
UNIT 16 SOCIAL ACTION

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16.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This unit aims at familiarizing you with an important method through which the deprived and the oppressed sections of society seek changes to achieve social justice. Social action has a long and chequered history even though its identification as a technique is a more recent phenomenon.

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the meaning of social action;
- Describe its main features;
- Analyse the strategies;
- Discuss the tactics; and
- Describe some of the social action movements in India.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

Social action has been a part of the process of development of human society. There has hardly been any time in social evolution when people have not organized themselves and enjoined to protest against injustice, to seek redressal of grievances or alterations in unjust social, economic and political structures. The struggles that ensued did not always achieve their goals but they represented important expressions of deprived people's attempts to secure a more humane society. Social work education gave social action an academic status by recognizing it as one of the methods of Social Work and its inclusion in the curriculum of Master's degree programmes.

Voluntary effort and people's participation have been recognized as being critical to the success of any development endeavour and find a legitimate

place in almost all the plan documents and official policy statements. However, social action, as a tool to mobilize people for development work, is rarely mentioned in such documents probably because it represents to those in authority an organized end eavour to bring about changes which often results in conflict of interests with those in power who are sometimes opposed to such initiatives of change, overtly or covertly.

Social action is a very powerful instrument in the hands of the people to secure social justice and human rights. The foremost practitioner of social action in our country was Mahatma Gandhi. Social reformers, trade union leaders, public workers and political activists have been involved in social action movements in one way or the other. For all those who are interested in empowering people, this unit is therefore of considerable interest.

16.2 MEANING

There is currently no universally accepted definition of social action, though there is a broad understanding of it. We give here some of the more widely used definitions so that you have an idea of how different scholars have viewed social action.

One of the earliest definitions was by Mary Richmond (1922) who considered social action in terms of “mass betterment through propaganda and social legislation”. This definition however, is too general and fails to bring out the distinguishing features of social action.

A more elaborate definition is given by Friedlander (1963): “Social action is an individual, group or community effort, within the framework of social work philosophy and practice that aims to achieve social progress, to modify social policies and to improve social legislation and health and welfare services.” This definition, as you will see, rules out conflict or radical alternation when it prescribes action “within the framework of social work philosophy and practice”.

Roger Baldwin defines social action as “Organised effort to change social and economic institutions as distinguished from social work or social service, the fields which do not characteristically cover essential changes in the established institutions. Social action covers movements of political reform, industrial democracy, social legislation, racial and social justice, religious freedom and civil liberty; its techniques include propaganda, research and lobbying.” This definition does not specifically refer to social action as seeking change in a manner consistent with social work values. It seems to suggest, however, as will be evident from the methods it mentions, that the action for change will be within the parameters of the existing institutional framework.

Gabriel Brito brings out the ‘conflict’ element when he states that “Social action is a conflictual process of varying intensity initiated and conducted by

the masses or by a group of elites, with or without the participation of the masses in the action against the structures or institutions or policies or programmes or procedures of the government and/or relevant agencies and/or power groups to eradicate/control any mass socio-economic-political problem with a view to bringing betterment to any section of the under-privileged at a level larger than that of a sociologically defined community”. This definition brings out also the role of leaders from outside the affected groups initiating and conducting social action movements.

Paull, too, recognizes the element of conflict when he observes that social action refers to “those organised and planned activities that attempt to influence the social distribution of status, power and resources.”

Some scholars emphasize the use of ‘legally permissible’ methods while others state that the methods could be legal or not legal if the situation so warrants. Some state further that the objectives of social action may not necessarily be in conformity with culturally approved goals and values, especially when these are seen as major obstacles.

16.3 MAIN FEATURES

From the consideration of the definitions of social action, you may have got some idea about its features. We indicate them here although it is important to remember that not all forms of social action necessarily reflect them nor do all the authors agree that these are characteristic of social action.

- Social action is an organised effort directed at bringing about change in social, economic or political structures and in their style of functioning, in order to achieve social and economic well-being, specially of the under-privileged groups, and in bringing about a just social, economic and political order. It is perceived as a method of empowering the deprived through mobilization and collective action against vested interests and against exploitation by existing power groups (political groups, economic interests) and against exploitation by existing power groups (political groups, economic interests, industry, trade etc.).
- The field of social action cover a very wide spectrum – political reforms, social and economic reform, removal of social injustice and religious intolerance, restoration of human rights, enactment of legislation, sharing of power in decision making and in benefits, protection of the environment, liberation from the stranglehold of current mores, etc.
- The objectives of social action can be radical i.e., questioning the very foundation of current structures, and aiming at the overthrow and often proposing alternatives even if these have not been precisely worked out. At the other end, social action may work for changes within the existing system.

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- Social action can be directed against global, universal issues like protection and conservation of environment through action, against its degradation, or on more localized issues like crime, sale of alcoholic drinks, wrongful use of village community resources by dominant individuals or groups, exploitation of labour, punishment of a wrong-doer, illegal felling of trees, etc. Even in the former case, social action programmes have to be specific and focused so that it is possible to mobilize support and organise pressure groups.
- The geographical area of social action and the numbers involved may be very large or relatively small depending on the issue.
- The driving force for social action may come from outside without initial sharing of the goals or strategies with the people being mobilized, or only partly sharing them. To achieve sustained results, however, involvement of the people in the goals and strategies is important.
- The goals of social action are not value neutral. They are value-oriented and normative in character, though these values and norms may at times be at variance with the culturally approved goals and values.
- Social action has elements of conflict, the resolution of which may not always be through peaceful and totally non-violent means even though violence may not be an explicitly propounded method.
- Social action may in some situations involve the use of methods or pursuit of goals which are wide in scope, more comprehensive and futuristic and may go beyond the law. However, social or moral legitimization of goals and methods is important.
- Social action movements require commitment of the leaders, their emotional involvement and belief in the goals and in the means used.
- Social action is not non-political. However, most of the social action movements are not initiated directly by political parties.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Space is given below for your answers.

b) Compare your answers with the text.

1) In what ways would you consider Friendlander’s definition of social action as inadequate for developing countries?

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2) List five features of social action.

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16.4 SOCIAL ACTION AND SOCIAL REFORMS

As a student you would be interested in knowing the difference between social action and social reform. You have some knowledge about social action. Let us first understand briefly the meaning of the term social reform.

Gore (1987) defined reform as “a deliberate effort to bring about a change in social attitudes, culturally defined role expectations and actual patterns of behaviour of people in a desired direction through processes of persuasion and public education”. He further observed that most social reform movements emanate from the “recognition of the dignity of the human individual and therefore, of the responsibility of the privileged to widen opportunities of life for all segments of the population.”

Let us now try and briefly state the common features of social action and social reforms:

- Both owe their beginning to dissatisfaction with existing systems or values and seek change in the direction of social justice. Both appeal to the ‘advantaged’ to accept the change in order to provide a better deal to the ‘disadvantaged’.
- Both follow a variety of strategies and tactics to achieve their goal, several of which are common.
- Both follow the method of mass mobilization.
- Both have normative ends.

Let us now see in what ways social action and social reform differ from each other:

- The scope of social action is much wider. Social reform is only one field of social action.
- Social reform represents a goal, at least an intermediate one, in the sense that through such reform, the status and situation of people affected will improve. Social action can be one of the means of achieving this goal.
- Social reform does not seek total alteration of economic, political and social structures nor does it reject them. It seeks amendments or changes

in specific aspects of them in order to humanize them. Social action could seek radical changes or even reject existing systems when it amounts to injustice, inequity, repression and exploitation.

- Social reform movements are a product of the times and its importance has varied in different periods of history. Social action has a place, relevance, and need at every stage of a society's development.
- The main actors in social reform may come from social and religious groups. Social action interests cut across different communities.
- An important objective of social reforms is to consolidate the change through legislation. In the case of social action, legislation may or may not become necessary as the objective may as well be achieved through non-legislative means.

16.5 STRATEGIES OF SOCIAL ACTION

There are different strategies of social action. The strategy determines the tactics used. Whatever the strategy, several steps are involved in organizing social action movements. Let us consider these aspects.

Types of Strategies

Various strategies and techniques of social action have been identified, some conceptually, others on the basis of analysis of actual movements. Gabriel Britto (1984) made an attempt to identify the strategies in the Gandhian model of mobilization for action. These are:

Credibility-building: This implies building of a good public image of the leadership, the sponsors and the participants based on cherished social values.

Legitimization: Promoting the movement's objectives as being morally right, and therefore the action is legitimate and permissible socially and morally.

Dramatization: This implies mobilizing the population into action through emotional appeals, soul-stirring speeches, management of the media, novel procedures of drawing support, catchy slogans, processions, protest marches and such other techniques.

Multiple strategies: This implies a concerted programme of action involving advocacy, education, persuasion, facilitating actions, pressure tactics etc.

Dual approach which implies building a counter system as an alternative or reviving a system which is declining, or has declined, but which is perceived to be beneficial. A constructive counter action plan is proposed which is in opposition to an existing system and perceived to be unjust, exploitative or undesirable.

Manifold programme: This implies developing social, economic and political programmes which would facilitate mass mobilization for social and economic reconstruction and political independence.

Siddiqui (1984) has mentioned the stages used in the Sarvodaya strategy drawing from the Sarvodaya social action movements inspired by the Gandhian philosophy. The stages are: (1) Prachar (Publicity) (2) Parichaya (Introduction) (3) Adhyayan (Survey or study) (4) Sahavasa (Association) (5) Seva (Service) (6) Pratikar (Resistance) (7) Construction Work or Community Service (8) Building the Climate of Change.

Stages 5 to 8 indicate that in the Gandhian approach constructive social service and peaceful non-violent ways of achieving change are basic. In fact, Gandhians strongly advocate 'constructive work'. This includes activities like relief work in emergencies such as floods, setting up basic education schools, the promotion of Khadi and other cottage industries and crafts, anti-liquor propaganda, and social work among the Harijans and the women.

Speaking about the non-violent social action model, Das Gupta (1984) observed: "Although non-violent social action also uses conflicts and struggles as weapons, its purpose is not to 'defeat' an enemy but to 'win' him over. The aim is not to crush an individual or to destroy an opponent however importantly placed he may be in a system, but to change the system and to protect the body and the psyche of the so called 'enemy' – both for his own good as also for the good whom the person opposes. Its aim is not to win only a struggle but to establish new values and norms that may pioneer the way to a new society. Means are ends in the non-violent battle and the ends are means. Since the two are equated in the structure of the method of non-violent action, the latter cannot, and does not, use ends to justify the means but harps on the need for adopting pure means for reaching pure goals."

Several scholars of social action point out that when non-violent technique for building pressure through mobilizing public opinion fails to alter the system or undo the injustice, some form of militancy and systematic expressions of hatred, anger, dislike, contempt, force (not necessarily violent) are perceived as necessary, even if it is in a limited way. Das Gupta (1987) refers to the "conflict-cum-not-non-violent model". He observes: "The adjective 'not non-violent' instead of the term 'violent' is deliberately chosen here as only a few of those who belong to the school of action would, even if they reject the non-violent model, agree to call their path the path of violence".

Let us now see how social work educators look at social action strategies. Desai (1984) has classified the strategies available to social workers into three categories:

- **Collaborative:** This is based on the assumption that people in power will agree to change even when a conflict approach is not adopted. Change can be brought about because "the intended change is either the lesser of

the two evils or they have themselves identified the factors which affect the very existence of the institution or the achievement of its goals; they are disenchanted, or dissatisfied and therefore willing to engage in the change effort though some part of the system may show initial resistance”.

- **Bargaining, Negotiating and Advocacy:** The assumption here is that since resistance is anticipated, some kind of mild pressure would be necessary. In the words of Desai: “These could include techniques of bargaining and negotiation, publicity which leads to discomfort for the target of change, advocacy through the media and attempts to isolate the target group from the opinions of the community at large. The techniques utilized may, to some extent, deviate from the usual interpersonal behaviours, and include methods such as satyagraha, morcha, and other methods of dramatizing the situation and developing public opinion”.
- **Conflictual/Confrontational:** The assumption here is that there are fundamental differences in positions and viewpoints and therefore strong pressure tactics become necessary (such as, for instance, demonstration and civil disobedience, or direct action). Since conflict in its more extreme manifestations could mean annihilation, elimination, defeat or subjugation, these have not been mentioned by Desai as possible tactics, probably because they are not in harmony with the educational philosophy of social work.

A somewhat similar classification of strategies of social action has been given by Lees (1972). He categories them as:

- **Collaboration:** This is useful where, according to Lees, “there is basic agreement about the way an issue should be resolved or the likelihood of reaching such agreement once the issue is fully considered”.
- **Competition:** This is relevant where there is ‘conflict’ over interests but where it is possible for the contending parties to agree on the means to promote the different view-points. According to Lees this implies conflict over goals but consensus over means.
- **Disruption:** This occurs when there are little chances of reaching an agreement and the tactics used may vary from “peaceful demonstration to revolutionary upheavals”.

Whatever the classification, it is important to remember that the different strategies do not comprise water-tight compartments. Nor do they represent an orderly movement from the peaceful to the disruptive strategies. Sometimes the conflict model is adopted when the other models fail. Sometimes even if one model is applied, the approaches of the other models are selectively used.

Tactics

From the definitions of social action and the discussion of the strategies, you have seen that social action involves the use of a variety of tactics – often a combination of them – depending on the philosophy and ideological beliefs of the sponsors, the techniques used by the other party, and the dynamics of the situation as it develops.

Some of the tactics have been explicitly identified and are listed below:

- Fact finding,
- Publicity, advocacy, dissemination, using both formal and nonformal media,
- Education, awareness-building, conscientisation,
- Mobilizing support and opinion through established institutional systems and political processes,
- Expressing anger, wrath, hatred in dramatic and innovative ways,
- Cooperation/collabouration,
- Using slogans,
- Negotiation, bargaining, arbitration,
- Disruption and mild coercion (mild resistance, protests, marches, morcha, dharna, strikes, boycotts, fasts, gherao etc.) defiance of orders and various forms of economic sanctions.
- Strong coercive tactics (extra-legal measures, and direct action).

The choice of tactics is conditioned by the choice of strategy. Though confrontation and conflict are inherent in social action, most social activists would like to abstain from violence and seek resolution of the conflict and change by building moral and public pressure. Most of the social action is also not directed towards the overthrow of the system but rather its humanization.

Steps

As you must have realized by now, certain steps are involved in social action. These are enumerated here:

- 1) Identifying the problem (in this case injustice), diagnosing it, gathering information about it and about who the principal actors are, what roles they play, what interests they have and what benefits they derive.
- 2) Determining the position to be taken.
- 3) Identifying the social action goals i.e. the expected outcomes. These should be specific and at least some should be tangible.
- 4) Mobilizing support using both non formal and formal methods and locating the networks of influence and power.

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- 5) Setting up the machinery to carry out the struggle, canvas action, provide leadership.
- 6) Laying down the strategy. A well-drawn out plan indicating series of actions and their networking among the leaders.
- 7) Laying down the communication channels and the decision-making loci of the social action movement.
- 8) Carrying out the action.
- 9) Reviewing the implementation of the strategy and, if necessary, weighing alternative approaches and working out alternate plans.
- 10) Sustaining the pressure.

Some writers by the above mentioned steps have suggested the stages as:

- 1) **Awareness-building** (Steps 1 and 2)
- 2) **Organising people** (Steps 3, 4, and 5)
- 3) **Developing the strategy** (Steps 6 and 7)
- 4) **Action** (Steps 8, 9 and 10)

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Space is given below for your answers.

b) Compare your answers with the text.

- 1) In what ways does the strategy in the Gandhian model of social action differ from others?

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Activity I

Identify a social action issue (even a hypothetical one) and draw up two action plans. Base the first one on the Gandhian model and the second on other models.

16.6 SOCIAL ACTION IN INDIA

India has been the place of many social action movements. Let us briefly mention some of them.

Satyagraha is a uniquely Indian concept and mode of social action shaped into a formidable tool by Mahatma Gandhi. Although based on non-violence

(since Gandhi believed and practiced ahimsa and considered it a powerful tool), satyagraha meant exerting moral pressure, through mass mobilization, mass courting of arrests, and long protest marches to achieve the goal. We mention here some examples.

The Rowlatt Act Satyagraha: What is popularly known as the Rowlatt Act (1918) represented an attempt to put war time restrictions on civil rights and detentions without trial for a maximum period of two years. All sections of Indian political opinion vehemently opposed the Rowlatt Act but it was left to Mahatma Gandhi to work out a practicable all-India mass protest. The intention was to go beyond petitions but at the same time to stop it from being unrestrained or violent. Initially, the volunteers merely courted arrest by publicly selling prohibited literature. It was then extended by Mahatma Gandhi to include the idea of an all India Hartal (strike).

The Salt Satyagraha: Mahatma Gandhi's famous Dandi March symbolized protest against the government monopoly of salt and the claim to salt tax. The march which started from Sabarmati to the sea through the heartland of Gujarat attracted considerable attention both within India and outside. Mahatma Gandhi propagated manufacture and auctioning of salt by the people violating the unjust law. This action was accompanied by boycott of foreign cloth and liquor.

The Nagpur Flag Satyagraha: This was started in mid 1923 against a local order banning the use of the Congress flag in some areas of the city.

The Borsad (Kheda district, Gujarat) Satyagraha: This was directed against a poll tax imposed to be paid by every adult for the police required to suppress a wave of dacoities. The movement took the form of total non-payment of the new levy by all the 104 affected villages and the tax had to be withdrawn.

The Vaikom Satyagraha: This was the first temple entry movement. It was essentially an attempt on Gandhi an lines to assert the right of low caste Ezhavas and untouchables to use roads near a Travancore temple. Gandhi an social action has to be understood in the context of the Gandhian philosophy of work which aimed at building a social and economic order based on non-violence, and building the strength of the people and the moral fabric. It included not only activities like relief work in emergencies but also setting up basis education schools, the promotion of khadi and other cottage crafts, anti-liquor propaganda, uplift of the lower castes and untouchables.

Chetna' march in Panchmahal and Sabrakantha districts of Gujarat: This was organised by DISHA (a voluntary organisation) which, on analysis of its programmes, came to the conclusion that unless awareness is created among the forest labourers, minor forest produce collectors, small community action groups and other agencies working in the area, the injustices and exploitation would continue and the affected people would not come forward to lodge their complaints, narrate their grievances and seek redressal. One of

the methods devised by DISHA to generate awareness was to organise a foot march in the area which covered nearly 1000 km. through the most backward districts.

Mahila Mukti Morcha – Dalli Rajhara: Dalli Rajhara is an iron ore mining town in the southern Durg district in Madhya Pradesh. The mines here are largely worked manually through contractors. Contract labourers are mainly members of Adivasi, landless and small peasant households from the seven districts of Chhattisgarh in eastern Madhya Pradesh.

The women took a leading role in organising social action struggles. For example, in 1979-80, the wages of the workers improved after a successful struggle. A successful anti-alcoholism campaign was carried out on the ground that it drained hard won benefits back into the pockets of the contractors and liquor merchants. The mass mobilization achieved among the households was a rare example of mobilization on a social issue. Women played a leading role in propagating the philosophy of this campaign, and in organising mohalla committees, for detection and punishment. In 1982 the women started their own forum called Mahila Mukti Morcha (MMM). The forum concentrated on three broad areas of concern – women and work, women and health and women's struggles. Action arising out of MMM platform was largely issue-based. Awareness and mobilization were effected through a variety of methods including plays and songs, and through annual observation of martyrdom of those who had struggled for the rights of the poor.

Narmada Bachao and Holan is a social action movement which has brought together several organisations engaged in developmental issues, for the environmental problems caused by the construction of the Narmada Dam. The movement today enjoys widespread support, cutting across different segments of the population, apart from people directly affected by the construction of the dam. The movement is spearheaded by eminent social workers, scientists, intellectuals, students and the local villagers. Huge protest marches have been organised in which villagers from far and near, from different states, have participated with banners, shouting slogans, sporting badges forming a human chain on the banks of the Narmada in protest, taking pledges, organizing demonstrations at the dam site, and often violating prohibitory orders. Its defiant message from the people to decision makers and planners is for full participation at all the levels of planning and that the people are no longer prepared to watch in mute desperation, as projects after projects are approved without ensuring that the benefits accrue mainly to the people and are not cornered by the vested interests like the 'contractor and the rich'.

16.7 LET US SUM UP

You have seen in this unit that social action represents an organised attempt of the people to secure a more humane society. It is a powerful instrument to empower the poor and to secure social justice and human rights. It seeks changes in an unjust social and economic order or in unjust actions. You also saw that while some scholars were of the view that social action should be confined to seeking the goals within the existing social, economic and political frame work and accepted methods of seeking change, others were of the view that the methods could be legal, or not so legal if the situation so warrants, especially when legally permissible methods fail. Social action may also not always be in conformity with current social and cultural values of dominant groups in society, especially when they are seen as major obstacles. The social and moral contents of the action give it the necessary social and moral legitimacy. The goals of social action are not value-neutral. You read about the various strategies of social action, including the Gandhian Model. You learnt about different ways of classifying the strategies of social action and the tactics that are used. You also read about the step in social action for awareness building, mobilization and organising people, laying down strategies and carrying out action. Finally you read about some of the social action movements in India.

16.8 KEY WORDS

Dharna: Picketing.

Gherao: A coercive action in which workers/others agitating for the acceptance of their demands, encircle those in decision-making positions for longer hours to force them to agree.

Morcha: The term literally means organisation of a front (as would be the case of the foremost line of the army against the enemy) to fight for their rights or for an issue of wider social concern.

Satyagraha: Struggle for truth using non-violent means. This was developed into a formidable tool by Mahatma Gandhi through mass mobilization and exertion of moral pressure to undo injustice and exploitation.

16.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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