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Grassroots Movements and Democracy in India

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ABSTRACT: Grassroots movements or micro movements have become active in different parts of the country since 70s. They represent the desperate struggle of economically marginalized and socially excluded sections of the society. Many micro movements have combined together to form national level alliance to fight against Indian state on the issues of globalization. There is an impression that Indian state is increasingly getting aligned with foreign capital. Micro movements are countervailing forces against global political and economic power e.g. People protesting against upcoming Nanar, Ratnagiri Oil Refinery in Maharashtra. Protest against Vedanta in TN.

KEYWORDS: grassroots movements, democracy, India, foreign capital, protests, globalization, society

I. INTRODUCTION

A grassroots movement is one that uses the people in a given district, region or community as the basis for a political or economic movement. Grassroots movements and organizations use collective action from the local level to effect change at the local, regional, national or international level. Grassroots movements are associated with bottom-up, rather than top-down decision-making, and are sometimes considered more natural or spontaneous than more traditional power structures¹.

Grassroots movements, using self-organization, encourage community members to contribute by taking responsibility and action for their community. Grassroots movements utilize a variety of strategies from fundraising and registering voters, to simply encouraging political conversation. Goals of specific movements vary and change, but the movements are consistent in their focus on increasing mass participation in politics.

According to Smitu Kothari, globalization have revived the grassroots movement around the world because of the destructive forces of development. Globalization have also promoted the growth of movements for peace, human rights and movements against corruption. Amrita Basu suggests the growth of grassroots movements in India is because of capitalist model of development on one hand and the availability² of democratic space on the other hand. Ranjitha Mohanty has suggested that grassroots movements have served following tasks. Replaced the exclusionary narrative of state led development with counter narrative of inclusion. Expand non party political spaces for social actions. Public space is constantly democratized. Renegotiating people's relationship with the state. Site of the reconstruction of modernity through the discourse of citizenship and rights. Seventy-five years ago, we finally won the freedom we fought for for decades. Millions of ordinary citizens came together to demand political freedom that gives us, and no one else, the power to write our own destiny.³

The history of grassroots movements reveals their power to shape the discourse of development to make it democratic in its form, practice and outcome. In this sense 'development' questions become questions about democracy. It is argued in this chapter that contestations over development are also contestations over democratic

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politics, for they raise the questions of equity, equality and inclusion.⁴ The movements have brought the old questions of democratic distribution of the material benefits of development back to the surface, but also infuse them with new meanings by emphasizing the democratic principles and practices that development has undermined. The movements have filled the spaces left vacant in a formal democracy where neither the local governance spaces created by the state for participation nor the political parties have represented the interests of the poor and the marginalized.⁵ The movements have thus both rejected the spaces and emerged as depoliticized sites of alternative grassroots democratic politics. As such, the resistance movements can be looked upon as acts of deepening democracy.⁶

A grassroots movement is an organized effort undertaken by groups of individuals in a given geographic area to bring about changes in social policy or influence an outcome, often of a political issue. By harnessing spontaneous support at local levels to bring about policy changes at local, regional, national, or international levels, grassroots movements are considered bottom-up, rather than top-down efforts—much in the way grass grows. Today, grassroots movements work to influence social issues such as racial injustice, reproductive rights, climate change, income inequality, or affordable housing.⁷ Grassroots movements organize and mobilize individuals to take actions intended to influence social and political issues. Undertaken at local, regional, national, and international levels, grassroots movements are considered bottom-up, rather than top-down efforts. Often growing from “kitchen table discussions” to global networks, grassroots movements can influence issues ranging from racism and voting rights to abortion and climate change. More specifically, grassroots movements are self-organized local-level efforts to encourage other members of the community to participate in activities, such as fundraising and voter registration drives, in support of a given social, economic, or political cause. Rather than money, the power of grassroots movements comes from their ability to harness the effort of ordinary people whose shared sense of justice and knowledge about a given issue can be used to influence policymakers. In growing the seeds of an idea into a flourishing cause through increased participation in the political process, grassroots movements are often said to create democracy—government by the people.⁸

Drawing their power from ordinary people, grassroots movements need large numbers of participants. By making phone calls, sending emails, posting on social media internet sites, and putting up posters, an activist group of just five people can contact 5,000 people in a week. Grassroots organizations increase their size and power by recruiting and training new volunteer leaders and activists. The leaders of grassroots campaigns must master a wide variety of skills, such as public relations, developing flyers, writing letters to the editor and letters to lawmakers, and posting on social media networks. Leaders eventually become organizers, who are responsible for choosing issues, running campaigns, and training new leaders. The full history of “grassroots” as a political metaphor in the United States is unclear. An early use of the phrase “grassroots and boots” is thought to have been coined in 1912 after Senator Albert Jeremiah Beveridge of Indiana, said of former President Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive Party, “This party has come from the grassroots.”⁹ It has grown from the soil of people’s hard necessities.” A 1904 newspaper article on a campaign for possible Roosevelt running mate Eli Torrance quotes a Kansas political organizer as saying, “Roosevelt and Torrance clubs will be organized in every locality. We will begin at the grass roots.”¹⁰

In 1907, Ed Perry, vice-chairman of the Oklahoma Republican Campaign Committee, stated of his platform, “I am for a square deal, grass root representation, for keeping close to the people, against ring rule, and for fair treatment.” The term “ring rule” refers to comparatively small groups of persons, usually headed by a political boss, organized to control a city, county, or state to derive large personal monetary profit from that control.¹¹

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The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s stands as a prominent example of grassroots movements in the United States. An early instance of grassroots politics in the Civil Rights Movement was the 1951 case of educator William Van Til while working for the integration of the Nashville, Tennessee public school system. Van Til worked to create a grassroots movement focused on discussing race relations at the local level. To that end, he founded the Nashville Community Relations Conference, which brought together leaders from various communities in Nashville to discuss the possibility of integration. In response to his attempts to network with leaders in the Black community, white residents of Nashville responded with violence and scare tactics. Despite these and other formidable obstacles, Van Til succeeded in bringing Blacks and Whites together to discuss the potential for changing race relations and was ultimately instrumental in integrating the Peabody College of Education in Nashville. The desegregation plan proposed by Van Til's Conference was implemented by Nashville public schools in 1957. This movement is characterized as grassroots because it focused on changing hearts and minds at the local level using local influence. As grassroots organizers are today, Van Til ultimately succeeded by working with community organizations to foster useful political dialogue.¹²

II. DISCUSSION

Grassroots campaigns succeed by raising money, increasing public awareness, building name recognition, and increasing political participation. To accomplish these goals, grassroots leaders employ a wide variety of strategies including:

- Raising money to pay for political advertising
- Putting up posters, handing out flyers, and going door-to-door
- Conducting letter-writing, phone-calling, and emailing campaigns
- Gathering signatures for petitions
- Holding get out the vote activities and helping people get to polling places
- Organizing larger rallies and marches
- Posting information on online social media networks¹³

Over the last decade, the prominence of online social media networks in grassroots activism has skyrocketed. Online apps such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Vine provide grassroots movements with eager audiences for their causes. The social media technique of hashtags (#) has become an especially effective way of grouping postings from across the network together to present unifying messages. Two of the most influential recent hashtag campaigns were the #MeToo movement in response to allegations of sexual assault and abuse against prominent entertainment industry figures, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement in response to the killing of unarmed Black suspects by White police officers.¹⁴

Examples

Since the early 20th century, grassroots movements have been commonplace in both the United States and in other countries. Notable examples of prominent grassroots campaigns include aspects of the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, the East German peace movement of the 1980s, and the 1988 political uprising in Myanmar. Some other examples include:

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Women's Suffrage

One of the modern world's defining grassroots movements, the women's suffrage campaign lobbied for women's right to vote, a victory it won in 1920 with the enactment of the 20th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Like all great grassroots movements, women's suffrage had charismatic leaders, such as Inez Milholland Boissevain who, riding on a snow-white horse, became the iconic image for the major suffrage march in Washington, D.C., on March 3, 1913. At its height, the movement had over 2 million members who helped stage massive parades of as many as 20,000 women.¹⁵

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)

Founded in 1980 by Candy Lightner, whose 13-year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver, MADD works to raise awareness about drunk driving and to strengthen drunk driving laws. From a handful of similarly grieving mothers in California, MADD soon grew to several hundred chapters across North America. By 1982, more stringent DUI laws had been enacted in 24 states. Just a year later, at least 129 new DUI laws had taken effect. Later in 1983, MADD succeeded in getting the legal drinking age effectively raised to 21 nationwide, when President Ronald Reagan signed the Uniform Drinking Age Act into law. In 2000, after years of lobbying, President Bill Clinton signed legislation lowering the legal blood alcohol level in the U.S. from .12 to .08. Today, the annual number of drunk driving deaths has decreased by over 50% and MADD stands as one of the largest and most successful grassroots movements in recent history.¹⁶

Me Too

The Me Too movement is a grassroots effort to combat sexual abuse and harassment. Organized mainly through social media under the #MeToo hashtag, the movement was started in 2006 by American sexual harassment survivor and social activist Tarana Burke.

Podemos (Spain)

Translated as "we can" in English, Podemos is a grassroots protest movement dedicated to reforming the political and economic system in Spain. Organized in 2013, Podemos' stated goals are to heal the economy, promote individual liberty, equality, and fraternity, redefine sovereignty, and recover agricultural land from exploitive industries. A few of their most notable demands include a universal basic income, higher corporate taxes, constitutional reforms, and reduction of fossil fuel consumption. Since gaining more than 50,000 members in its first 24 hours of existence, Podemos boasted more than 170,000 official members in 2012 and stood as Spain's second-largest political party.¹⁷

Sovereign Union (Australia)

Sovereign Union is a grassroots coalition of First Nations Indigenous peoples from communities across Australia and their supporters. Organized in 1999, Sovereign Union seeks freedom from colonial bondage in the form of a treaty restoring the original sovereignty of Australia's indigenous Aboriginal peoples. Having never officially

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surrendered the sovereignty taken from them during the British colonization of Australia, the continent's Indigenous peoples continue to seek the right to live true to their traditional culture¹⁸

IV. RESULTS

The form of grassroots democracy and domination in India and the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in the progression of rural areas is great. India has been a welfare state ever since after Independence and the chief objective of all governmental endeavours has been the wellbeing of its populace. Basic principles of government are elimination of poverty, ignorance, diseases and inequality of opportunities and providing a better and higher quality of life. India's democratic structure has three levels of governance which are national, state, and local.

In simple term, Grassroot democracy is a people/community driven contribution in elections, governance and decision making. Grassroot democracy can be seen as a propensity towards designing political processes where as much decision making authority as practical is shifted to the lowest level of organization. Therefore, a local government is a government at the grassroots level of administration meant for meeting peculiar grassroots need of the people (Agagu, 1997). Appadorai (1975) also opined that the local government system as government is by the popularly elected bodies charged with administrative and executive duties in matters concerning the populations of a particular district or place. Local government was further defined by Lawal (2000) as that tier of government closest to the people, "which is vested with certain powers to exercise control over the affairs of people in its domain". Local government is a system of public administration at a local level, charged with the responsibility of bringing the people at the grassroots closer to the government. Grassroots organisations can have numerous structures; depending on the type of organisation and what the members want. These can be non-structured and non-hierarchical organisations that are run by all members, or by whichever member wishes to do something. The grassroots level is called the Panchayati Raj System. If democracy means people's participation in running their affairs, then it is nowhere more direct, clear and significant than at the local level, where the contact between the people and their representatives, between the rulers and the ruled is more constant, vigilant and manageable. Lord Bryce believed: "The best school of democracy and the best guarantee for its success is the practice of local self - government". Decentralization is a main mechanism through which democracy becomes truly representative and responsive¹⁹

The 73rd amendment to the Indian Constitution (1992) clearly prescribes that the Panchayats should be institutions of self-government through which powers are devolved to the people as to the participation in the process of planning for economic development and social justice, and implementation of schemes and programmes for these purposes. To strengthen and enhance the efficiency of local governance, PRIs were structured and designed as three tier system. The base of this pyramidal structure is the gram sabha (or village assembly), composed of all citizens eligible to vote, and so the foundation of grassroots democracy. Whatever the case, the grass roots level institutions are vital instruments in the process of development to lower levels and these processes are quicker as and when common people identify themselves as active partners. There are so many facets to the issue of grassroots governance and development in India and it is very important because of more than 65 percent of India's population comes from rural areas and its fortune and future are determined by these PRIs.²⁰

Grassroots democracy is a tendency towards designing political processes that shift as much decision-making authority as practical to the organization's lowest geographic or social level of organization.

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Grassroots organizations can have a variety of structures; depending on the type of organization and what the members want. These can be non-structured and non-hierarchical organizations that are run by all members, or by whichever member wishes to do something.²¹

To cite a specific hypothetical example, a national grassroots organization would place as much decision-making power as possible in the hands of local chapters or common members instead of the head office. The principle is that for democratic power to be best exercised it must be vested in a local community and common members and instead of isolated, atomized individuals, at the top of the organization. Grassroots organizations can inhabit participatory systems. Grassroots systems differ from representative systems that allow local communities or national memberships to elect representatives who then go on to make decisions.²⁵

The difference between the three systems comes down to where they rest on two different axes: the rootedness in a community (grassroots versus national or international); and the ability of all individuals to participate in the shared decision-making process (participatory versus representative).²²

V. CONCLUSIONS

Grassroots democracy is a key component of libertarian socialist political philosophies, which, for various reasons, advocate putting firms under the control of local communities or councils. For example, eco-socialists argue that firms should be controlled by the group of people whose ecosystem is directly affected by that firm's activity. Meanwhile, Anarchists view contemporary forms of employment as examples of unjust and unnecessary forms of hierarchy and centralization.²⁴ Finally, Libertarian Marxists view history as a struggle between various social groups where the inclusive nature of a grassroots economy will enable new socioeconomic groups to emerge such that these struggles will abate, thereby, improving the human condition.²³

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