M S A Rao

Conceptual Problems in the Study of Social Movements*

IN RECENT YEARS social movements have attracted the attention of sociologists and social anthropologists in India. This paper does not aim to review the literature on social movements. Instead it attempts to outline the conceptual problems involved in a sociological study of social movements. One can identify five inter-related sets of problems. These are: (a) problems of definition and classification; (b) problems relating to the emergence of movements; (c) problems concerning the formulation of ideologies and establishing identities; (d) problems of collective mobilization, organization, leadership, internal dynamics and routinization; and (e) problems concerning the nature of the consequences for and changes in the wider society and culture.

It is necessary to distinguish a movement from a non-movement, and to identify the basic features which are characteristic of a movement. A social movement undoubtedly involves collective

action as distinct from individual action. However, only when the collective action is somewhat sustained, as distinct from a sporadic occurrence, does it take the form of a movement. This collective action, however, need not be formally organized, but should be able to create an interest and awakening in a sufficiently large number of people. Hence, a social movement essentially involves sustained collective mobilization through either informal or formal organization.

Secondly, a social movement is generally oriented towards bringing about change, either partial or total, in the existing system of relationships, values and norms, although there are efforts which are oriented towards resisting change and maintaining the *status quo*. The latter are more in the nature of counter attempts which are defensive and restorative rather than innovative and initiating change. They are the organized efforts of an already established, routinized order to maintain itself.

While there is considerable agreement among students of social movements regarding the two basic features—namely, collective mobilization and change-orientation—there are differences of opinion as regards including other criteria—such as, the presence of an ideology, method of organization and the nature of consequences—as part of the definition of a social movement.

Anticipating my argument in this regard, I consider ideology as an important component of a social movement as it distinguishes it from the general category of movements involving collective mobilization and orientation towards change. For example, a student strike involves collective mobilization and is oriented towards change. But in the absence of an ideology, a strike becomes an individual and isolated event and not a movement. On the contrary, if a strike is organized by a student organization with a defined ideology, it becomes an event in that student movement. Thus, a social movement is an organized attempt on the part of a section of society to bring about either partial or total change in society through collective mobilization based on an ideology.

While it is necessary to define the minimum criteria of relevance in identifying a movement, it is essential to define its limits. That is, when does a movement cease to be a movement? To anticipate the argument once again, when a movement becomes routinized with an established institutional procedure of recruitment and commitment and a code of conduct and sanctions for punishing deviants,

it becomes part of the institutionalized system loosing its innovative features. Thus, when a movement with a defined ideology becomes a well established political party, it ceases to be a movement. However, the internal dynamics of the party may be such that it may lead to splinter movements. Hence, the main focus of a movement approach is to analyze the various processes involving a flow of activities and flux of norms and values in situational contexts.

The classification of a social movement is another definitional problem that must be tackled, for it helps to clarify its various dimensions. There have been several attempts to classify social movements using one or another criterion. Thus, on the basis of the criterion of the consequence of a movement, there are some movements oriented towards bringing about reform in some area of life or the other, involving new relationships, activities, norms and values. Other movements are oriented towards bringing about changes in super-ordinate and subordinate relationships which may be designated as transformative. Still others work towards bringing about revolutionary changes in all spheres of life and in all basic values.

The locus of a movement provides another criterion of classification. On this count, movements may be classified into linguistic, religious, sectarian, caste, peasant, worker, tribal, ethnic, faministic and student. Movements may also be classified on the basis of their scale and spatial spread. While some may be all-India, others may be regional and local. Another criterion of classification is the dominant issue of interest such as temperance, women liberation and a distinctive expressive art form.

It is necessary to emphasize that classification only helps to identify the main features of a movement; it does not fully explain its origin, growth, dynamics and consequences. Any classification is bound to remain inadequate, for a movement tends to acquire new features during its course and any classification can only be relative to a particular phase in its development. However, in classifying any movement I consider the criteria of ideology and the nature of consequences as critical in defining its nature and scope. The criterion of locus helps to identify the section of society which is involved in the movement. Thus, while locus provides the substantive aspect, the criteria of ideology and consequence provide the analytical foci of a movement.

Genesis of Social Movements

The problems of definition, including those of classification, pertain to the preliminaries of identifying a movement and operationalizing the problem of enquiry. One of the main issues in the study of any movement concerns its emergence. The relevant questions here are: what are the structural conditions under which movements emerge? What are the motivational forces? What are the theories which conceptualize the genesis of a movement? To what extent are they adequate?

Broadly speaking, there are three main theories which try to explain the structural conditions and motivational forces which give rise to a movement: These are theories of relative deprivation, strain and revitalization. The theory of relative deprivation has developed on two different lines: social mobility and social conflict. The former line of development is represented by Merton (1950) and Runciman (1966). Although the authors of the *American Soldier* (1949) were the first to use the notion of relative deprivation, it was Merton who systematically developed the concept in relation to reference group theory. Merton applied the concept to analyze social mobility. Later, Runciman, following Merton, developed the concept in relation to reference group and problems of inequalities and social justice. In this approach, relative deprivation is made the basis of a study of social mobility as occurring through emulation and positive reference group behaviour.

As against this approach, Marx and Aberle developed the concept of relative deprivation emphasizing the element of conflict. Marx and Engels (1973) recognized that dissatisfaction with the *status quo* was not determined by absolute conditions but by relative expectations. Aberle (1966), defining relative deprivation as a negative discrepancy between legitimate expectations and actuality, treated it as the bed-rock for a study of social movements. He analyzed relative deprivations in terms of material possession, status, behaviour and worth.

Gurr (1970) introduced several clarifications in the concept of relative deprivation. He considered relative deprivation not only in terms of expectations but in relation to perceived capabilities. He defined relative deprivation as a gap between expectations and perceived capabilities involving three general sets of values: economic conditions, political power and social status. The gap may be caused

when expectations remain stable but capabilities decline (decremental deprivation); expectations rise but capabilities decline (progressive deprivation); and expectations rise while capabilities remain the same (aspirational deprivation).

A point that is conceded by relative deprivation theorists is that a position of relative deprivation alone will not generate a movement. The structural conditions of relative deprivation provide only the necessary conditions. Sufficient conditions are provided by the perception of a situation and by the estimate of capabilities by certain leaders that they can do something to remedy the situation.

The strain theory propounded by Smelser (1962) treats structural strain as the underlying factor leading to collective behaviour. Structural strain occurs at different levels of norms, values, mobilization, and situational facilities. While strain provides the structural condition, the crystallization of a generalized belief marks the attempt of persons under strain to assess their situation, and to explain the situation by creating or assembling a generalized belief. Both strain and generalized belief require precipitating factors to trigger off a movement.

Smelser's analysis of the genesis of social movements is in the structural-functional framework. Smelser considers strain as the impairment of relations among parts of a system leading to the malfunctioning of the system, and includes deprivation under strain. However, the relative deprivation theory emphasizes the conflict element which is productive of change, and does not consider conflict as leading to the malfunctioning of the system.

It may be asked whether social movements necessarily arise out of negative conditions of relative deprivation and strain. In this context, Wallace (1956) posited that social movements develop out of a deliberate, organized and conscious effort on the part of members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture for themselves. Wallace analyzed the dynamics of revitalization movements in four phases: period of cultural stability. period of increased individual stress, period of cultural distortion and consequent disillusionment, and period of revitalization.

The revitalization theory, however, propounds that adaptive processes are employed to establish equilibrium situations. Although social movements develop a positive programme of action, they tend to be double-edged. On the one hand they express dissatisfaction, dissent and protest against existing conditions, and on the other, they