

# 16

## Democracy and Social Movements

**In the previous chapters, we tried to understand how the common people participate in Indian democracy and the democratic system of government. In this chapter, we shall try to understand what exactly a people's movement is and what role it plays in a democracy. We shall study some examples of people's movements to find answers to these questions.**

### 16.1 The concept and nature of social movements

When we studied the participation of the common people in democracy in the previous chapter, we saw that there are different ways in which they can participate in government in a democratic system. The examples we saw included voting in elections, active pressure groups and the media. Are there other ways in which people can participate in democratic governance?

In a democratic system, the right to vote, freedom of expression and freedom to form associations is usually guaranteed to citizens by the government. But the strength of a democracy lies in finding new ways in which people can participate in governance to ensure that the government works for the welfare of all classes in society.

A social movement is when a social group in any country or society gets together to fight for its demands. We shall look at some recent examples of social movements in India to try and answer the following questions:

1. How does a social movement influence and catalyse people's participation?
2. How do different groups in society influence the political system and the policy and law-making process in a democracy?

#### 16.1.1 Dongria Kondh movement in Niyamgiri

The state of Odisha lies to the east of Chhattisgarh. The Niyamgiri Hills in Odisha contain rich bauxite (aluminium ore) deposits. The state government had entered into an agreement with a company called Vedanta in 2004 to mine these deposits. But exploiting the resources required the permission of the state forest department since these deposits lay in a densely forested area. The company acquired all the required permissions and decided to begin mining operations on January 27, 2009, having already moved in the machinery and equipment required for the purpose.

But, from the morning of the same day, the people living in the surrounding areas began collecting around Niyam Dongar, the hill on which the open-cast mine was to be located. Their numbers soon swelled to thousands, with one estimate placing the number of men and women who had gathered at

over 10,000. These people were opposed to mining in the Niyamgiri Hills so they joined hands to prevent the bulldozers from entering the area, forming a human chain 17km-long that completely encircled the Niyam Dongar. The placards they carried displayed their message: 'Vedanta go back, stop mining in Niyamgiri'!

Let us try to understand the reasons behind this incident. The Odisha government believed that the mining project was important for the state's development. The plan included developing an open-cast bauxite mine to extract three million tonnes per year of bauxite on Niyam Dongar, setting up a one million tonnes per year alumina refinery to process the ore at the foothills of the Niyamgiri range, and construction of a coal-based power plant to generate 75mw of electricity at Lanjigarh in Kalahandi district. The total investment in the three projects was estimated at Rs 4,000 crore, which was expected to generate employment in the region.

On the other side were the local inhabitants of the Niyamgiri Hills area who were opposed to the project. These *adivasis* belong to the Dongria Kondh, Kutia Kondh and other scheduled tribes who have been living in the region for generations. The Niyam Dongar gets its name from Niyam Raja Penu who, along with Darini Penu and other gods, is worshipped by the *adivasis*. They believe that Niyam Raja, whose sacred abode in the Niyam Dongar, is their protector.

The *adivasis* depend on the forests, wildlife, rivers, streams, forest produce, etc for their livelihood. So their lives revolve around the natural resources of the Niyamgiri Hills. If open cast mining came to the area, the forests would be destroyed, their livelihood would be snatched away and they would be displaced from their traditional habitat.

The *adivasis* had, thus, been opposing the mining project from the time the government had signed an agreement with Vedanta. Their long-drawn-out struggle had largely been peaceful. They were supported by some environmental and social activist groups. Responding to the demand of the *adivasis*, the government set up several committees to examine the project and give their recommendations. The committees found that the company had used illegal means to gain permission to mine, with the mining lease directly flouting the PESA Act (under which the village panchayats in forest regions where the *adivasis* lived are given some special powers).

The *adivasis* staged regular demonstrations, taking out rallies to protest against the Vedanta company entering their sacred hills. A petition was filed in the Supreme Court on their behalf. The Supreme Court passed an important judgment in 2013, stating that under the provisions of the PESA Act, the 12 village panchayats in the area would have to decide whether they would permit mining operations or not. The panchayats unanimously voted against mining.



Figure 16.2: The *adivasis* of Niyamgiri participating in a gram sabha to protest against mining



Figure 16.1: A demonstration by the *adivasis* of Niyamgiri

In this way the *adivasis* were able to protect the Niyamgiri Hills and establish their traditional right to the area's natural resources. It was a victory after a long and hard-fought battle.

**What was the role of the people's movement, the law and the courts in protecting the rights of the *adivasis* of Niyamgiri?**

### 16.1.2 The struggle for the right to information

We had a look at the struggle of the *adivasis* of Odisha to protect their sources of livelihood. Let us now study another people's organization, this time in the state of Rajasthan.

Ajmer, Bhilwara, Pali and Rajsamand are drought-prone districts in central Rajasthan. The small farmers and agricultural labourers depend on the government's famine relief work and other drought relief projects to earn a living. Most of these projects are planned and implemented by the panchayats. But the villagers employed in these projects were not being paid the minimum daily wages for the work they did. The minimum wages were Rs11 per day in 1987-88 but the men were paid Rs7-8 and the women only Rs5-6.



Figure 16.3: A rally organized by the Mazdoor-Kisan Shakti Sangathan

Fed up with the situation, the exploited workers began demanding that they be paid the minimum wage, registering complaints with all the concerned government departments. But they were not paid their due wages. Frustrated, they decided to get together and launch a movement to stop this exploitation. The Mazdoor-Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) was, thus, created on May 1, 1990 under the leadership of some civil society organisations.

The MKSS began holding demonstrations and hunger strikes outside the government offices to demand the payment of minimum wages but still there was no reaction from the government. The workers were told that they were paid less wages because the quantum of daily work they did had been reduced.

The MKSS decided to follow up the cases of 12 labourers from one village working on a panchayat project. At the end of each day, it measured how much work each labourer had done and kept a record for the entire project period. But even after providing this evidence, the labourers were not paid the full wages. So the farmers and labourers decided to launch a movement under the banner of MKSS. After a prolonged struggle, the 12 labourers eventually won their due wages following the intervention of the central government.

**Do you agree with the method the labourers used to prove that they had done their quota of work for the day? Give reasons.**

**Have you heard about any demonstration or hunger strike? Discuss in class.**

After their successful struggle, the daily workers began maintaining a record of their daily work. The register in which the government maintains a daily record of the work done is called the muster roll. So the workers also began examining the muster roll. They found that the local government officials



Figure 16.4: A rally

were manipulating the records to underpay them for the work they did. They also found many other corrupt practices. For instance, they found payments being made to workers who were not living in the village for the past few years. Payments were even being made in the name of some government officials. There were also cases of excess wages paid for lesser number of days worked. In addition, there were records of work done for buildings that had never been constructed.

**Public hearings (Jansunwai)** The workers realized that this was not just a matter of under payment but of corruption in the government system. They realized that they were getting lower payments even though the government had released the entire funds for the panchayat project. So MKSS began demanding the right to check the muster roll and government registers to track the corrupt practices of the sarpanch and other officials. But the officials were not prepared to let them do this. MKSS then decided to hold a public hearing to verify the actual execution of government projects. It organized several such public hearings.

**Kot Kirana Public Hearing:** The first public hearing was organized on December 2, 1994. The agenda was the development work carried out by the Raipur panchayat samiti in Kot Kirana and Bagri Kalyan villages in 1993-94. The public hearing attracted the participation of many villagers from the surrounding villages as well as many of Rajasthan's well-known intellectuals and social activists. But no government official attended. The names of 100 workers who had been paid by the panchayat for the project work were read out to the assembled gathering. But several people whose names were on the list came forward to give evidence that they had not participated in the development work nor had they received any payment from the panchayat. The muster rolls also contained the names of people who had died some years ago. It was also shown that the building for which bills for electrical fittings were submitted hadn't been constructed at all. Many such irregularities and the many layers of corruption were exposed during this first jansunwai. Subsequent public hearings unearthed many more instances of corruption.

**Has any similar jansunwai taken place in your area? Discuss in class.**

**Is there any issue on which you think a jansunwai should be held in your area? Discuss in class.**

**Demanding the right to information:** The initial demands of the people's movement were linked to the payment of minimum wages. But as more and more corrupt practices began surfacing during the five public hearings held till then, the people began demanding that all information contained in the



records of the work they had done, which was linked to their livelihood, should be made freely available to everyone. MKSS knew that the government officials were withholding these records from the public to hide their corrupt practices. It claimed that the workers had the legal right to see these records. This claim eventually emerged as the demand for the right to information.

MKSS pursued its agitation demanding the right to information but the government did not pay any heed to this demand. So the MKSS staged an sit in demonstration in Jaipur, the state capital. People from different regions in the state participated in the demonstration. It continued for 53 days, beginning from May 26, 1997. It ended in a dramatic manner on July 14, 1997 with the government telling the agitators that it had already enacted a law a year ago that complied with their demand. According to



Figure 16.5: The right to information

S.No	State	Year
1	Tamil Nadu Right to Information Act 1997	May 5, 1997
2	Goa Right to Information Act 1997	December 2, 1997
3	Maharashtra Right to Information Act 2000	July 18, 2000
4	Rajasthan Right to Information Act 2000	January 26, 2001
5	Karnataka Right to Information Act 2000	2000
6	Delhi Right to Information Act 2001	2001

this law, the common people of Rajasthan had the right to examine and make photocopies of any bill, voucher, muster roll or other development-related documents.

The Right to Information Act was implemented for the entire country in 2005. Thus, the movement in Rajasthan to demand the right to information achieved success after a prolonged, non-violent struggle.

**How does the right to information benefit us? Discuss in class.**

**In what way can you use the right to information? Discuss in class.**

### 16.1.3 Peace movements

Like the social movements that we have read about till now, several important movements for world peace have been conducted across the globe. These movements have played a key role in ending wars and establishing international peace.

Peace movements are usually associated with campaigns and organized attempts to stop wars, stop

acts of violence during wars and stop arms build-up by countries. The global aim of peace movements is to prohibit the use of nuclear weapons, encourage disarmament and bring an end to war. Many different kinds of organisations have been established to advocate world peace. They mostly work to establish peace camps, support anti-war candidates in elections, and carry out critical studies and analysis of the security and disarmament policies of different governments.

**What is the purpose of a peace movement? Explain with examples.**

**What steps can the people who participate in a peace movement take to stop unrest?**

**Why do you think that peace between nations is necessary?**

**Anti-nuclear weapons movement:** Japan faced massive destruction after America dropped two nuclear bombs on the country in 1945. That is why the anti-nuclear weapons movement took strong root there. In 1954, the Japanese people established a unified 'Japanese Council against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs'. They also voiced their protest against the testing of nuclear weapons in some islands in the Pacific Ocean. They conducted a signature campaign against these tests, collecting around 35 lakh signatures. This was the first largescale anti-nuclear weapons campaign.

**England's pro-nuclear disarmament movement:** Like Japan, England, too, launched a massive campaign to abolish nuclear weapons in 1958. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) demanded that England should abstain from any attempt to produce or experiment with nuclear weapons. It also demanded that England should abolish all types of nuclear weapons. The thousands of activists involved in the movement took out a march from London to the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment in Aldermaston in Berkshire. This march came to be known as the Aldermaston march. Many such marches were conducted through the early years of the 1960s.

The well-known philosopher Bertrand Russell set up a 'Committee of 100', an anti-war group, after resigning from his post as CND president. The committee began staging protests in front of England's nuclear establishments. Russell exhorted the people to participate in these sit-in protests, claiming that the English newspapers were lukewarm to the anti-war campaign. His call began attracting thousands of members to the Committee of 100 and participation in the protests grew rapidly.

The growing numbers of protestors soon began to have an impact, attracting violent repression by the police and mass arrests. This state repression led to a steady fall in numbers of the campaign's supporters. The arrest of the 89-year-old Russell further dampened the movement because the Campaign of 100 had no leadership hierarchy nor was its membership formal.

Many local anti-war groups now began to affiliate themselves with the campaign, helping it to gain widespread support once again. But since they were not fully aware of the campaign objectives there were many misconceptions about its policies. The anti-war and nuclear disarmament focus of the committee was thus gradually diverted as it began taking up many other issues.

**Discuss the following:**

**1. Why do you think the English parliament could not pass a proposal to abolish nuclear weapons?**

**2. How successful were the strikes, protests and campaigns conducted by the Committee of 100?**

**American anti-nuclear weapons peace movement:** Like Japan and England, America also witnessed an important anti-nuclear weapons peace movement in the decade of the 1960s. At the peak of the Cold War in 1961, American women launched a 'Women Strike for Peace' campaign by marching in 60 US cities. Over 50,000 women participated in this massive campaign to demand a nuclear-free world and an end to the Cold War. It was the largest political protest in America against nuclear weapons.

Subsequently, over 50 US cities observed June 20, 1983 as Nuclear Disarmament Day. In 1986, hundreds of activists took out a nuclear disarmament march from Los Angeles to Washington DC. They also staged protests at the nuclear weapons testing facility in Nevada in 1980s and 1990s. Thus, America saw a peaceful movement to abolish nuclear weapons that began in the 1960s and continued till the end of the Cold War and achieved some significant objectives.

**Peace movements in other countries:** Apart from these three countries, Canada, Germany, Israel and Norway were among several other countries to have active peace movements. They supported the abolition of nuclear weapons during the Cold War and continued to oppose all kinds of weaponry in the global arms race. After the Cold War, they played an active role in limiting and stopping the American war in Iraq. They also made sustained efforts to stop international conflicts, such as the Middle East war and the civil wars in countries like Egypt, Libya and Syria.

The list of active organisations included the Green Party in many European countries, the Canadian Peace Research Association, and Germany's peace campaign to abolish nuclear technology, particularly nuclear weapons. These organizations helped take the global peace movement forward and were active in preventing international conflicts and wars.

## EXERCISES

### 1. Choose the correct option from the following multiple options:

1. Niyamgiri is
  1. A movement
  2. A mountain
  3. A bauxite storehouse
  4. A king
2. The Niyamgiri movement was not:
  1. An environment movement
  2. A socio-economic movement
  3. A political movement
  4. A movement for justice
3. The right to information movement began:
  1. With a demand for minimum wages.
  2. To expose corruption.
  3. To get information about the muster roll.
  4. For all these reasons.
4. The main objective of the peace movement is:
  1. To stop wars
  2. Disarmament
  3. Abolish nuclear weapons
  4. All these reasons

5. The following was done to protect the Niyam Dongar:
  1. A 17km-long human chain was formed to encircle the hill.
  2. The gram sabhas declared that mining the hill was illegal.
  3. Public opinion was sought through a public vote.
  4. A petition was filed in the Supreme Court under the PESA Act.
6. Which type of corruption was not occurring in Rajasthan:
  1. Excess wages for less work.
  2. Buildings constructed only on paper.
  3. Payments made to unknown people.
  4. Violation of the right to information.
7. Which was not part of the Niyamgiri project:
  1. Alumina refinery
  2. 3 million tonnes per annum bauxite production
  3. 75MW electricity power plant
  4. Wildlife conservation based on the environment
8. Which *satyagraha* did the Mazdoor-Kisan Shakti Sangathan successfully carry out:
  1. Hunger strike
  2. Strike
  3. Civil disobedience movement
  4. Public hearing and exposure of corruption in a people's court of the gram sabha.
9. The peace movement for disarmament began with:
  1. The civil wars in some Middle Eastern countries.
  2. Communal strife.
  3. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by nuclear bombs.
  4. The First World War.
10. The main purpose of disarmament for peace was:
  1. To end the Cold War.
  2. To stop the production of weapons
  3. To abolish chemical/biological weapons.
  4. To maintain peace and development

**2. Fill in the blanks:**

1. American ..... staged strikes, marches and demonstrations for peace in 60 US cities.



2. America observed ..... day on June 20, 1983.
3. Britain's Atomic Weapons Research Establishment in Berkshire is located at .....
4. Niyamgiri contains rich deposits of ..... ore.
5. America's nuclear testing facility is situated in .....
6. Mining in *Adivasi*-inhabited scheduled areas is a violation of the ..... Act.
7. The Right to Information Act was implemented in India in .....
8. The Labour party is a political party in .....
9. America dropped an atomic bomb on ..... in 1945

**3. Write the answers to the following questions:**

1. Why wasn't the peace movement of the Committee of 100 successful? Explain with reasons.
2. Why did the peace movement for disarmament begin in Japan?
3. What are the objectives of the peace movement?
4. Explain the main benefits of the right to information.
5. Explain the experiences of the people in the jansunwai.
6. Whose decision led to the victory of the Niyamgiri *satyagraha*?
7. Which scheduled tribes lived in the Niyamgiri area?
8. What was the Supreme Court's decision on Niyamgiri?
9. Who and what do the peasants and workers depend on for their livelihood during a drought?
10. Explain what is a muster roll.
11. Write the names of any four districts in Rajasthan.
12. Explain the destruction caused by an atomic bomb.
13. Explain what disarmament means.

**4. Discuss the following in class:**

1. Should there be a peace movement? If yes, then why, if no then why? Explain with reasons.
2. Have you heard or read about any peace movement in India? Share what you know in class.
3. What is the role of a peace movement in a democracy?