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Environmental Activism and Movements-Exploring Theoretical Perspectives

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Abstract:

This paper explores the theoretical perspectives surrounding environmental activism and movements, shedding light on their significance in contemporary society. The paper delves into the role of politics in environmental studies, emphasizing that nature should be seen as an integral part of human existence, not just a resource. It suggests that environmental studies are interdisciplinary and touch on various social sciences, particularly politics and economics. To understand environmental movements, the paper draws on theories of social movements. It discusses the factors that prompt collective action, such as changes in life conditions, beliefs, collective capacity, and opportunities for successful action. New social movements are characterized by their informal organization, emphasis on changing values, and commitment to open and democratic participation. The paper also examines the diverse origins of environmental movements, ranging from post-materialist values to the experiences of a post-industrial world. It highlights the differences between new and old social movements, including their blurring of individual and collective identities. Furthermore, the paper discusses the organization and structure of environmental movements, emphasizing their diversity and amorphous nature. It notes that environmental movements often consist of a multitude of informal groups, formal organizations, networks, and individuals with varying goals. It also discusses the pluralistic view of NGOs as interest groups.

Keywords: Environmental Activism, Social Movements, Politics, Non-Governmental Organisations, Theoretical Perspectives.

Introduction:

The term "environment" is rooted in the French word "environ," which signifies encircling or surrounding. Albert Einstein aptly defined the environment as everything that exists beyond oneself. In the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, the environment is described as the natural world in which humans, animals, and plants coexist. "Environ" implies surroundings, and "ment" denotes the process of shaping. The environment represents the intricate interplay between humanity and the natural world. The issue of environmental activism holds immense importance in the modern era.

However, it has not received the systematic attention it deserves in the realm of social science literature.

Environmental Politics and Social Movements:

The significance of politics in environmental studies undergoes a significant expansion when we shift our perspective to view humans as an integral part of nature rather than separate from it. In this paradigm, nature ceases to be merely a resource and transforms into a more comprehensive concept that allows for diverse interpretations. Acknowledging our inclusion within nature, we come to realize that our connections with the non-human world are shaped not only by the physical and biological aspects but also by social constructs. Therefore, contemporary environmental studies encompass the multifaceted relationships among humans and non-humans, interactions among various non-human entities, and even the dynamics between human societies themselves. Environmental studies are “essential inter disciplinarily is intellectually testing and touches not only in biology and ecology but all the social sciences, most especially politics and economics.”(Doyle and Walker, 1996, p.10).

Before delving into the intricate and diverse nature of environmental movements, it's important to establish some key characteristics of social movements in general. Social movements are a term used to describe the way novel coalitions of individuals insert themselves into the political arena, challenging prevailing ideologies and existing power structures. New social movements exhibit distinctive traits such as informal organizational structures, a core emphasis on the transformation of values as a central component of their political agenda, a dedication to open and highly participatory modes of organization, and a willingness to engage in direct action to prevent outcomes they perceive as detrimental. These movements are intentionally disruptive of the established norms of traditional politics, aiming to elevate alternative considerations and issues to the forefront of public discourse. There are many theories about the origin and character of social movements. The most significant of these have their roots in the sociological theories of the Chicago school.

Social movement theory goes back to psychosociology and the study of individual behavior within groups. Collective action according to this theory can be triggered in various ways, depending essentially upon the theoretical framework to which one refers. One can distinguish three main schools. All of them are fundamentally ahistorical. Indeed, collective action can occur either as a result of relative deprivation, as a strategy to articulate common interests, or as a response to economic or political conflicts. In a political context, the purpose of collective action is social change. (Princen and Finger, 1994, pp. 48-49)

In collective action theories, the individual is created as rationally responding to forms of deprivation or to some newly presented opportunity for political success. Such situations usually

occur when there is a social change. In these circumstances, traditional relationships and ideas are challenged sometimes giving rise to social movements.

In this view, a period of rapid social change due to industrial growth and economic transformation, urban growth and rural decline, an economic depression, the aftermath of a lost war, rapid population growth, and the like will weaken and undermine stable groups and communities. As social bonds weaken and traditional answers and remedies no longer work, the population will manifest signs of increasing disorganization... they participate in major social political, and religious movements that seek to reform and restructure institutions. (Oberschall, 1993, p.18)

Collective action theories often provide broad and timeless explanations for the evolution of both traditional and contemporary social movements. However, when examining new social movements, it becomes crucial to focus on the contextual factors that give rise to these movements and to closely analyze the distinct attributes of their participants and objectives.

There are two broad explanations of this type, one that focuses on post-materialist values and one that focuses on the experiences of a post-industrial world. One of the most significant and pervasive accounts of the origin of the new social movements has emphasized a value shift in society explained in terms of the post-materialism thesis. Environmental movements, for example, are seen as possessing post-materialist values that directly contest, in a paradigmatic battle, the dominant materialist values of modern society. (Doyle and McEachern, 1998, p.59)

An alternative account of the origin of environmental movements is based on the thesis of post-industrialism. Writers such as Boggs argue that the post-industrial era created a distinctive social and political environment conducive to the emergence of new social movements. Consequently, the defining features of these movements diverge from those seen in earlier movements, particularly in terms of class dynamics, ideologies, and organizational structures.

Carl Boggs writes from the post-industrialist perspective that the degree to the radicalism of new social movements tends to flow from the deep crisis of industrial society its roots are generally indigenous and organic, making it naturally resistant to totalistic ideologies that galvanized the second and third internationals the eclipse of the industrial growth model, the threat of nuclear catastrophe, bureaucratization, destruction of natural habitat, social anomie cannot be expected to disappear simply through the good intention of political leaders.” (Boggs, 1986, p.23)

It is essential to view general theories of social movements, both traditional and contemporary, as instruments rather than templates that can be universally applied to all situations. These theories can prove highly valuable in certain contexts but may be ill-suited or inadequate in others.

Organization and Structure in Environmental Movements:

Environmental movements exhibit a wide spectrum of both broad and specific objectives,

coupled with diverse internal structures and organizational methods. It is crucial to examine how these movements maintain internal cohesion and the degree to which they unite to establish more cohesive entities. When scrutinizing the multifaceted activities of environmental movements, political scientists have sought to employ various models, including the pluralist interest group model. However, it is important to note that social movements are not mere extensions of large interest groups or formal organizations; they possess greater complexity.

Social movements are often characterized by their informality, amorphous structures, and constant evolution. They transcend the boundaries of conventional interest groups. Instead, they encompass a wide array of informal collectives, formal associations, networks, and individuals, all contributing to each environmental movement's cause. This fragmentation mirrors a spectrum of diverse political ideals, policy objectives, and the strategies employed to achieve them. It underscores the segmented, diffuse, and ever-evolving nature of the movement's organizational framework. "Structures include patterns of links between movement-specific groups and organizations drawn into the orbit of movement activities but formed independently of them (e.g., Political parties, religious bodies ethnic organizations."(Pakalski, 1991, p.32)

For this very reason, it is challenging to determine the precise count of environmental groups operating at any given moment. The environmental movement is in a constant state of flux. As new issues arise on the political agenda, groups often emerge to address them. Conversely, when a particular issue fades from public view, the associated group may also diminish or disband. In India, grassroots environmental movements following the Gandhian tradition of non-violence are gaining momentum. These movements distinguish themselves from their Western counterparts by simultaneously addressing environmental preservation, economic equity, and social justice concerns. Notable examples include the Chipko movement in the Himalayas, the Save the Narmada movement in central India, and the Silent Valley movement in the Malabar region of southern India.

Ramachandra Guha in distinguishing the private and public faces of Indian environmentalism identifies three ideological strands: Crusading Gandhians, Appropriate Technology, and Ecological Marxists. Crusading Gandhians, while rejecting the modern way of life, uphold the traditional village community as protector of environmental and social harmony. Influenced by western socialism, Appropriate Technology strives to combine agriculture and industry, large and small units of production and modern and traditional technology. And the Ecological Marxists have arrived at environmentalism after their protracted engagement with Marxism. (Guha, 1988 pp. 2578-81)

The diverse range of ideologies within Indian environmentalism has played a pivotal role in expanding the scope of protest movements and intensifying the discourse. Voluntary organizations are now widely recognized as essential components of India's development process. These organizations, numbering in the hundreds, operate at the grassroots level. While environmental

concerns are a relatively recent addition to their agendas, they have become a dominant force. Community organizations have emerged through local initiatives that, in some regions, build upon social traditions aimed at safeguarding local rights and the environment. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) serve as both local and external catalysts, actively facilitating and supporting these community groups in their endeavors.

NGOs and Environmental Activism:

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) play a prominent and visible role in the realm of environmental politics. They engage across various levels of political involvement, from local community activism to national and international politics. These NGOs operate in the non-institutional domain of social movement politics and within the structured landscape of political parties, administrative systems, and government bodies, extending their reach even further.

The proliferation of NGOs reflects the surge in environmental activism. Unlike many grassroots groups and informal networks, most NGOs possess formal constitutions. These symbolic documents grant these organizations a greater degree of permanence. Consequently, NGOs are more stable entities, allowing for more comprehensive tracking and assessment of their activities over time. However, for every formal NGO, numerous informal groups, associations, and networks also exist.

Organizations within the realm of social movements exhibit distinctive collective characteristics, with their constitutions serving as a defining feature. These constitutions symbolize the recognition of legitimacy and rationality within the organization and publicly affirm the organization's commitment to operating within the established structures of the state. These constitutions establish rules governing power distribution within the organization, decision-making processes, and interpersonal relationships among members.

Interest Groups and Lobbying:

The interest group or pressure group theory is closely associated with the pluralist interpretation of liberal democracy. Within this perspective, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are considered as interest or pressure groups. In a pluralist framework, it is presumed that power is widely dispersed throughout society, and all citizens possess equal power resources that can be utilized to pursue their interests and objectives. Individuals who share common goals, grievances, or interests are free to establish organizations to advocate for their causes within the political process. In this model, the political system is responsive to at least some of these demands, resulting in a gradual process of adjustment and accommodation. In a pluralist system, the state is regarded as a neutral entity without specific interests or objectives of its own. NGOs, within this context, operate as lobbying entities. They do not seek public offices directly but instead aim to bring about change indirectly through the influence wielded by their members, public opinion, financial resources, and

the power of persuasion.

Duverger argues that these organizations do not participate directly in the acquisition of power or in its exercise they act to influence. Power while remaining apart from it; they exert pressure on it. Pressure groups seek to influence who wields power, not to place their own in power, at least not officially. (Duverger, 1972, p.101)

The problem with the pluralist account lies in its assumption about what happens in the competition with other groups and forces as they struggle to influence government

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this paper has provided a comprehensive exploration of environmental activism and movements from various theoretical perspectives. It has emphasized the urgent need for a universal awareness of the importance of preserving the environment, as the exploitation of nature has brought our planet's ecological balance to the brink of collapse.

The paper delved into the characteristics of social movements, with a focus on new social movements that challenge dominant ideas and power structures. It discussed the theories of collective action and factors prompting social movements, emphasizing the need for something to go substantially wrong for people to coalesce into new social movements.

The origins of environmental movements were explored, with a discussion of post-materialist values and the experiences of a post-industrial world as driving forces behind these movements. The paper also highlighted the distinct characteristics of new social movements, including their blurring of individual and collective identities.

Additionally, the organization and structure of environmental movements were examined, revealing their diverse and often informal nature. A specific focus on environmental movements in India highlighted the emergence of grassroots movements rooted in Gandhian non-violent traditions, which combine environmental preservation with issues of economic equity and social justice.

The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in environmental activism was analyzed, noting their diverse roles and the stability offered by their constitutions. In summary, this paper has provided a multifaceted understanding of environmental activism and movements, shedding light on their complexities, origins, and diverse ideological strands. It underscores the importance of these movements in shaping the future of our planet and the need for continued research and study in the field of environmental politics.

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