



Social Movement and Public Policy: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities in India

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20699938>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 27-05-2026

Published: 10-06-2026

Keywords:

Social Movements, Public Policy, Citizen Participation, Democratic Governance, Digital Activism, Social Change, political polarization.

ABSTRACT

Social Movements have helped in the development of public policy. In India, social movements have historically played an active role in societal issues of social justice, environmental sustainability, transparency, gender equality, and economic rights. The growing use of social media and digital platforms has made it easier for people to organize campaigns, share information and participate in collective action. At the same time, social movements face several challenges, including political divisions, limited resources, institutional barriers and misleading information through online platforms. This chapter explains how social movements have shaped public policy in contemporary India. It focuses on social movements including the Right to Information movement, environmental protests, the Farmers Movement and the #MeToo to understand the people's influence on government decisions and public debate. The chapter shows that social movements remain an important part of India's democratic process and continue to influence policy discussions and outcomes. The chapter explores the opportunities and challenges faced by social movements in influencing policy outcomes. It argues that despite challenges such as political polarization, misinformation, and institutional constraints, social movements continue to strengthen democratic governance and contribute to more inclusive



1.INTRODUCTION

The relationship between social movements and public policy is an important aspect of democratic governance. In a democracy, public policies are not shaped alone by governments and political institutions; they are also influenced by the demands, aspirations, and participation of citizens. Social movements provide a platform through which people collectively express their concerns, challenge existing policies, and advocate for social, economic, and political change. Throughout history, social movements have played a significant role in bringing public issues to the attention of policymakers. By mobilizing public support, organizing protests, conducting awareness campaigns, and engaging with the media, these movements create pressure on governments to address pressing social concerns. As a result, many policy reforms have emerged in response to sustained collective action from civil society groups and grassroots organizations.

In the Indian context, social movements have contributed to important policy changes in areas such as environmental protection, transparency and accountability, gender justice, farmers' rights, and social welfare to demonstrate how citizen activism can influence policy debates and decision-making processes.

According to Charles Tilly (2004), social movements are sustained collective efforts through which ordinary people make collective claims on authorities. Sidney Tarrow (2011) similarly emphasizes the role of collective action in challenging political structures and influencing public decisions. In the Indian context, Ghanshyam Shah (2004) argues that social movements play a vital role in representing marginalized voices and expanding democratic participation.

The importance of social movements has increased significantly in contemporary India. The expansion of social media, increasing political awareness, and growing demands for accountability have transformed the ways citizens engage with public policy. Movements today operate both on the streets and in digital spaces, creating new forms of participation that influence policy agendas and governance processes. At the same time, contemporary social movements face several challenges. Despite these obstacles, they continue to serve as vital channels for democratic participation and public engagement.

This article addresses three research questions: (1) How do social movements influence public policy in India? (2) What are the major contemporary challenges faced by these movements? and (3) What emerging opportunities exist for strengthening movement-based policy engagement? By answering these



questions, the study contributes to the societal importance of social movements in shaping public policy understanding.

2.METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach to examine the role of social movements in shaping public policy in India. The analysis is based on secondary sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, legislative documents, and newspaper reports. Four significant social movements the Right to Information Movement, the Anti-Corruption Movement, the Farmers' Protests, and the Gender Justice Movement have been selected as case studies to understand how collective action influences policymaking. The collected information was analyzed through document analysis and interpretive review to identify major patterns, challenges, and opportunities in the relationship between social movements and public policy.

3.Theoretical Framework: Understanding Social Movements and Public Policy

3.1 Defining Social Movements

Social movements are collective efforts by groups of people seeking social, political, economic, or cultural change. They differ from political parties because their primary objective is not to win elections or hold governmental office. Instead, they attempt to influence public opinion and policy through protests, campaigns, advocacy, and public mobilization (Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004). In the view of Michel Foucault, these movements aim at establishing their identity or particular recognition and, as such, their role looks like a struggle for 'identity politics; Anthony Giddens compares the role of the such movements with a panoramic struggle as a part of the life of the people and so he calls it 'life politics. Social Movements "reflect the struggle of the people in defence of their social, cultural and symbolic identities as well as their heritage." Since social conflicts are as old as human collective life, social movements are centuries old. The most peculiar feature of these movements is that they touch human issues or matters concerning the very conditions of human existence. They struggle possibly for a sensible existence in the present time as well as in time to come. They involve grassroots politics, grassroots actions, often initial micro-movements of small groups targeting localised issues with a limited institutional base.

3.2 How Social Movements Influence Public Policy



Social movements affect policymaking in several ways. They can bring neglected issues to public attention, organize protests to show public support, approach courts through litigation, use media to shape public discussions, influence electoral debates, and engage directly with policymakers. In India, the Chipko Movement drew attention to environmental concerns, the RTI movement contributed to transparency reforms, and the farmers' protests influenced the government's decision to repeal the three farm laws.

Theoretical Perspectives

Social movements have been explained through several theoretical approaches that help understand their formation, aims, and impact on society and public policy.

3.3 Deprivation Theory

Deprivation theory argues that social movements arise when people feel deprived or excluded from social, economic, or political benefits. Feelings of inequality, injustice, and marginalization often push people to protest and demand change.

In India, several movements can be understood through this theory. The farmers' protests reflect economic deprivation due to concerns over income security and market dependence. Gender justice movements arise from experiences of inequality and violence faced by women. Environmental movements are also linked to displacement and loss of livelihood among forest-dependent and rural communities. These groups mobilize when they feel that existing policies do not address their basic needs and survival concerns.

3.4 Ideological or New Social Movements Theory

This theory explains that modern social movements are not only based on class struggle but also on broader social and cultural issues such as identity, rights, environment, and gender equality. These movements include people from different social classes and backgrounds and focus on dignity, justice, and rights.

In India, environmental movements, gender justice movements, and citizenship-related protests such as those against the CAA/NRC, LGBTQ+ rights movement reflect this approach. These movements show how contemporary collective action is shaped by identity, representation, and cultural acceptance rather than purely economic concerns. These movements are not limited to economic demands but also involve



concerns about identity, constitutional values, equality, and democratic rights. They bring together students, activists, professionals, and civil society groups across different regions and social categories.

3.5 Resource Mobilization Theory

Resource Mobilization Theory focuses on the importance of resources such as leadership, organization, funding, communication networks, and media support in the success of social movements. Movements become effective when they are able to organize people and use available resources efficiently.

The Anti-Corruption Movement (2011) is a clear example, where strong leadership, large public participation, and extensive media coverage helped in mass mobilization. The farmers' movement also showed strong organizational capacity through unions, coordinated protest sites, and communication networks. Similarly, the RTI movement was supported by civil society organizations and activists who helped spread awareness and build networks.

3.6 Goal-Oriented or Identity-Based Theory

This theory explains that social movements aim to protect or strengthen identity, rights, and democratic space in society. These movements try to ensure greater participation of citizens in public life and protect civil society from excessive state control.

The Right to Information (RTI) movement in India reflects this approach, as it focused on transparency, accountability, and citizen empowerment. Citizenship and constitutional rights movements, including protests related to CAA/NRC, also fall under this category as they emphasize constitutional values, equality, and democratic inclusion.

4. Historical Contribution of Social Movements in India

4.1 Environmental Movements

The Chipko Movement (1970s) in Uttarakhand mobilized local communities, particularly women, against commercial logging. By embracing tree-hugging as a non-violent tactic, the movement compelled policymakers to impose a moratorium on deforestation in sensitive regions and influenced the Forest Conservation Act (1980) (Shiva, 1989).

The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), led by Medha Patkar, challenged the World Bank-funded Sardar Sarovar Dam project on grounds of displacement, environmental justice, and rehabilitation failures. While the dam was eventually built, the NBA transformed national debates on sustainable development,



forced the World Bank to adopt stricter environmental safeguards, and established the principle that displaced communities must be consulted (Baviskar, 2004).

4.2 Right to Information Movement

The RTI movement began as a grassroots campaign in Rajasthan led by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS). Activists demanded access to government records on famine relief works, exposing rampant corruption. Through sustained jan sunwais (public hearings), hunger strikes, and civil society mobilization, the movement pressured successive governments. The result was the Right to Information Act, 2005 widely regarded as one of India's most transformative transparency laws (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999).

4.3 Anti-Corruption Movement (2011)

The India Against Corruption (IAC) movement mobilized millions across urban centers, demanding a strong Lokpal (ombudsman) bill. Using a combination of traditional protest (Ramlila Maidan, Delhi) and digital mobilization (social media campaigns), the movement forced Parliament into a rare debate on civil society's role in drafting legislation. Although the final Lokpal Act (2013) was weaker than demanded, the movement permanently elevated corruption as a mainstream political issue (Ray, 2012).

5. Contemporary Social Movements and Policy Influence

5.1 Farmers' Protests (2020–2021)

The new Farm Laws, also known as Indian Agriculture Act 2020/Farm bills, are three acts: The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020; The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020; and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill, 2020. This Act followed one of India's largest and most sustained protest movements. For over a year, thousands of farmers, primarily from Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, camped at Delhi's borders. It was against three proposed laws that loosened rules around sale, pricing and storage of farm produce - rules which have protected farmers from the free market for decades. Farm unions said these laws would leave farmers vulnerable to big companies and destroy their livelihoods. The movement was led by the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), a coalition of farmers' organisations.

Why was the movement successful?

1. Strong and large-scale mobilisation



Farmers from different regions and rural groups participated.

The movement maintained unity despite differences among farmers.

Long-term protests showed strong commitment and organisational ability.

2. Pressure on government through democratic action

The movement used protests, public campaigns, and collective action to create political pressure.

Government attempts to weaken the protest through criticism, legal actions, and police measures did not end the movement.

3. Challenge to neoliberal agricultural reforms

The farm laws represented a shift towards market-based reforms:

Reducing the role of traditional regulated markets (mandis).

Increasing private participation in farming and storage.

Making agriculture more open to corporate involvement.

Key success factors:

- Unity across diverse farmer organizations (Samyukt Kisan Morcha)
- Effective use of social media (WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube)
- International solidarity campaigns (diaspora support in Canada, UK, US)
- Peaceful but persistent civil disobedience

The government repealed the laws in November 2021. This episode demonstrated that even a powerful state can reverse major legislation in response to sustained, well-organized collective action (Jodhka, 2021).

5.2 Gender Justice Movements

There are people who believe that we do not need feminism today, but nothing could be further from the truth. Women have struggled for equality and against oppression for centuries, and although some battles have been partly won such as the right to vote and equal access to education women are still disproportionately affected by all forms of violence and by discrimination in every aspect of life. It is true that in some areas and on certain issues, there have been improvements.



People around the world watched as thousands took to the streets in New Delhi in December 2012 following the gang rape of twenty-three-year-old physiotherapy student Jyoti Pandey. While similar protests were held in other metropolitan cities across the country, the protests in Delhi became so intense that the government imposed a curfew and sanctioned the use of force by its riot police. Domestic as well as international media coverage of these events helped fuel public outrage.

Citizens demanded stricter laws, faster trials, and systemic reforms in police and judicial responses to sexual violence. The government constituted the Justice Verma Committee, whose recommendations led to the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 introducing new offenses (acid attacks, stalking, voyeurism), stricter punishments for rape, and expanded definitions of sexual assault (Menon, 2013).

Subsequently, the #MeToo movement (2018 onward) in India, led largely by journalists, film professionals, and academics, exposed sexual harassment in workplaces and prompted companies and institutions to establish internal complaints committees under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.

Crime statistics:

In 2022, 4,45,256 cases of crimes against women were officially registered in India. This means around 1,220 cases every day. However, the actual number may be higher because many women do not report their experiences.

Different forms of violence:

Women face many types of violence, including: domestic violence, sexual abuse, workplace harassment, human trafficking, discrimination in language, culture, and society.

Problems in reporting crimes:

Many women hesitate to complain because of fear, social pressure, and lack of support. Some police officers refuse to register complaints, especially when the accused is powerful. This prevents women from getting justice.

Role of caste, class, and disability:

Women from disadvantaged groups, such as Dalit women, poor women, and women with disabilities, face greater difficulties in accessing legal protection and justice.



Patriarchal control:

The article explains that society often tries to control women's freedom, movement, and choices. Patriarchal thinking rewards women who follow traditional expectations and punishes those who challenge them.

Workplace harassment:

Even when women become financially independent, they may experience harassment at work. Although laws and guidelines exist to protect women, implementation is often weak.

Domestic violence:

Many women experience physical and sexual violence at home, but only a small number seek help because of fear, shame, or lack of support.

Culture and media influence:

Movies and popular culture sometimes show harassment or controlling behaviour as normal or romantic, which can create acceptance of gender-based violence.

Victim blaming:

Women who speak about sexual violence are often blamed or judged by society instead of receiving support.

Gender Justice Movements and Legal Transformation in India

Gender justice movements in India have not only challenged social attitudes towards violence against women but have also contributed to changes in law, institutions, and public policy. The demand for survivor dignity, accountability, and gender-sensitive justice has influenced judicial and administrative reforms.

An important example is the Supreme Court's decision in *State of Jharkhand v. Shailendra Kumar Rai @ Pandav Rai* (2022), which prohibited the use of the "two-finger test" in examinations of survivors of sexual assault. The Court recognized that such practices were unscientific, violated the dignity of survivors, and reflected harmful stereotypes about women's sexuality.



The decision represents the impact of broader gender justice struggles in India, where women's rights groups, activists, and civil society organizations have continuously challenged victim-blaming approaches and demanded reforms in criminal justice and healthcare systems. It shows how gender movements can contribute not only to social awareness but also to institutional change.

5.3 Citizenship and Constitutional Rights Movements

The operationalization of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019 is a blow to the Indian constitutional values of equality and religious non-discrimination and inconsistent and incompatible with India's international human rights obligations, said Amnesty International today.

“The Citizenship Amendment Act is a bigoted law that legitimises discrimination on the basis of religion and should never have been enacted in the first place. Its operationalization is a poor reflection on the Indian authorities as they fail to listen to a multitude of voices critical of the CAA from people across the country, civil society, international human rights organizations and the United Nations,” said Aakar Patel, chair of board at Amnesty International India.

The anti-CAA/NRC protests (2019–2020) against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 which granted citizenship based on religion mobilized students, civil society, and minority groups across India. Protesters argued the Act violated Article 14 (equality before law) and Article 15 (non-discrimination) of the Constitution. While the Act was not repealed, the movement succeeded in delaying implementation, generating judicial scrutiny (Supreme Court has not stayed but is hearing challenges), and creating sustained public debate on secularism and citizenship (Jha, 2020).

5.4 LGBTQ+ Rights Movement

The LGBTQ+ rights movement in India represents an important contemporary social movement focused on equality, dignity, and recognition of diverse sexual and gender identities. The movement has contributed to wider public discussions on human rights, social inclusion, and constitutional equality.

A major milestone in this context was the decriminalization of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code by the Supreme Court of India in 2018, which marked a significant legal and social recognition of LGBTQ+ rights. This judgment strengthened the broader discourse on individual freedom, dignity, and equal citizenship in India.

The movement continues to play an important role in expanding democratic space and promoting inclusion within Indian society.



6. Digital Activism and the Transformation of Collective Action

In the last two decades, the emergence of social media has revolutionized the way individuals and groups voice their aspirations and form collective solidarity in various social movements (Muhammad Rachimoellah 2024). Digital activism encompasses the use of online platforms and communication technologies to mobilise individuals, shape public discourse and drive social and political transformation. It operates through a spectrum of activities from hashtag campaigns and online petitions to immersive live streams and peer-to-peer networks. Digital activism is not merely a digital replica of offline protest but constitutes a distinct modality defined by immediacy, scalability and the affordances of participatory media. Since its inception, digital media has opened up limitless social networks, making it faster for people to convey ideas, creativity, and aspirations openly. This makes politics more deliberative and has resistance to hegemonic mainstream media (Livingstone 2013). Digital social movements appear massive and viral, as in the case of...Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, And #MeToo there are still doubts about the real contribution of digital activism to structural social change. Digital technologies have reshaped protest movements by enabling rapid dissemination of information across platforms and reducing the cost of mobilisation through tools like WhatsApp and Telegram. They also support transnational networking by connecting diaspora communities with domestic movements. In addition, alternative media such as YouTube and podcasts bypass traditional gatekeepers, while crowdfunding platforms help raise financial support for legal aid and logistics.

7. Contemporary Challenges of Social Movements in Shaping Public Policy

Social movements today operate in a complex environment shaped by globalization, digital transformation, and rising authoritarian tendencies. While they play a crucial role in democratizing policy processes, they face multiple structural, political, and communicative challenges.

7.1. Structural Inequality and Systemic Power Structures

Social movements operate within deeply unequal systems shaped by neoliberal globalization, institutional bias, and economic disparities. Policy processes are often dominated by elite interests, corporate influence, and state institutions that reproduce inequality. This limits the ability of marginalized groups to meaningfully influence public policy and achieve structural change.

7.2. Fragmentation and Ideological Contestation



Contemporary movements face internal fragmentation and external ideological pressures. Competing discourses neoliberal development agendas, identity-based violent mobilizations, and non-violent democratic alternatives create divisions and weaken collective action. Lack of coherence, leadership conflicts, and decentralised digital activism further complicate sustained policy engagement.

7.3. State Resistance, Authoritarianism, and Co-option

Governments and powerful institutions often resist social movements through surveillance, repression, legal restrictions, and misinformation. Movements may also be co-opted or neutralised through selective policy adoption or symbolic reforms. Increasing securitization and militarised responses to dissent further shrink civic space and reduce policy influence.

7.4. Communication Gaps, Media Control, and Public Legitimacy

Movements struggle to shape public opinion due to misinformation campaigns, biased media representation, and uneven digital access (digital divide). While digital platforms enable rapid mobilisation and transnational networking, they also spread misinformation and create unequal participation. Sustaining legitimacy and broad-based public support remains essential but difficult for policy impact.

7.5. Social movements based on social media

This type of movement is often spontaneous and temporary, with participation being reactive and emotional. This raises social problems related to minimal long-term involvement, weak organizational structures, and the difficulty of building sustainable solidarity (Ade Onny Siagian, Agus Susilo, 2021). Collective identities are quickly formed, but also quickly disappear, so that social movements tend to lose direction or resilience. Several countries respond to digital activism with repression, such as arresting activists, restricting internet access, or monitoring online activities (Ahmad and Setyawati 2024). This is a social problem related to restrictions on civil liberties, violations of privacy, and the criminalization of online political participation.

8. Opportunities of Social Movements in Shaping Public Policy

Contemporary social movements in India are increasingly able to influence public policy through a combination of legal, demographic, technological, and transnational channels. These emerging opportunities have expanded both the reach and effectiveness of collective action beyond traditional forms of protest.



8.1. Judicial Engagement and Public Interest Litigation (PIL)

The judiciary has become a crucial institutional space for translating movement demands into enforceable rights and policy directions. Through Public Interest Litigation (PIL), social movements have successfully raised issues related to environmental protection, gender justice, labour rights, and civil liberties. Courts often act as corrective mechanisms when executive or legislative responses are limited or delayed. Ongoing constitutional challenges such as those related to citizenship laws highlight how legal activism continues to shape national policy debates and accountability structures.

8.2. Youth participation and digital activism

A major opportunity lies in the growing involvement of youth combined with digital mobilisation. India's large youth population has become central to movements like Fridays for Future India, which demands climate action, and the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement, which highlighted demands for transparency and governance reform. Digital campaigns such as #MeToo, #SaveTheInternet, and #JusticeForSSR shows how social media enables rapid mobilisation, public debate, and agenda-setting on issues ranging from workplace harassment to digital rights and accountability. Recent student protests in Prayagraj (2024) over UPPSC exam fairness further show how youth activism can directly pressure institutions for policy correction.

8.3. Transnational solidarity networks

Contemporary movements increasingly operate within global networks of solidarity, allowing local issues to gain international visibility and pressure. The influence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in India, which inspired campaigns like #DalitLivesMatter, demonstrates how global narratives shape domestic struggles around caste discrimination and police accountability. Similarly, global feminist movements have strengthened Indian campaigns for gender justice and safety. These transnational linkages enhance legitimacy, attract global attention, and increase policy pressure on governments.

8.4. Hybrid mobilisation (online-offline integration)

Modern movements effectively combine digital tools with physical protest, creating a hybrid model of mobilisation. Social media platforms enable rapid coordination, awareness-building, and narrative framing, while street protests sustain real-world pressure on authorities. The farmers' protests and student-led movements show how WhatsApp coordination, Twitter campaigns, and on-ground



mobilisation work together to strengthen resilience. This integration also helps movements withstand censorship, internet shutdowns, and information control while maintaining continuous public engagement.

8.5. Alternative public sphere and agenda-setting power

An emerging opportunity is the creation of an alternative public sphere through digital media and grassroots communication networks. Movements today are no longer dependent on traditional media or state institutions to shape public discourse. Campaigns like #MeToo, #SaveTheInternet, and #JusticeForSSR demonstrates how social movements can directly influence public opinion and force issues into national debate. This agenda-setting power allows marginalized voices such as students protesting exam reforms or groups demanding social justice to shape policy discussions and push governments toward responsiveness and reform.

9. CONCLUSION

Social movements play an important role in reshaping public policy in India. By acting as powerful instruments of democratic participation, accountability, and social change which make public concerns to the attention of the state. These influencing reforms across social, political, environmental, and economic domains. Through mechanisms such as legal activism, digital mobilisation, and sustained grassroots campaigns, social movements have continuously expanded the scope of public policy and strengthened democratic responsiveness. Despite limitations, social movements remain indispensable to democratic governance. The growing use of digital tools, hybrid forms of mobilisation presents new opportunities for more inclusive and impactful advocacy. In a rapidly changing socio-political context, the future of public policy in India will increasingly depend on constructive engagement between the state, peoples, and organisations ensuring that governance remains responsive, participatory, and inclusive.

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