

Social Protest Movements

Industrialisation and the emergence of nation states changed the lives of people in very basic ways, the way people worked, their entitlement to necessities of life and dignity, their relation to their own work and its products, their families and neighbourhood. To many people, especially the poor peasants and crafts persons and also industrial workers, it meant an end to



dignified and secured life. They had to now work in factories with hundreds and thousands of other workers under control of unsympathetic foremen and managers. They did not have any aware over what they produced, when and how they worked. The meagre wages and impermanence of work created tremendous discontent among the people. Things became especially difficult when the factory owners tried to cut down wages or retrench workers or increase workload on them.

The early decades of industrialisation coincided with the spread of new political ideas pioneered by the French Revolution (1789-94). The movements for 'liberty, equality and fraternity' showed the possibilities of collective mass action. They created democratic institutions like the French parliamentary assemblies of the 1790s and checked the worst hardships 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 overwhelming emphasis on reason and science and technology rather than feelings and emotions, the awesome impact of large scale industrialisation coupled with the squalor and poverty in which the working people lived – left deep mark on the thinking 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. 16.1: Lane in poorer quarters of London. French artist Dore 1876.

Industrialisation also gave birth to new social groups which increasingly wanted to play an important role in the society. While it gave power and influence to the industrial capitalists and large landowners, it also gave rise to organised working class movement. Workers realised their power when they united as they could bring the entire economy to a standstill. They were also inspired by the ideas of French Revolution and Socialism. Similarly, women who till then were confined to homes came out demanding equal status and role in society, economy, polity and culture. They often joined hands with other social movements like socialism and democratic nationalism to push their cause.

In this chapter we will look at some of these developments and try to see 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 protest against the harsh working conditions in factories kept increasing. The working population agitated for the right to vote. The government reacted by repression and by new laws that denied people the right to protest.

England had been at 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 grew and the price of essential items of food, like bread and meat, soared to heights beyond the level of average wages. Parliament in 1795 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’ and banned unauthorised public meetings of over 50 persons. Protest, nonetheless, continued against ‘Old Corruption’. This term was used for privileges linked to the monarchy and Parliament. Members of Parliament – landowners, manufacturers and professionals – were opposed to giving the working population the right to vote. They supported the Corn Laws, which prevented the import of cheaper food until prices in Britain had risen to a certain level.

As workers flooded towns and factories, they expressed their anger and frustration in numerous forms of protest. There were bread

- Why do you think workers would have supported the ending of the Corn Laws and why do you think the landowners supported 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?

or food riots throughout the country from the 1790s onwards. Bread was the staple item in the diet of the poor and its price governed their standard of living. Stocks of bread were seized and sold at a price that was affordable and morally correct rather than at the high prices charged by profit-hungry traders. Such riots were particularly frequent in the worst year of the war, 1795, but they continued until the 1840s.

Another cause of hardship was the process known as ‘enclosure’ – by which, from the 1770s, hundreds of small farms had been merged into the larger ones of

- To what extent do you think breaking the machines helped the workers?
- The government passed a law which provided for capital punishment for 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?

powerful landlords. Poor rural families affected by this had sought industrial work. But the introduction of machines in the cotton industry threw thousands of handloom weavers out of work and into poverty, since their labour was too slow to compete with 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. In desperation, in Lancashire, cotton weavers destroyed the powerlooms which they believed had destroyed their livelihood.

In Yorkshire, shearing-frames were destroyed by croppers, who had traditionally sheared sheep by hand. In the riots of 1830, farm labourers found their jobs threatened 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 movement known as Luddism (1811-17), led by the charismatic General Ned Ludd, exemplified another type of protest. Luddism was not merely a backward-looking assault on machines. Its participants demanded a minimum wage, control over the labour of women and children, work for those who had lost their jobs because of the coming of machinery, and the right to form trade unions so that they could legally present these demands.

The workers who still did not have any powerful trade union to fight for their rights, 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 offer better terms. Workers and even many middle class persons like shop keepers and master craftsmen thought that the machines



were unnecessary and were being introduced to rob people of their livelihoods. Hence there was much social support to such protests. In many places the radical workers acted spontaneously in the name of General Ludd and in other places there were secret organisations which acted in a planned and coordinated manner.

Socialism

Even as Luddism was being suppressed by the government and the army, a new ideology was developing which was to give the workers a new social goal. This was the idea of Socialism. What is Socialism? It is a doctrine that calls for public rather than private ownership or 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 in some sense a social product, and everyone who contributes to the production of a good is entitled to a share in it. Society as a whole, therefore, should own or at least control property for the benefit of all its members.

In this way socialism contradicts the basic idea of capitalism which is based on private ownership of the means of production and free play of market in determining what is to be produced and who is to be given a share of the produce. Socialists complain that capitalism necessarily leads to unfair and exploitative concentrations of wealth and power in the hands of the relative few. The rich then use their wealth and power to reinforce their dominance in society. Because such people are rich, they may choose where and how to live, and their choices in turn limit the options of the poor. As a result, terms such as individual freedom and equality of opportunity may be meaningful for capitalists. But for the working people, who must do the capitalists' bidding if they are to survive, they can only hallow. As socialists see it, true freedom and true equality require social control of the resources that provide the basis for prosperity in any society.

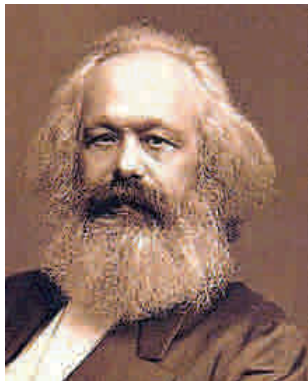


Socialists also believe that given such unequal distribution of resources, there cannot really be genuine free competition as the rich and powerful manage to tilt the balance in their favour by hook or crook.

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



Karl Marx

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are exploited so that the capitalist system continues to make profit. This will necessarily force the workers to fight not only for better wages but for ending the capitalist system itself. If the workers could take over all factories and other resources and ran them for common benefit, the foundations of a new and equitable society could be established. He argued that workers



Friedrich Engels

should organise themselves and throw out the capitalists just like the people did away with the feudal lords and kings in the French Revolution. Workers should take over the state apparatus and establish a worker's state which should own all factories and land and organise production on a planned basis to benefit all.

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 a number of issues and they propounded 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 MN Roy, Bhagat Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru etc. were enthusiastic socialists. As factory production developed in Indian cities 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.

- 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?

Women's Movement

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

in factories in large numbers. As women came out of family to work and earn they developed a new identity about themselves and their role in the 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 principles that women should be treated as equals of men, that they should have right to participate in government through voting and holding public posts remained as the goals of women’s movement in Europe and America.

The movement for extending the right to vote to all sections of the population gained momentum in 1830 to 1870. In countries like England, women too came out in large numbers demanding right to vote. They were called ‘women’s suffragists’. They held demonstrations, meetings and wrote in newspapers, etc. 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 unequal treatment of women continued in most sectors, whether education, or health or property rights or employment. Many women writers like Virginia Woolf wrote about how men dominate over women and how women have themselves become tools of this domination. A new phase of women’s movement developed after the Second World War which focused attention of gaining equality of women in all aspects of life. They campaigned against cultural and political inequalities, which they saw as inextricably linked. The movement encouraged women to understand aspects of their own personal lives as deeply politicised, and reflective of an unequal distribution of power between men and women. If first-wave feminism focused upon absolute rights such as suffrage, second-wave feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as the 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 Gandhiji 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 real equality still deludes women all over the world including India and new wave of women's movement is on to understand the reasons for this and also to bring about real and effective equality.



Key words

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

Improve your learning

1. Which of the following statement about lives of industrial workers are correct? And correct the false statements AS₁
 - 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. AS₄
3. Write a paragraph comparing the ideas of capitalism and socialism. How were they similar or different? AS₁
4. How was the idea of equality being similar or differently challenged by women and workers movements? AS₁
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. AS₆
6. Locate the countries in the world map in which the protest movements took place. AS₅
7. Read the last para of page 202 and first para of page 203 and comment on them. AS₂

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.