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Q2(b)

Discuss the role of social movements in strengthening the democratic processes in developing societies

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · PSIR GS 2 · 15 marks · Politics of Representation and Participation

Politics of Representation and Participation: Political parties, pressure groups and social movements in advanced industrial and developing societies.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss the role of social movements in strengthening the democratic processes in developing societies
- Write at 15-mark length

Revision summary

Movements are sustained claims that widen the people who count in politics.

In developing societies they compensate for thin parties and weak local institutions.

Indian environmental and information campaigns, and anti-apartheid struggle, are teaching cases.

They feed laws and courts as well as street protest.

Violence and State repression are the failure modes, not the definition.

Introduction

In developing societies the formal vote often arrived before dense civic institutions. Social movements fill that gap. They put new issues and new groups into the democratic process.

Body

What movements do for democracy

- Charles **Tilly** treated movements as sustained public claims on power. They expand the demos beyond the notables who first captured independence parties.
- **They convert needs into rights language:** land, wages, environment, caste dignity, and gender.
- They watch the State between elections, which Guillermo O'Donnell called a dimension of democratic quality, not a luxury.

Developing-society cases

- India's **Chipko**, Narmada Bachao, and later right-to-information campaigns pushed accountability onto the public agenda.
- Anti-apartheid mobilisation in South Africa made majority rule more than a constitutional clause.
- Peasant leagues, trade unions, and indigenous movements in Latin America bargained inside and against electoral regimes.

How the process is strengthened

- **Agenda setting:** issues that parties ignore become campaign material.
- **Inclusion:** women, Dalits, ethnic minorities, and informal workers learn to organise as citizens.
- **Institutional spillover:** new laws, commissions, and public-interest litigation often follow street and court combined pressure.

Risks

- Violence, secession, and capture by patrons can weaken the same process.
- The State may criminalise protest and still hold elections. Movement strength then measures how democratic the democracy is.

Flow diagram

Social movements -> Agenda and rights

Social movements -> Inclusion of new groups

Agenda and rights -> Stronger democratic process

Inclusion of new groups -> Stronger democratic process

Elections -> Stronger democratic process

Conclusion

Social movements strengthen developing democracies by widening who claims, what is claimed, and how governments are watched. They are not a substitute for elections. They stop electoral democracy from shrinking to a five-year ritual.

Facts & figures

Tilly

Social movements as organised, public, and repeated claim-making against holders of power.

Chipko

Himalayan forest-protection mobilisation that entered Indian environmental law and party talk.

RTI movement

Indian campaign that helped produce the Right to Information Act, a tool of democratic accountability.

O'Donnell

Stressed that polyarchy needs horizontal accountability, not only a vote.