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Q7(b)

Discuss how "environmentalism" can be explained with new social movements approach.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Sociology GS 1 · 15 marks · Politics and Society

Politics and Society: Sociological theories of power; Power elite, bureaucracy, pressure groups, and political parties; Nation, state, citizenship, democracy, civil society, ideology; Protest, agitation, social movements, collective action, revolution.

Core demand of the question

- Discuss how "environmentalism" can be explained with new social movements approach
- Keep the discussion within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

- **NSM theory:** movements struggle over identity and the quality of life, not only wages.

Touraine, **Melucci**, and Habermas named historic actors, networks, and the lifeworld.

Environmentalism fits as defence of nature and livelihood against system projects.

Chipko and Narmada illustrate Indian forms.

Guha and world-system critique stop a purely post-material reading.

Introduction

Environmentalism is a politics of nature, risk, and livelihood that often sits outside the old union-and-party map of class. The new social movements approach, after Alain **Touraine**, Alberto **Melucci**, and Jurgen Habermas, explains it as identity, culture, and civil-society action in post-industrial or post-colonial public spheres.

Body

What the NSM approach claims

- **Touraine** treated movements as struggles over the historic quality of social life, not only over wages. The actor names a self against a dominating apparatus.
- **Melucci** stressed submerged networks, identity, and information as resources. The movement is a message about how we shall live.
- Habermas placed new movements as defences of the lifeworld against system steering by money and administrative power.
- **Offe and others contrasted them with old labour movements:** cross-class membership, non-party forms, post-material or risk issues.

How this explains environmentalism

- **Chipko** in the Himalaya combined livelihood, gender, and forest as a moral community, not a classic strike for pay.

- The **Narmada Bachao Andolan** named displacement, river, and alternative development against a large-dam state-and-capital project.
- Silent Valley and later climate marches mix science, identity of "the affected", and media spectacle.
- Membership is often students, peasants, women, and professionals in shifting coalitions, which **Melucci's** networks fit.

Indian and Southern twist

- Ramachandra Guha distinguished environmentalism of the poor from Northern post-material ecology. NSM tools still work if livelihood is kept inside identity, not treated as a luxury value.
- Andre Gunder Frank and Wallerstein remind us that forests and dams sit in a world-system of extraction. NSM culture talk must not erase that.
- SHG and local resource groups can be quiet environmental actors without a national banner.

Limits of the approach

- Old organisations, unions, and parties still carry green demands. The "new" is not a clean replacement.
- State repression and caste in movement leadership need conflict theory beside identity theory.
- Global climate NGOs can professionalise and lose the NSM grassroots that **Melucci** prized.

Flow diagram

New social movements -> Identity networks
 New social movements -> Lifeworld versus system
 Identity networks -> Environmentalism
 Lifeworld versus system -> Environmentalism
 Environmentalism -> Chipko Narmada

Conclusion

New social movements theory explains environmentalism as identity, networks, and defence of the lifeworld against system projects. **Chipko** and Narmada are the teaching cases. Keep Guha's environmentalism of the poor and world-system extraction in the same frame, or the approach becomes a Northern lifestyle story.

Facts & figures

Touraine

Movements as actors fighting over the cultural orientation of society.

Melucci

Submerged networks and identity; the movement as a symbolic message.

Chipko

Himalayan forest protection joining livelihood, women, and ecology.

Narmada Bachao Andolan

Anti-displacement movement against large dams; a canonical Indian environmental NSM.

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