

# WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS BECOME POLITICAL PARTIES?

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When a Social Movement becomes effective and begins to gain the trust and confidence of the people, the natural tendency is to become a political party. The implicit understanding is that people's power being expressed in the movement can be consolidated into a party's power as part of the State structure. Examples are not lacking: the anti-colonial movement became the *Congress Party* at the national level; In Tamil Nadu, the *Adi Dravidar* movement for self-respect of lower casts became the *Dravida Kashagam* and later the *Dravida Munnetra Kashagam* and still later the *Anna Dravida Kashagam*. So also in Jharkhand, the *Adivasi Mahasabha* became a political party in the name of *Jharkhand Party*; the *Jungal Andolan* became *Jharkhand Mukti Morcha*; later various splits often based on personalities led to the formation of other smaller Jharkhandi parties. Very recently, *Jharkhand Janadhikar Manch* which spear headed the movement against the domicile policy of the Govt. has become *Jharkhand Janadhikar Party*.

It is important, therefore, to understand (1) What is a People's Social Movement? (2) What is a Political Party? (3) What are the compulsions that make a Movement become a Political Party? And (4) What are the compromises a Social Movement has to make when it becomes a Political Party?

## (1) *What is a Social Movement?*

A People's Movement is the process of growing awareness of a marginalized/deprived people with regard to the contradictions in the socio-political reality. It involves two factors: consciousness and action. Consciousness with regard to their marginalisation and powerlessness and the reasons for the same. This leads to the realisation that no one else (Govt., upper class/caste sections) will not come to their rescue but rather they themselves will have to take their life into their hands. Strong motivation that they have to act and act decisively to assert themselves and their human/civic rights. This brings them to a level of action that they are presently capable of. Their action is characterised by a strong ideology which projects a goal to be achieved. Finally, every People's Movement paves the way for the emergence of a committed leadership. These leaders have certain charisma which attracts people towards them, and their commitment to the movement and the struggle is unquestionable. Although there is an implicit organisation, it is flexible to respond to the nature of the struggles that are undertaken. These are the factors which make a People's Movement appealing and effective.

(2) *What is a Political Party?*

Political Parties are the deliberately constituted organisations by particular social classes/castes/social groups with the aim of capturing state power. Hence there are significant differences from social movements. Whereas People's Movements come into existence spontaneously, Political Parties are intentionally created. People's Movements are loosely knit bodies, Political Parties are institutional in character. The leadership in People's Movements emerge from within, whereas Political Parties impose leaders from outside. There is a sense of equality among the participants in a Movement, Political Parties are hierarchical in their existence & functioning. The decision-making process is based on consensus in People's Movements whereas the top brass takes decisions in Political Parties. Assertion of rights is the aim of People's Movements, capture of state power is the aim of Political Parties.

Schematically put...

<i>People's Movement</i>	<i>Political Party</i>
Charismatic & committed to a cause	Maneuvering to capture power
Spontaneous emergence	Intentionally constituted
Members: Marginalized sections	Members: specific social class/caste
Loosely knit & flexible in their Functioning	Institutionalised, hard & fast in their Functioning
Sense of equality among members	Hierarchical relationship
Leadership from within	Leadership imposed from top
Aim: assertion of legitimate rights	Aim: capture of State power

(3) *What are the compulsions that make a Movement become a Political Party?*

When the issues taken up are real and the action taken are effective, the people participating in the Movement taste success and feel empowered. There is a newly born self-confidence in themselves. In other words, they feel they are capable of confronting anyone who stand on their way. The charismatic leaders who have led the movement so far begin to feel that they need to break new paths in the process of asserting themselves even more clearly and forcefully. Now our political system is such that the only other way is to enter into the formal electoral system. They feel that by doing so they will not only get formal recognition of their leadership qualities but also there will be a permanence and stability to their role and position as leaders. They sincerely believe that they can achieve greater benefits to the people whom they have been leading and have more legal protection and security if they transform their movement into a political party. At this point of time, the people are not taken into confidence but rather the decision to become a political party is taken by the leaders and people are only informed of the decision with the assurance that this step is necessary for strengthening the movement. The people are rather expected to accept the decision of the leaders.

*(4) What are the compromises a Social Movement has to make when it becomes a Political Party?*

We assume that this transformation is done in all sincerity and earnestness, and not with mala fide intentions. However, the sober fact is important and serious consequences follow such a transformation. Let us spell out some of them:

(a) Spontaneity which characterised the Social Movement slowly disappears and party rules/norms become the order of the day. (b) Collective, consensus decision making process which was the hall mark of the movement is replaced by unilateral dictates taken at the top levels of the party. (c) Charism of the leaders which was the attracting element in the movement yields its place to position/rank of those leaders within the party. (d) Decentralised functioning of the movement becomes highly centralised in the day-to-day functioning of the party. (e) The sense of equality that prevailed among the participants of the movement is changed into a hierarchical position such as ‘the high command’, the central committee, state committee, party members etc. in the party. (f) Whereas leadership emerging from within was the significant factor of the social movement, the party high command imposes leaders from outside in the party. (g) The social movement aims at assertion of a people’s legitimate rights and empowerment of marginalized people through systematic struggles, but the political party aims at capture of State power through electoral process with all that it involves.

**The Final Question** is if such be the serious compromises Social Movements have to make in the process of becoming Political Parties, why at all do they do so?

Basically the reasons are twofold: (1) As the saying goes “**Once you have tasted power, it is hard to leave it.**” The first historic example is the Congress Party itself. It started as movement for independence from the British colonial rule. In the process it became a party and certainly was instrumental in realising independence. Gandhiji was of the opinion that since independence was the goal of Congress Party and independence had been achieved, the right thing to do is to dissolve itself. But the Congress Party leadership ignored Gandhiji’s advice and became the first ruling party of the first Govt. of India. And it is still very much in existence! The same logic holds for all the various people’s movements which have become political parties. (2) **The insecure situation of People’s Movements** in the present political scenario in India. People’s Movements necessarily have to undertake a series of struggles to assert their rights, and such struggles are not to the liking of the ruling class and of the govt. So the Govt. tends to crush such struggles through its law-and-order machinery. Even peaceful, nonviolent struggles are met with brutal repression leading to lathi charge, arresting the leaders, filing of penal cases and even opening fire on the crowd. Hence the natural tendency is to seek the security that political parties enjoy within the frame work of the Indian Constitution. This is an understandable action on the part of people’s social movements becoming political parties knowing full well the compromises such a step involves.

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