Will social movements empower poor and marginalised people to struggle for improved livelihoods and well-being?

This panel will focus on the role that people’s or social movements play among the poorest sections in South Asian societies. Are social movements advocates for the poor and marginalised in the contemporary period, and if so, can we expect that social movements will play a crucial role in bringing the plight of the poorest back onto the development agendas (so heavily dominated by neo-liberal discourses) of the near future?

We start from the fact that poverty and inequality persist throughout South Asia, though exact figures and trends are disputed. This poverty and inequality persists in spite of decades long efforts by the respective states’ developmental administrations – efforts that were, and are, considerably supported by multilateral and bilateral donors and their fringe of NGOs and I-NGOs. But many argue that this state-led development paradigm (the developmental state) has failed the poorest, including its often donor-driven ‘participatory’ guise.

In the light of this experience, the de-concentration or decentralisation of state governance was expected to bring development opportunities not only closer to the citizens, but also better reflect their concerns and visions. This new strategy led to some success in specific localities and contexts, but the majority of South Asia’s people benefitted little – and specifically so the poorest and the marginalised.

This draws our attention to public action by the concerned themselves – i.e. forms of non-state organisations, and people’s or social movements. As a matter of fact, many of these organisations and movements challenge and even resist the state's development agenda (accused of being neo-liberal). And above all, many of them claim to authentically represent people's (and especially poor and marginal people’s) aspirations towards well-being. In order to support these claims, they take actions ranging from directly providing support to poor and marginal people (e.g. in accessing state services, and thus often substituting state services), to non-violent protest against structural constraints or exploitation, and at times they even go for militancy.

During the 1970s and 1980s, many people’s movements mobilised their claims and activities around economic identities, especially class (e.g. peasant movements, movements of agricultural labour, etc.), and a vocabulary of class conflict. However, in recent decades, such class-based mobilisation became conspicuous by its absence in many parts of South Asia (except maybe Nepal and parts of India). Instead, other identities emerged as anchor points for mobilisation, such as religion, ethnicity, and gender or regional/territorial categories. Linked to that, the purpose of mobilisation has switched from more economic/material dimensions of everyday livelihood concerns (e.g. access to land and struggles for land reform or better wages), to more non-material concerns of dignity or group cohesion (e.g. caste-based groups; religious mobilisation, or mobilisation for regional autonomy and self-rule).

But how far do these varied and heterogeneous forms of contemporary social mobilisation really represent the aspirations and concerns of the poor and marginalised social groups – especially when recalling the above-mentioned shortfalls of state-led development and decentralisation/NGO-isation? Does the argument we have put forward above hold? How far do social movements today address the everyday (material) livelihood struggles of those in poverty – not only in their discourses and language, but also in their actual practices? On
whose radar are the poor and marginalised? How are the poor and marginal’ people’s concerns portrayed and framed, and how do such groups and movements legitimise their claims? How are their actions related to the concerns of the poor?

And finally, are social movements in a position to “shape the future”?

For this panel, we invite original and empirically grounded contributions across theoretical positions (old and new) that critically engage with our thoughts.

Speakers are requested to submit their abstracts for this panel by 1 October 2012.

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