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## Review

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Social Movements In India: Poverty, Power and Politics  
Edited by Raka Ray and Mary Fainsod Katzenstien  
Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2005

STRATEGIES to remove poverty have always occupied a central position in Indian discourse, not surprising since close to a third of our populace is still below the poverty line. Policy planners have, however, only focused on the differential roles of either the state or the market in attending to this objective. If earlier, greater reliance was on the state operating not only through planned allocation of resources but also through ownership and control of the 'commanding heights of the economy', the pendulum today has swung towards the market, including granting a greater role to foreign capital.

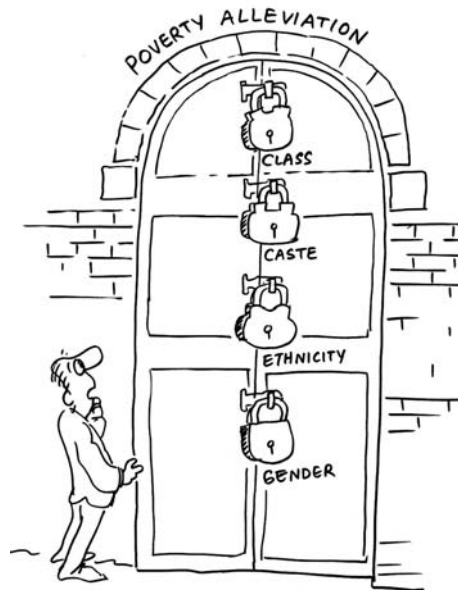
In all of this, what is the role of the public, in particular social movements? Is the public only to be a recipient, an object of public policy, expressing its appreciation or otherwise through

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episodic elections or protests, or can it play a more pro-active role through organised intervention?

The volume under consideration offers a fresh look at public activism in India, examining both the changing strategies of movement actors over the last five decades as also the shifts in thinking influencing their choice of strategies.

Today, in addition to class, movements have to address concerns of identity - caste, ethnicity, gender - as also factor in issues relating to the environment. What we have as a consequence of this shifting of master frames - from a democratic socialist consensus centred around the state to one of the market - is the



development of a highly variegated set of movement strategies, which the book identifies as repudiation, dilution, adaptation, reconfiguration to adoption and espousal. While it can safely be asserted that most social movements in India still operate within the broad template of the early Nehruvian years - a commitment

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to democracy, equality and poverty removal - how effectively their specific strategies address these key concerns remains a matter of debate. It is this problematic that these essays seek to address.

The first set of essays by Vivek Chibber, Tanika Sarkar and Patrick Heller focus on movement strategies in an era defined by Nehruvian consensus. Chibber, in foregrounding organized labour, shows how the trade union movement permitted itself to be appropriated by the priorities of the Congress party. Not just the INTUC, but all central trade unions (HMS, AITUC) accepted for themselves a similar role - permitting party concerns to define the union agenda, with clearly negative consequences.

Tanika Sarkar's essay on the Hindu Right on the other hand shows how the Sangh Parivar and its politics, despite seeking autonomy from the Congress, was marginalised by the Nehruvian master discourse. Both its questionable role in the freedom struggle and the unsavoury association with the Mahatma's assassination ensured that in our early years Sanghist politics remained a peripheral presence. But it is Heller's analysis of developments in Kerala that demonstrate the possibilities of a praxis which seeks autonomy from the Congress frame while fiercely adhering to a redistributive agenda that enabled the province to show amazingly positive results in social development, despite the absence of high economic growth. It is interesting how all these three strains of experience continue to mould the vision of social movements even now.

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It is the middle years - between 1964 and 1984 - that witnessed the greatest rupture in Indian political economy. Even as the ideological underpinning of poverty alleviation was granted supremacy, the key vehicle for social transformation - the Congress Party - fractured, thereby opening up spaces for a differentiated activism. Not only did the country experience the Naxalite upsurge but also saw the emergence of the dalit and women's movements and subsequently the struggles around the environment. The essays by Mary John, Gopal Guru and Anuradha Chakravorty, and Amita Baviskar explore different facets of these movements - in particular how the earlier focus on class and poverty removal came to be mediated by concerns of gender and caste. Not surprisingly, this new emphasis on identity complicated not only the objectives before social movements but also altered our perceptions of what we were willing to classify as 'progressive and just'.

This was also the phase of the emergence of non-party politics, as different movements and agencies sought autonomy from political parties and elections as also the earlier obsessive concern with the capture of state power (including through revolution) as the favoured route towards social transformation. Surprisingly however, it is only Baviskar who examines how the emergence of new social actors alters not just strategies of action but even the vision of a desirable order.

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The next two essays by Gail Omvedt and Ron Herring more directly address the question of the role of social movements in the era of market and religious nationalism, all of which necessitated a shift of relationship with the Indian state. Nevertheless, as the final essay by Neema Kudva ('Strong States, Strong NGOs', based on case studies of three NGOs in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal) shows, the effectiveness of an NGO in addressing poverty alleviation depends not only on its organizational capacity and flexibility, but also 'ironically on the extent to which the state within which it is located is sympathetic to a pro-poor politics.' Possibly that is why, despite so little sympathy for autonomous NGO activism, the Left Front led West Bengal seems to have done better in poverty alleviation.

An effective democratic strategy for poverty removal and social justice demands an interplay between state, market and civil society. Focusing differentially on any one of the three is not only inefficacious but distortionary.

Despite its intellectual rigour and ethnographic detail, it is doubtful that this book will appeal to the growing constituency of civil society activists. I suspect this is because the activist community is far too caught up with its different agendas to reflect on the broader implications of their sectoral interventions. And that will be a loss for without an engagement with the emerging master frames of discourse, discrete interventions are unlikely to make a societal impact.

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