

*BRIEF REPORT OF Seminar organised by the
Social and Cultural Movements Group, Edge Hill:*

**The Changing Trajectory of Social Movements in
Rural India: Practising Anomalies and Conceptual
Dilemmas**

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On the 6th of June 2007, the Social and Cultural Movements Group, based at Edge Hill University in the UK, was very pleased to welcome Professor Debal Singha Roy, who delivered a paper on: “The Changing Trajectory of Social Movements in Rural India: Practising Anomalies and Conceptual Dilemmas”. Professor Roy, who is based at the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, is currently in the UK as a Commonwealth Fellow at the Open University, Milton Keynes.

Professor Roy began his talk, which focused principally on the state of West Bengal, by reviewing the numerous social movements that had emerged in that region from the 1940s to the 1980s. Most of these, beginning with the Tebhaga Movement that emerged in the last days of the British Raj, were the product of peasant discontents and often had left-wing leadership. The Naxlite movement, for example, that emerged in the late 1960s was at least partly inspired by the Communist slogan : ‘land to the tiller’.

Since the 1980s, Professor Roy explained, West Bengal, and indeed the whole of India had gone through a number of very significant changes. The state was moving, he argued from being a predominantly agricultural economy to being a service economy. Poverty continues at a relatively high level and this, turn has created an increasing dependency on political mobilisers, principally in the various communists parties. Increased levels of literacy and the development of mass communications have created the possibility for greater participation in multiple channels of mobilisation. Political mobilisations have become more diverse, involving women,

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religious minorities and tribal peoples. All of these developments, he argued, have to be understood against the backdrop of West Bengal's transition from being a 'local' society to being part of an international society; a process has led to a weakening of traditions and the development of a de-contextualised existence within ongoing global processes. The fracture in West Bengal's social movements was summarised by Professor Roy in the table below:

Dominant Trends of Mobilization by Time

Radical (till early 1970s)	Reformative (Since mid 1970s)
Ideological Orthodoxy	Ideological revisionism
Specific goal, hostile against institution, norms	Diverse goals, guided hostility, adherence to norms
Structural change, egalitarianism	Reformative change
Single ideology, secret organisations	Multiple ideology, open organisation
Participants are change agents	Participants are Beneficiaries
State Oppression	State patronage at times
Against dependency and domination	New structure of dependency and domination
Consolidated class action	Dispersed collective/individual action

As a consequence of these developments the clear class conflicts of the past are not so obviously apparent, it is not that such conflicts have disappeared, it is rather that they now take a wide variety of often subtly nuanced forms. To illustrate this Professor Roy told the story of a man whose peasant father had been humiliated by a landowner. In adulthood the man became a successful urban worker, and in time moved into a house next to the landowner. In West Bengal the consumption of meat is usually limited to once a week, but the wages of this particular man enabled him to eat it much more regularly. What really gave the man pleasure, though was the knowledge that the smell of the highly spiced meat would waft over to the house of his landowner neighbour, telling him in effect, that the family was now beyond his power, and his insults; an example of class struggle by conspicuous consumption!

Such developments have, Professor Roy argued, called into question the applicability of some of the current academic approaches to conceptualising social movements, as they occur in West Bengal. The Professor argued for an holistic approach to understanding of social movements, taking into account the dynamics of social mobility, social conflict, collective mobilisation and social transformation and change.

The presentation stimulated an animated and enthusiastic discussion. Dr. Tasleem Shakur, of the International Centre for Development and Environmental Studies (ICDES) made a number of contributions, drawing on his experience of the region, in particular Bangladesh, which borders on West Bengal. Other members of the audience drew parallels between the use of consumption as an indicator of status, with the values of the British working class in the early 19th century, values which compelled them to eat white bread, despite its nutritional deficiencies.

The meeting concluded with the expression of thanks to Professor Roy, for his extremely interesting and illuminating presentation.