



Social Protest Movements

CHAPTER

14

Industrialisation and the emergence of nation states changed the lives of people in very basic ways. It changed the way people worked, their access to necessities of life and dignity, their relationship with their own work and its products, their families and neighbourhood. For many people, especially the poor peasants, crafts persons and industrial workers, it brought an end to dignified and secure life. They were now forced to work in factories with hundreds and thousands of other workers under the control of unsympathetic foremen and managers. They did not have any

awareness about what they produced, when and how they worked. The wages were very low and the work was not permanent. This created a lot of dissatisfaction and unhappiness among the people. Things became especially difficult when the factory owners cut down wages, reduced the number of workers or increased workload on them.

In the early decades of industrialization, the new political ideas of French Revolution (1789-94 CE) were also spreading simultaneously. People could take mass actions like protest with the help of the movements for 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. These movements helped in the creation of democratic institutions like the French parliamentary assemblies of the 1790s. They also reduced the difficulties of war by controlling the prices of necessities like bread.

Industrialisation also deeply troubled artists and intellectuals. Human values associated with agricultural or craft production and community life of villages were lost. The focus was on reason, science and technology rather than feelings and emotions. The impact of large scale industrialisation and poverty of the working people left a deep mark on the minds of the people. Some of them studied economics and social history to understand the challenges of industrialisation. Others turned to poetry and art for inspiration for alternative virtues.



Fig. 14.1: Lane in poorer quarters of London. French artist Dore 1876.

Industrialisation also gave birth to new social groups that wanted to play an important role in the society. Now, the power and influence was in the hands of industrial capitalists and large landowners. The working class movements were becoming more organised. Workers realised their power when they united. They now understood that if they came together, they could bring the entire economy to a standstill. They were also inspired by the ideas of French Revolution and Socialism. Similarly, women, who were confined to homes till then, came out and demanded equal status and role in society, economy, polity and culture. They often joined other social movements like socialism and democratic nationalism to ask for their own rights.

In this chapter, we will look at some of these developments and understand how they influenced the course of modern world, especially India.

- In what ways do you think ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity would have helped to inspire protest movements?
- Do you think people have achieved these three ideals in the 21st century?
- Do you see any social movements which are still inspired by these ideas around you?

Early Worker's Movements in England

In England, political protests against the cruel working conditions in factories were increasing. The working population was demanding for the right to vote. The government tried to repress them. They made new laws that denied people the right to protest.

England had been fighting a war with France for a long time – from 1792 to 1815. Trade between England and Europe was disrupted. Factories were forced to shut down. Unemployment was growing and the prices of essential items of food, like bread and meat, increased beyond the level of average wages. In 1795, the Parliament passed two Combination Acts which made it illegal to ‘incite the people by speech or writing to hatred or contempt of the King, Constitution or Government’. It also banned unauthorised public meetings of more than 50 persons. Even then, protest against ‘Old Corruption’ continued. The term, ‘Old Corruption’, was used for the privileges that the monarchy and Parliament had. Members of Parliament – landowners, manufacturers and professionals – were against giving the right to vote to the working population. They supported the Corn Laws, which prevented the import of cheaper food until prices in Britain had risen to a certain level.

- Why do you think the landowners supported the Corn Laws and workers would be against them? In India too, such laws which protected our farmers from competition from import of cheap agricultural products are being ended. Do you think such imports will benefit the poor people in India?

The workers came together in towns and factories and protested in anger and frustration. There were bread or food riots throughout the country from the 1790s onwards. Bread was the staple item in the diet of the poor. Its price governed their standard of living. People seized large stocks of bread and sold them at an affordable and morally correct price rather than at the high prices charged by profit-hungry traders. Such riots were particularly common in the worst year of the war, 1795, but they continued until the 1840s.

Another process known as ‘enclosure’ caused problems for the people. From the 1770s, hundreds of small farms had been merged into larger ones under powerful landlords. The poor rural families who were affected by this had to start working in industries. But, when machines were brought into the cotton industry, thousands of handloom weavers were thrown out of work and into poverty. Their work was too slow as compared with the machines.

From the 1790s, these weavers began to demand a legal minimum wage, which was refused by Parliament. When they went on strike, they were dispersed by force.

- To what extent do you think breaking the machines helped the workers?
- The government passed a law which gave capital punishment to those who broke machines. Do you think this was justified?
- When new machines are brought in a factory, some workers are usually rendered jobless. Why do you think this happens? Can there be ways of improving technology without creating unemployment for workers?

Out of frustration, the cotton weavers in Lancashire destroyed the power looms which they believed had destroyed their livelihood. In Yorkshire, croppers, who had traditionally sheared sheep by hand, destroyed shearing-frames. In the riots of 1830, farm labourers found that their jobs could be taken away by the new threshing machines that separated the grain from the husk. The rioters smashed these machines. Nine of them were hanged and 450 were sent to Australia as convicts.

Luddism

The protest movement known as Luddism (1811-17) was led by the charismatic General Ned Ludd. Luddism was not only an assault on machines. Its participants demanded a minimum wage. They also wanted control over the labour of women and children. They demanded for work for those who had lost their jobs because of the coming of machinery. They also asked for the right to form trade unions so that they could legally present these demands. The workers still did not have any powerful trade union to fight for their rights. They fought by threatening to damage the machines and stocks of the factory owners. In many cases, the factory owners agreed to negotiate with the workers and offered better working conditions. Workers and many middle class persons like shop keepers and master craftsmen thought

that the machines were unnecessary. They felt that the machines were being introduced to take away their livelihoods. Hence, there was much social support to such protests. In many places, the radical workers worked spontaneously in the name of General Ludd and in other places, there were secret organisations which acted in a planned and coordinated manner.

Socialism

Luddism was now being suppressed by the government and the army. A new ideology was slowly developing which would give the workers a new social goal. This was the idea of Socialism. What is Socialism? Socialism calls for public ownership rather than private control of property and natural resources. According to the socialist view, individuals do not live or work in isolation but live in cooperation with one another. Further, everything that people produce is a social product, and everyone who contributes to the production of a good has a right to share it. Therefore, society as a whole should own or control property for the benefit of all its members.

In this way, socialism is opposed to the basic idea of capitalism. Capitalism is based on private ownership of the means of production. Capitalists themselves determine what is to be produced and who is to be given a share of the produce. Socialists complain that capitalism distributes wealth and power in an unfair and exploitative manner. It gives all the money and power to a few individuals. The rich then use their wealth and power to increase their dominance in society. Because such people are rich, they may choose where and how to live. Their choices in turn limit the options of the poor. As a result, terms such as individual freedom and equality of opportunity may be meaningless for capitalists. But the working people must do as the capitalists' want in order to survive. As socialists see it, true freedom and true equality means that society should control the resources that provide the basis for prosperity in any society.

Socialists also believe that because the resources are distributed unequally, there cannot really be genuine free competition. The rich and powerful people manage to move the balance in their favour by hook or crook.

Some elements of socialist ideas can be seen in many thinkers down the ages, like Plato or Thomas Moore. These ideas became powerful when they were

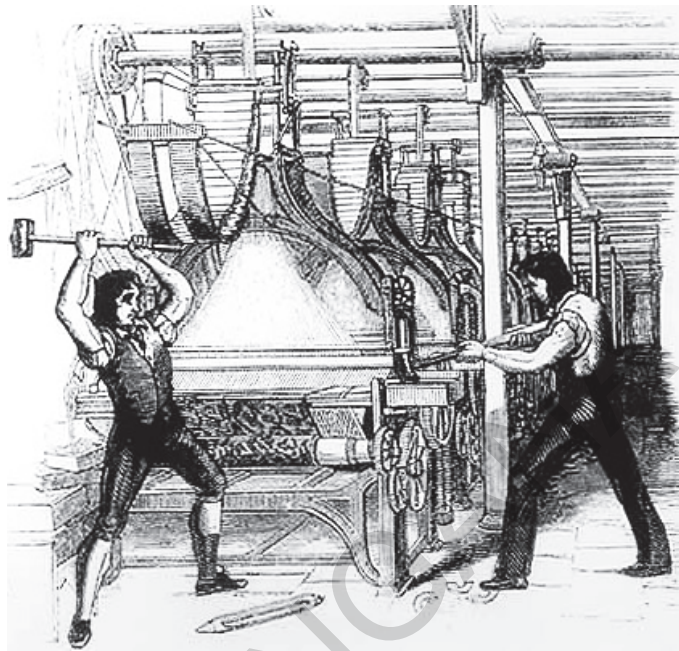


Fig. 14.2: An illustration from 1812 named *Frame Breaking* showing Luddists.



Fig. 14.3: Pyramid of Capitalist System

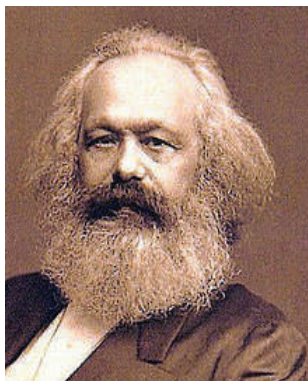
combined with the ideas of French Revolution. Babeuf and other radicals complained that the Revolution had failed to fulfill the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Babeuf argued that in order to get complete equality, private property and common enjoyment of the land and its fruits should be abolished. He was executed for conspiring to overthrow the government because of these ideas. However, his ideas inspired many social protest movements against the factory system.

Another early socialist thinker was Saint-Simon of France who advocated for public control of property through central planning. He imagined a society in which scientists, industrialists, and engineers would anticipate social needs and make plan to meet them. Such thinkers emerged in England too, the home of

Industrial Revolution. Here a small industrialist named Owen was disturbed by the conditions of the workers and the wealth of the capitalists. He took an initiative for building cooperative villages, in which everything would be owned in common and people would work in cooperation with each other and share the products of their labour. However, these ideas could not be implemented because of the massive growth of industrial production and so they only remained idealistic or utopian.

Karl Marx and Fredric Engels came up with a new theory of socialism based on their study of the working of industrial capitalist production. They argued that capitalism is both a progressive as well as an exploitative system. It separates capitalists and workers from their true humanity. It is progressive because it has made possible the industrial transformation of the world, and this productive power can fulfill everyone's necessity. Yet it is exploitative because it forces the working classes to lives of extreme hard work and difficulties. The fruit of this hard work goes to the capitalists. Marx believed that industrial production will make it impossible for people to live and work on a small scale; they will have to cooperate with countless number of people to produce even their basic needs. Thus, production has become an all-society affair rather than a matter of one family or a small farm or one village. This has given human beings a lot of power in their hands to improve their own lives, provided they are able to do it in collective interest.

Marx and Engels argued that the workers, who produced in the factories, had no property and were at the same time most important for the production to happen. Yet they are exploited so that the capitalist system continues to make profit. This



Karl Marx

will force the workers to fight for better wages and for ending the capitalist system itself. If the workers take over all the factories and other resources and run them for common benefit, a new and equitable society could be established. He argued that workers should organise themselves and throw out the capitalists just like the feudal lords and kings in the French



Friedrich Engels

Revolution. Workers should take over the state

government and establish a worker's state which should own all the factories and land. This state should plan and organise the production in a way that it benefits all the members of society.

The ideas of Marx and Engels made a great impact on radical thinkers and activists at the end of 19th century and inspired major social movements in the 20th century. At the same time, many other radical thinkers disagreed with Marx on many issues and they gave new theories like Anarchism.

Socialism came to India from very early days. Swami Vivekananda was himself deeply influenced by the ideas of Socialism which were growing in Europe and America when he visited those continents. As the nationalist movement grew in strength, many nationalists were also influenced by socialism. Russian Communist Revolution in 1917 was the source of great inspiration for Indian nationalists, particularly as the revolutionary government declared that it will support all nationalist causes. Many leaders like M N Roy, Bhagat Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru etc. were enthusiastic socialists. As factory production developed in Indian cities

- In what way did Marx's Socialism disagree with Luddism?
- Why did Marx consider factory production as superior and desirable?
- What was the main difference between Marx and the earlier socialists?

too, many leaders organised trade unions among the workers. They too were influenced by the ideas of Marxism and went on to found the Communist Party of India in the 1920s.

Women's Movement

During medieval and early modern times, women were dominated by men across the world. They did not have access to property or civil rights like voting etc. They were mostly restricted to domestic work like cooking, bringing up children, taking care of the elderly at home and assisting men at work. This started to change with industrialisation as women began to be employed in factories in large numbers. As

women came out of their houses to work and earn, they developed a new identity of themselves and their role in society. They began to assert the principle of equality of all human beings, whether they were women or men.

When the French Revolutionaries were preparing the Declaration of Rights of Men in 1791, many French women protested against this and drafted a separate Declaration of the Rights of Women. It declared - “Women are born free and remain equal to men in rights. Social distinctions may only be based on common utility... All citizens including women are equally admissible to all public dignities, offices and employments, according to their capacity, and with no other distinction than that of their virtues and talents”. Of course, this declaration was never passed by the French Assembly. However, the goals of women’s movements in Europe and America were that women should be treated as equals of men, that they should have the right to participate in government through voting and holding public posts.

The movement for extending the right to vote to all sections of the population became stronger from 1830 to 1870. In countries like England, women came out in large numbers demanding the right to vote. They were called ‘women’s suffragists’. They held demonstrations, meetings, wrote in newspapers, and made appeals to the Parliament. Russian Revolution was the first to grant such rights to all women in 1917. The right to vote was extended to some women in England in 1918 and to all adult women by 1928. Gradually, this was accepted by most democratic countries.

As women participated more and more in public matters, they realised that women were treated unequally in most sectors, whether education, health, property rights or employment. Many women writers like Virginia Woolf wrote about how men dominate over women and how women have themselves become subjects of this domination. A new phase started in the women’s movement after the Second World War. It focused on gaining equality for women in all aspects of life. They campaigned against cultural and political inequalities, which they felt were linked to each other. The movement helped women to understand that power was unequally distributed between men and women. First-wave of feminism focused on absolute rights such as suffrage, Second-wave feminism focused on other aspects of equality, such as end to discrimination in all aspects of life including education and health.

You would have read about the struggles of social reformers in 19th century India to end practices like Sati, killing of girl children at birth, enforced widowhood for life etc. and also to extend modern education to women. The growth of education among women enabled many women to take part in public life and organise other women like themselves. This gave rise to women’s movement in India too.

Women participated in the national movement and leaders like Mahatma Gandhi specially emphasised the importance of women in the movement. Thousands of women joined the freedom movement and helped to shape the ideas of the nationalists. As a result, when India became independent, women were given

complete legal equality vis a vis men. It also sought to end discriminations against them in property laws etc.

Even though legal equality was achieved, women all over the world including India still do not have real equality. The new wave of women's movement is trying to understand the reasons for this and bring about real and effective equality.

Keywords

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| 1. Socialism | 2. Luddism | 3. Orientalists |
| 4. Feminism | 5. Capitalism | 6. Revolutionaries |

Improve your learning



1. Which of the following statement about lives of industrial workers are correct? And correct the false statements
 - Workers controlled the industries.
 - Living conditions of the workers were comfortable.
 - Low wages was one of the reasons for discontent among the workers.
 - During the phase of industrialisation there was emphasis on emotions and feeling.
 - Romantic writers and artists tried to highlight values of closeness to nature as described in folk tales and folksongs.
2. List some of the problems faced by workers of those times. Discuss if such problems exist in our times too.
3. Write a paragraph differentiating the ideas of capitalism and socialism.
4. How was the idea of equality being similar or differently challenged by women and workers movements?
5. Draw a poster to illustrate the ideas of “liberty, equality and justice” within the context of workers, and women. Identify occasions where these ideas are being violated.
6. Locate the countries in the world map in which the protest movements took place.
7. Read the last paragraph of page 187 and first paragraph of page 188 and comment on them.

Project

Do you find any such social protest movements around you? Interview with the leaders of that movement and prepare a report and present in your class.