For instance, the Fisherman struggle in the coastal regions of Kerala comprises a conflict between the rich trawler owners and the traditional small boat fishermen. Methods of social action have been very persuasive and the traditional fishermen have been successful to get a ban every year for trawler fishing during the rainy season.

The term ‘social action’ refers to organised or legally permitted activities designed to mobilize public opinion, legislation and public administration in favour of objectives believed to be socially desirable. Social action prepares the general public or the clientele with skills like cooperation, collaboration and inter-dependence. It teaches the community people, the practical way of solving interpersonal conflicts in a peaceful manner and work together for the betterment of the society. It trains community members in people’s participation and democratic functioning, which goes a long way in minimizing social conflicts and increasing social harmony. Social action, therefore, is a mass approach in the most peaceful manner used for changing or modifying existing social and economic institutions, which do not function properly.
Social Action in Relation to Social Change

Before understanding the relation between social change and social action, let us have a look into the concept of social change. In its broadest sense, social change is any change in social relations. More specifically, social change may be changes at the group level, which might be important for that group itself, but negligible on the level of larger society. Similarly, from time perspective, social change may be short-term or long-term. The specific meaning of social change depends on the social entity considered. Social change is the general characteristic of all human societies as change itself in the law of nature. Customs and norms change, inventions are made and applied, environmental changes lead to new adaptations and conflicts result in redistributions of power. It suggests that social change is ‘ever present’ phenomenon in any society.

In a strict sense, social change is defined as the change in the social structure. Here it is important to make a distinction between social dynamics and social change. Social dynamics are the processes within the social structure, which serve, at least partially to maintain the structure. On the other hand, social change includes the processes that modify the social structure. Any change in the structure and functioning of the social institutions may be taken as social change. It is an ongoing process. Many times, this change goes on uncontrolled, unguarded, unaware and at a slow pace. It may bring betterment, peace and harmony or conflict, frustration and discord. Commercialization, industrialization, urbanization, modernization, all has brought social change with both positive and negative repercussions.
Social action is also meant to bring about social change but in a directed, conscious, guided, guarded and radical way with the aim of creating a just society. Social action may also mean preventing those changes that may have deleterious effect on the target population. To exemplify, *Narmada Bachao Andolan* has been taken up to secure the rights of millions of poor people living near the banks of Narmada River and construction of a dam on that river would have uprooted them.

Thus, we see that social action is a collective action, aiming at specific social changes for the betterment of the society. The change does not mean that the basic structure of a society has to be totally altered. But changes must be visible in the social institutions, in the customs of a society, in the social relationships and even in the social systems. Whatever may be the form, a change occurs when a collective body of people opts and acts for it. Social action is directed toward bringing about social change that is positive, guided, controlled and aiming at a just society.

**Social Action in Relation to Ideology and Consciousness**

Ideology means ‘manner of thinking, ideas, characteristics of a person, group, etc., especially as forming the basis of an economic, social or political system’. Ideology means strong attitudes or perceptions towards any aspect of life, say, religious, moral, economic and the like. People do have their ideological stands or firm beliefs about any social process of their social life. These ideologies regulate behaviour and actions of persons towards this social process.

Social action is a process of rectifying the attitudes, ideologies and behaviour of those people who tend to hinder the route to social justice. It also strengthens the ideological beliefs of those who are pro-poor
and pro-development. During its process, social action brings about changes in the thinking, feelings, ideologies and actions of the people so as to correct the problems, enhance their social functioning and bring better quality of life. For instance, India has, mostly, remained a patriarchal society. Females have been given unequal share in almost all aspects of life starting from right to life itself. Female foeticide, malnutrition, low educational and occupational status, limited role in decision making in the family what to say of community and society – all these problems have links with our patriarchal beliefs and ideologies. Even most women themselves have been found perpetuating these ideologies of ‘females being inferior sex and should always be dependent on male members of the family for their financial, social and emotional needs’. Social action, as a method of social work, plays crucial role in bringing about change in these ideologies so as to bring about gender-equality in the society in almost every aspect of life.

The dictionary meaning of consciousness is ‘all the ideas, thoughts, feelings, wishes, intentions of a person or persons’. However, here, it has a moral connotation too. Social action, during its process, deals with the consciousness too. During mass mobilization, the leaders do try to wake the consciousness of the people by preaching that it is their moral duty to fight for the cause. For instance, during freedom movement Gandhiji, in his speeches, motivated the people to participate by saying that it is their moral obligation to fight against injustice and the people who tolerate injustice are a party to it. Let us look at another instance of the success of social action by waking the conscience of people. During Campaign against Child Labour, people’s consciousness, particularly that of school children, was touched and they were asked to boycott fire-crackers as many of their unfortunate brothers and
sisters go through immense torture during manufacture of the fire-crackers. As a result, most school children understood the plight of child workers and stopped buying and firing crackers.

So, we see that social action does deal with ideologies and consciousness of people during its course of fighting for a cause.

**Social Action and Community Development**

The term ‘community development’ refers to a process meant to enhance conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community with the active participation of the community people. Community development is a combination of two important aspects. First is people’s participation and second is technical and financial assistance from the government agencies. Both these aspects are complementary to each other. Community development is not possible if any one of the aspects is missing. People’s participation, their ability to cooperate and assimilate tied up with the technical know-how from government agencies is necessary to realize the goal of community development.

Implementation of a community development programmes on a national scale requires adoption of consistent policies, specific administrative arrangements, recruitment and training of personnel, mobilization of local and national resources, research, experimentation and evaluation. So, community development is a process as well as the objective, the means and also the end. Let us now view its linkage with social action.

Community development as well as social action, have same inherent goal – overall development of the community. They both correspond to the basic
needs of the community and all their activities are initiated in response to the expressed needs of people. Both these processes adhere to concerted action and the establishment of multi-purpose programmes for achieving the goal of full and balanced community development.

The identification, encouragement and training of local leadership is omnipresent in both the processes. Also, change in attitudes and behaviours of the community people are an important requirement for community development as well as social action. Social action as well as community development share a basic belief that greater reliance on the participation of women and youth in the process invigorates development programmes, establishes them on a wide basis and secures long range expansion.

Community development aims at increased and better participation of the people in community affairs, revitalization of existing forms of local government and transition towards effective local administration where it is not yet functioning. Social action works for re-distribution of power and resources to achieve social justice. In fact, in communities where there is inequality and injustice, community development has to first rely on social action and once resources and powers are reallocated, then only constructive work has any meaning.

Sometimes, in order to achieve the objective of overall community development, some changes in the social system and institutions, that is social action, are required. To exemplify, poverty has remained one of the most pressing problems of our country. For more than two decades, many piece meal programmes were planned and implemented to a number of poverty-affected communities in the country to make a dent in the poverty problem. Still, the situation kept on worsening as the number of people living below poverty
line sore. During late 60s and early 70s, a rethinking was done on the whole concept and strategies of development, highlighting the need for structural changes in society, to bring about a substantial change in the standards of living of the masses which means greater access to essential services such as education, health, housing and employment. As a result, ‘Structural Adjustment Programmes’, Land Reforms, 20-point poverty alleviation programmes, etc., were evolved. These strategies of radical change emphasize a more equitable distribution of resources and the organisation of people to strengthen their capacity for claiming a better deal in society.

However, to be fully effective, communities’ self-help projects require both intensive and extensive assistance from the government whereas social action is anti-authoritarian. Community development is done at the micro-level whereas the social cause for which social action is required, most often, has wider range. Lastly, the most basic factor in social action is a method of working with people in professional social work while in community development is the process and a goal to indulge in constructive and developmental work with people’s participation and government assistance.

**Social Action and Social Movement**

Social movements are an inspiring reality in India. The downtrodden and the marginalized communities have mobilized themselves and raised their voice against the failure of state and society to safeguard their livelihood and to save rights. A social movement is a deliberate collective endeavour to promote change in any direction and by any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution or withdrawal into ‘utopian’ community (Wilkinson, 1971). In another definition, Blumer (1957) says, “social movements are collective enterprises to establish a new order
of life”. Peasant movement, tribal movement, dalit movement, women’s movement, students’ movement, etc. are a few examples of social movement.

Before looking into the relation between social action and social movement, let us view an example of a social movement, which has a special place in the literature of social movements in India, the Chipko movement.

Chipko is considered as the first organised environmental movement in India. The movement originated in 1968 in the Tehri Garhwal, also known as Uttarakhand, the then Uttar Pradesh.

What factors led to this movement? There was rampant commercial exploitation of timber in that area. The state had set terms and conditions with the private contractors, individual businessmen, wood merchants and owners of forest based industries and allowed them to exploit forests. People were told that deforestation is essential for nation building. Under the disguise of development, for self interest and to meet commercial greed, the forests were cut down at the large scale. This was followed by overflow of Alaknanda river in 1970 due to massive deforestation occurring in hills. It resulted in washing away of fields, crops, property and human settlements.

After this natural calamity, a sizeable number of hill dwellers started realizing the necessity of the ecological balance in the livelihood of hill habitats. Added to this, after massive deforestation, only non-timber bio-mass like leaves, twigs, fruits, etc., were left for hilly people which were never adequate to sustain the life-system of hilly people. Deforestation over the decades hardly left anything substantial for the bare survival of the Himalayan eco-system and its people.
A consciousness was spreading among the people of that area to do something to save the ecosystem, which is the base of their livelihood, rather than being the mute observers of devastation and destruction. They felt that in order to re-establish eco-balance, firstly, indiscriminate falling of trees had to be stopped and secondly, regeneration of forests was needed. A number of enlightened people started mobilizing the people against the injustice of denial of their rights on their own forests. One local poet Ghanshayam Sailani, in his folk poems narrated the distress of the people resulting from deforestation. Along with creating mass awareness against environmental degradation, Sailani’s songs were of great help in making the climate conducive for people’s movement in that area.

In 1971, Dashauli Gram Swaraj Sangh (DGSS), a local voluntary organisation, took the lead and organised several public meetings to discuss the cause. After discussions with different village groups and local leaders, it was decided to propose the government to replace the contract system by forest labour cooperatives and setting up of small scale industries.

During 1970-72, the people of Himalayan region demonstrated their protests against outside contractors. In 1973, DGSS demanded for the allotment of ‘ash trees’ to local people to make agricultural implements. However, the forest department of Uttar Pradesh didn’t pay attention to the demands of the voluntary organisation, representing the people of Tehri Garhwal, and allotted those trees to a ‘Sports Goods Company’. As a reaction to this, several agitations and protests were launched against the government decision and the contractor system. Many individuals of Sarvodaya movement, the Left oriented students and youth organisations joined with DGSS to raise mass opinion against this discriminatory policy.
The contractors were portrayed as the main constraint to the development of the hills. The people adopted the strategy to chase away the contractors in a non-violent way to prevent them from cutting trees. The people belonging to poor and marginalized sections also joined the struggle. In 1973, in a public meeting organised in Gopeshwar where many politicians, journalists, gram pradhans (Village heads) chalked out the strategies to prevent the contractors from entering into the forests. The common men and women organised themselves in groups to fail every effort of the contractors to axe the trees. The success of these acts spread the movement from one hill to another. Spontaneous vigilance by hill dwellers against the contractors cutting down trees took deep roots in that area.

In 1974, women of hilly areas, under the leadership of Gaura Devi saved large number of trees from felling by physically embracing them. ‘Chop me before you chop my tree’ was the inherent emotional quest and slogan, the women uttered while embracing the trees, saving them from the axe of contractors. This was first women’s participation. The protest of women who were agricultural labourers defending their traditional forest rights against state encroachments made this movement a peasant movement. After this, there were a series of similar demonstrations in several parts of the region on the same issue.

The students also played crucial role in keeping the movement alive. They organised several protests against the unfair policies of the government. The movement flared up with the arrest of some students of Parvatiya Van Bachao Sangharsh Samiti. Sundarlal Bahuguna, a Gandhian, marched 120 Km., the students also demonstrated their discontent through marches and rallies. Another Gandhian, Chandni Prasad Bhatt also extended his support. Through
consin demonstrations, students, agricultural labourers and various other sections of the hill community pressurized the state authorities to adopt policies beneficial to local people.

Finally the government set up a review committee and Uttar Pradesh Van Nigam was formed taking over the forest administration. This Nigam immediately declared ban on the forest felling. On the basis of the review committee report, the government discontinued the private contractor system in the hills and banned commercial felling of trees for a period of ten years in the upper catchment areas of the river. Later the ban was renewed in 1985 for another ten years.

In spite of the official ban forest felling continued in the hills through illegal nexus between the foresters and the private contractors. The students played salient role in mobilizing people against illegal forest felling. They conducted many demonstrations and courted arrest. Students’ organisation Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini, joined hands with local people and stopped axing of trees for a paper industry near Almora. Similar activities were carried out by the students in different parts of the hills under the leadership of S.L. Bahuguna. Not satisfied with the government’s move to just ban deforestation, Bahuguna sat on indefinite fast against illegal felling of trees. He wanted a complete ban on felling trees above an altitude of 1000 meters. He undertook a 4,870 Km. foot march from Kashmir to Kohima from 1981 to 1983 to generate awareness about man and nature relationship.

During the following years Chipko movement became sporadic in action. It lost its original strength and vigour. Yet, this movement contributed greatly to awaken the Indian masses about the danger of environmental degradation.
Let us now look at the relation between social action and social movement. What are the similarities between the two? Social action as well as social movement is a collective action aiming at specific social change. Both the processes work with the objective of social justice and securing the rights of the people. Social action as well as social movement are anti-authoritarian and they keep a distance from political parties. Authorities are challenged and necessary steps are taken to ensure re-distribution of power and resources. Both the processes rest on people’s participation. In both the cases, people show their protests through strategies like dharna, rallies, fast, morchas, etc. People’s conscience is shacked through emotional speeches, slogans, poems, and other similar ways. In fact, the above description of the chipko movement gives much clarity about the striking similarity between social movement and social action.

However, social action is a method of professional social work comprised theoretical base, skills of working with people, which are learned and refined under meticulous professional guidance. On the other hand, social movements are not necessarily led by professional social workers. One of the main reasons of dissolution of Chipko movement was the inter-group conflicts between the followers of two leaders, Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhat based on the ideologies, strategies and personal egos. The people’s participation couldn’t be institutionalized for constructive work and development.

Conclusion

To summarize, social action, as a method of social work shares some relation with certain characteristics of social life, which are as follows:
Social action and social structure: During the process of social change, certain social systems, within the social structure start creating conflicts influencing the harmony of social life. Social action is one form of social change, which is controlled, guided and guarded, meant to re-establish social harmony within the social structure.

Social action and social conflict: Social conflict arises whenever there is any disturbance between coordination and collaboration of different social units of social structure, whereas social action is a process which intends to minimize social conflict and enhance social harmony.

Social action and social change: Social action is meant to bring about social change but in a directed, conscious, guided, guarded and radical way with the aim of creating a just society. Social action may also mean preventing those changes that may have deleterious effect on the target population.

Social action and ideologies and consciousness: Social action is a process of rectifying the attitudes, ideologies and behaviour of those people who tend to hinder the route to social justice. It also strengthens the ideological beliefs of those who are pro-poor and pro-development. Social action, during its process, deals with the consciousness too. During mass mobilization, the leaders do try to wake the consciousness of the people by preaching that it is their moral duty to fight for the cause.

Social action and community development: Community development as well as social action, have same inherent goal – overall development of the community, both involve grassroots intervention and people's participation. Social action is, however, anti-authoritarian and works for re-distribution of equitable share of resources to the community people.
On the other hand, community development rests on assistance from government agencies.

**Social action and social movement:** Social action as well as social movement is a collective action aiming at specific social change with the objective of social justice and human rights. Both processes are anti-authoritarian and rest on people’s participation. They share similar strategies to show their protests like dharna, rallies, fast, morchas, etc. However, social action is a conscious, guided and guarded process to achieve equality and justice, whereas social movements are more or less based on emotional upsurge and may not involve professional expertise of social work.

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