# The Anatomy of Social Movements and How Can Brands Leverage Them

Author: Abhijit Das

**Introduction**

Social movements have been studied for a very long time and in great depth. Some scholars have spent their entire career on the subject and have specialized on specific social movements that have occurred in the past. My work owes a lot to these luminaries, whose detail and debate have helped my analysis and shaped my point-of-view one way or the other. The attempt here is not to analyze or critique existing theories on the subject. This paper broadly focuses on understanding the concept of social movements and arriving at a conceptual construct of the phenomenon.

The fundamental difference is in the intent. Scholars have pursued a universal definition of social movements, while my definitions and interpretations are only concerned with finding a working model of social movements in the interest of creating a meaningful engagement model for brands and businesses.

**What is a social movement? And, what is not.**

Cause.com, co-founded by Sean Parker and Joe Green, in 2007 goes with the motto "Anyone can change the world". Today it houses 5 Lakh causes, supported by 170 million members and 40 million dollars overall. Yes, it is a big business, but it is a bigger indication is of our times, our value system and the vulnerability of the status quo. The question is, are they social movements? Can they achieve what notable social movements like the 'Chipko Movement' or the 'Occupy Wall Street' have achieved?

To answer this question, let's first look at the concept of social movements.

Social movements are best defined as 'collective action' aimed at changing the 'conscience' (unwritten codes) or the 'constitution' (written codes) of a homogenous group. The 'Slut Walk' and the 'Pink Underwear' movements are examples of the former. Both of them challenged the moral policing of women by a male dominated society. They did attempt a change in 'attitude' but the movement was devoid of a definitive yardstick. While the 'Civil Rights Movement' and the 'Jan Lokpal Movement' are examples of the latter where the laws governing the conduct of citizens was put to evaluation and modified in letter and in spirit.

In the same breath now let us look at some brand campaigns dubbed as social movements like Gillette's 'WALS' or Mahindra's 'Spark the rise'. The former attempted to change the attitude towards facial hair among men and women, along the axis of attraction. The latter weaved itself into an existing upward shift of the bottom of the pyramid in India. While WALS addressed the elitist or urban population, the latter hit at the grassroots level. The point-of-view that 'women find men with facial hair unattractive' may be right or wrong, but it is skin-deep, a fad at best, not central enough to cause social change. Hence, cannot be regarded as a social movement. It is a tea-time update, unable to hold a conversation or debate. And it was treated as one, flavor of the season. On the other hand, 'spark the rise' is too generic and lacks conflict which is a core

ingredient of a movement-worthy cause. It is as unprovocative as saying; music can make your mood. You cannot disagree with it, but it cannot spark a conversation or debate either. It is seems to draw focus on Mahindra as a brand, which is relevant to a small universe, not enough to trigger a social movement. It is too branded to be outward, and its inwardness is a handicap. Can you have 'Think different' as a social movement?

Over the next few minutes, we will have a method to make this distinction.

There are ingredients that make a social movement and determine its extent. If you are missing some, probably you don't have a social movement there.

**What is the relevance of this dialogue in our times?**

The global economic crisis, global warming, sustainability questions arising from the fast depletion of natural resources are brewing unease and unrest. They have been there and will be there for a very long time. It would be apt to say that instability and uncertainty has become a way of life. People in every sphere of activity are feeling the brunt of this crisis.

Firstly, the world today is going through a transformative state. One of the main reasons behind this state of flux is the continuous presence of crisis. We are living next door to it. Some erupt un-announced while some are anticipated and awaited. In this scenario social movements become critical in helping us live through the crisis and cross over to the desired state.

Through social movements individuals vent out their feelings on larger issues that they cannot take on as an individual. They take solace in a shared experience and eventually succeed in coming to terms with the instability and uncertainty, one way or the other.

Secondly, technology has managed to bring the remotest of experiences alive to a large audience across the globe, timely. Participation has become a social obligation and is complemented by

evolved platforms that allow sharing with convenience.

Thirdly, the mandate to 'look out for us' is shifting from the 'powers that be' to our own hands. Uncertain and insecure, we are learning to trust ourselves and take matters in our own hands. The wisdom of the crowds is gaining legitimacy and effectiveness.

In view of these broad changes the way people look at brands and engage with them is bound to change as well.

Brands have entered our lives – individual, family, community, country and planet. So, all brands have a choice to participate in our lives and talk to our head and heart, than just talk to our wallets. Between the increasing clutter of brands and the demanding lives of people, brands need to chalk out a role that is valued and remembered in constructing or deconstructing the way of life as we know it.

Just as we are so actively involved in this transformation, we expect our brands to be as well. Brands can add a lot more value to themselves with this new model of engagement in addition to the competitive advantage they have on the shelf. It is not merely coincidental that brands with great CSR initiatives are favored by consumers and countries alike. A CSR is still extrinsic and not intrinsic to the purpose of brands and therefore the concept of social movements become important to connect with the audience at a deeper level.

Today, every brand wants to be seen as a game-changer and shed the commoditized nature of its offering in the cacophony of competition. It is not easy for brands to charm us off our preoccupation with a mere utility which is not so consequential to our transformative state. And connecting with people through a social movement ensures hitch-hiking into their lives and to their circles leveraging advocacy and unpaid media respectively.

In a nutshell, brands need to achieve an intrinsic connect between their purpose and people's lives in this transformation and leveraging or creating social movements is a way to get there.

**The fundamental pieces of the puzzle**

A **group** that is addressed by a social movement could be a race, society, nation or the world. It is important for the individuals of this group to share something common. This commonality should be central enough to qualify them as a homogenous group. Unless individuals intended to be involved in the movement can identify with each other, one cannot whip up a social movement. A movement worthy theme must need a collaborative effort to address the intended goal. This collective theme is called a **'cause'**.

Social movements are generally classified under progressive and non-violent movements. At the heart of all social movements is a desired 'social change'. A social movement's success depends on its ability to muster and demonstrate enough 'people power' to negotiate an outcome.

At the onset, it is important to understand that a 'social movement' is not linear, but random and iterative. Imagine it as a bag of wool which can be set on fire from any corner. The environment has a lot of bearing on the way the fire spreads, who will be the hero and what will be the defining act. The only definitive handle is in the origin of the movement. Therefore, in order to leverage 'collective action' we have to first understand how a social movement is born.

**Social movements are born out of conflicts.**

Conflicts are triggered in individuals due to transforming identities at an individual and at a group level.

In order to understand the nature of 'conflicts' from the standpoint of a social change, we will have to cut through the basic constituent of the society – the individual. The individual is in constant negotiation with the environment and his inner consciousness. The outcome of this negotiation is an 'identity'. Identity being a static idea is put to transformation when it is challenged by the changes in the environment. We are prey to continuous re-evaluation to keep pace and make peace with the fast changes around us. Any mismatch between the two creates a 'conflict' and triggers a transformation of the identity. Similarly,

a group identity transforms to keep pace with the changes in individual identities.

Any brand or business willing to create or leverage a social movement needs to identify identity conflicts in a group and the conditions that support it.

A recent example is the simmering outrage against Coke for draining water out of the nation. It is a conflict which wasn't born today, but surfaced again when the notion of abundance is being challenged across in the backdrop of the global economic crisis. This outrage can be leveraged by an outside-in, compensating activity like a CSR or an inside-out process that respects the resources of the community. Any brand with a business model similar to the latter can leverage this conflict and turn it into a social movement for its own advantage.
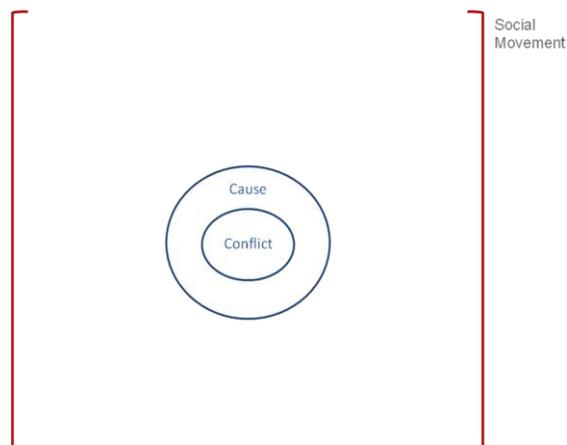


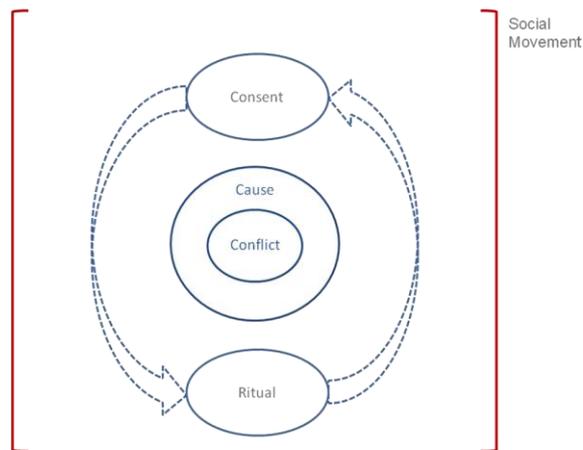*Conceptual diagram - 1: The Construct of a social movement*

The choice of the cause for the conflict not only influences the adoption by the core group, but also the consent by an extended group.

This is the process of turning a conflict into a shared conflict by refining and redefining the conflict so that it represents the values of a majority. The key struggle for social movements is to crack this idea of the conflict that represents the real values of the majority. This idea will determine whether the social movement will remain in the fringes or come to the center of the society, which finally would impact its momentum. We call this as the 'cause'. The cause is a simple

argument which explains in essence the conflict and the reason for the movement to exist.

The conflict of the 'occupy wall street' movement was simply articulated as '1 and 99'. It asserted that one percent of the society controls 99 percent of the wealth, therefore bringing up the question of foul-play, power play, etc. The cause in this case was a call to take over the epicenter of capitalism – Wall Street. It is provocative in its tone and leverages the most common reference to 'wealth' available in the culture. Once the cause is articulated, it becomes the baton and the sword for a 'change agent' or the 'activist'. It is the purest and the most popular articulation of the conflict that is shared and spread.

Let us look at the most recent example of a social movement on the Indian soil – India Against Corruption. The movement took forward an idea of 'Lokpal' that was coined originally in 1963, by L.M Singhvi, a Member of Parliament during a debate in Parliament about grievance redressal mechanisms. In its current form, it is called the 'Jan Lokpal Bill'. 'Jan' means citizens and 'Lokpal' means 'protector of the people'. The current conflict was the alienation of people from power. Voting became a futile exercise of choosing the better from the worse. The ruled increasingly felt disconnected from the ruler and was feeling helpless in bringing the desired change in their lives. Corruption was almost believed as the manner in which the ruler ruled. Scams after scams fed into this feeling of helplessness and haplessness. The conflict was then cast into the tune of the times to 'bring power back to the people' in the form of a cause known as 'India Against Corruption'. It was a strategically chosen articulation which helped join the powerless together to reclaim their role.

*Conceptual diagram - 2: The Construct of a social movement*

Another key element of the composition is 'consent' from a broader audience. Besides the commoners or sufferers, this 'call to action' should attract and involve people at all levels – lobbyists, journalists, etc. Multiple events can be organized during the lifetime of a social movement to generate consent.

The idea at this stage is to render a war cry (like Occupy Wall Street) that would jolt people out of comfort and attack their conscience to convert them for or against the movement. This garners legitimacy for the cause through varied and visible advocates. In the case of the 'Jan Lokpal' movement, we saw celebrities and office holders like Amir Khan, Kiran Bedi supporting the movement actively. This is a turnkey moment in the formation of the movement, as the movement is now able to leverage the system for its cause by demonstrating factions of disagreement within the system. This will give the struggle a new lease of life and limelight.

Another tactic in generating 'consent' is by inviting outrage from the opponent. As observed by Dr. Doug McAdam, the selection of Birmingham, Alabama for demonstration during the Civil Rights Movement in 1963 was a strategic choice which gave the movement headlines and support across and took it to success. Similar was the turnaround achieved with the 'lathi-charge' on the supporters unleashed by the people-in-power in the 'Jan Lokpal' movement.

'Consent' and 'rituals' related to the cause are complementary to each other. Fasts, candle light processions, wearing 'I am Anna' caps to work are examples of rituals that accompany a call for 'consent'.

Finally, we come to 'belief'. 'Belief' is the ultimate ideal of a 'conflict' and it suggests that a majority of the population believe in the 'cause' and support the movement.

For e.g. the 'Jan Lokpal' in the 'India against corruption' movement was embraced as the ideal solution to the conflict. In the 'Belief' stage people start weaving other conflicts with the cause. 'India Against Corruption' saw farmers walking hundreds of kilometers on foot to join the cause as they believed that the government lacks empathy for them. Lack of water for irrigation, subsidies, etc. was viewed in the light of corrupt governance.
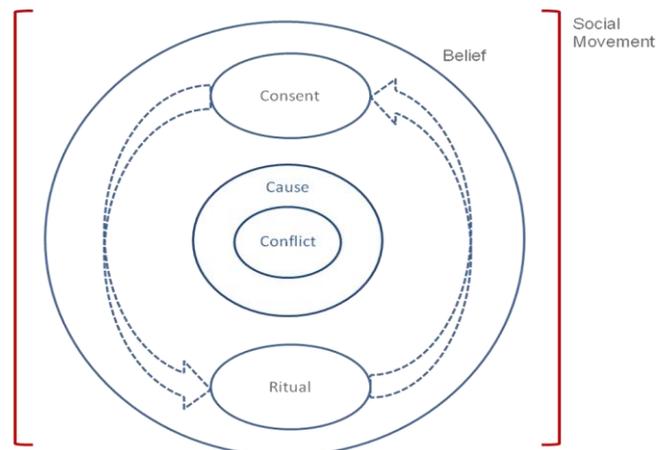


*Conceptual diagram - 3: The Construct of a social movement*

Every conflict has a lifecycle – origin, growth, maturity, decline and death. However, social movements don't have a lifecycle as it is not linear but random. Primarily because there can be multiple conflicts feeding a social movement at the same time or over a period of time.

**PART II: Brand with content or just cover?**

These are times when brands and individuals both are asking the same question, 'Am I making a difference?'

For brands it is not just a question of skin deep makeover of public image but integral to the sustainability and scalability of their business. And this is a question that even consumers have

started asking themselves and those who to claim their mindshare.

To my mind, brands have achieved a level of familiarity where they have to have more to themselves to nurture their relationships with the consumers. Brands need content, not cover.

People naturally attribute and expect basic things like quality, innovation, price and presentation from everything that is branded. Bisleri, Aquafina, Kinley, Himalaya, Oxygen – all of them are 'safe bottled drinking water' performing the key task of quenching thirst minus worries in an external environment. Thus, they are interchangeable with no real reason to insist upon one over the other. I would like to stretch the role and reason of a branding exercise on this argument. In today's marketplace a brand needs to aim at 'elimination' of others than just 'selection' of self to be successful as a proposition for the consumer as well as the business. Thus, there is a need to re-calibrate the purpose of the brand in the life of the consumer.

Let's look at a few brands with stories.

Dove's story about 'real beauty' is not just a cover, but a cause. It is an ambitious attempt at a social change in women and the way the society looks at her. It has content and will have for a long-long time from where we are today as a society.

Closer home we have beautiful examples like 'Lijjat', 'Amul' and 'Jaipur Rugs'. All of them are multi-dimensional brands which run deep into the lives and times of the people they are serving.

'Amul' for one championed a social change for the greater good, led the 'white revolution' for which the small town of Anand in Gujarat has earned a permanent place in the hearts and history of the country. Would you still call Amul's advertising as it stands today a coincidence or creative genius? Again, it is a brand with content, not just cover. It has lived and loved enough to comment on the nation and the people.

**Brands can make a difference**

Advertising runs deep into the hearts and homes of over a billion people who live in India is varied

economic conditions. You can't talk a away from the role that brands can play in creating an ecosystem that is conducive to co-existence than just mindless consumption. K.V Sridhar a.k.a Pops, NCD, Leo Burnett India, spoke about this impact in an interview with afaqs.com recently while referring to the public service campaign 'Hum Do, Humare Do' on family planning launched few decades back. The visual symbol in that campaign depicted a family of four with one boy child and one girl child as the ideal family. This inadvertently challenged the idea of a family with two girls as an ideal family over a period of time.



It is significant alright. But is it motivating enough for your brand?

**Social movements help embed brands in culture**

To save even half-a-chance of success, brands are leveling up with the competition on the basics of the product promise. Brand differentiation at a product level is becoming next to impossible given the speed of innovation and access to technology.

Close comparisons between looks and functionality is rampant, leaving the consumer to choose between ideologies – the one which is more like him/her, the one which he wants to sport. Mobile handsets market is a definitive example. What Samsung did to Apple and Blackberry with the Galaxy Series and Smart-phones respectively, is reality on your face, than reality knocking at your door.

Let's take the case of Bisleri. The challenge is that people ask for a Bisleri and happily walk away with an Aquafina or Kinley bottle.

As the category matures, the codes set by the first mover or the leader, as the case maybe, become generic to the category. In Bisleri's case, it was the first mover and is the leader still with 60% of marketshare. But as other players realized the potential, they mimicked the qualities people were buying into – safe and portable drinking water; and put consumers in the dilemma of choice. With the current supply situation and the increased mobility of consumers, any plastic bottle with a sealed cap and visibly clear water can be sold at par. In fact, it will be repeatedly purchased without guilt as long as the water tastes sweet, which to the consumer's mind is the ideal quality of drinking water. Neither the format (sealed plastic bottle with a label) nor the taste (sweetness) and appearance (clear) is difficult to duplicate.

For the leader, it is important to realize the lowest common denominator of this purchase decision and retain its ground than move away from it in search of something more differentiated. For Bisleri, it is the idea of 'safe drinking water' and thus the product promise of 'stay protected'. Mountain water or not is hardly a differentiation as every other bottle suggests mountain water with graphics or name on the label. Mountain water is water from the mountains, rich in minerals and unadulterated source, doesn't really make much of a difference to an average consumer whether it is called Himalayas or Sahyadri.

Here, what is needed is to embed the brand, not the product (safe drinking water) in the culture or sub-culture. We need to elevate the brand above functional appeal and give consumers an ideology that is both relevant to the category as well as the culture.

TATA salt managed to break away from this orbit with its 'Desh ka namak' positioning which started with reinforcing the marketshare lead and culminated in provoking 'everyday patriotism'. It expanded the 'purity' plank beyond the product and consumption into the idea of patriotism. It could have very well been the 'Jaago re' equivalent of those times, if it were conceived as a social movement and supported by the external factors and change-points in culture.

For Bisleri, it is an opportune moment. We are living in the times when natural resources are acknowledged as finite or at least insufficient. There is a responsibility on every shoulder to demonstrate 'care' towards consumption. I call it 'nature-mindedness'. Paper bags instead of plastic bags, car-pooling, The Body Shop which stands for beauty with a heart and rallies against animal testing, switching off the lights on Earth Day and numerous other causes within the realm of armchair activism – all go to prove that people don't mind taking guilt out of their consumption, while they may not want to curb their consumption at this moment. Add up the lack of belief in the system to do something about it. This helplessness in the hands of the system has encouraged people to be the change. The conflict is our realization that the nature is under threat and we can do something about it.

Could Bisleri champion the cause of 'water' and help people take 'water in their hands' by contributing to this task in their own small ways? Bisleri needs to channel the sensitivity towards protecting nature through the cause of water. This way it would add another layer to the satisfaction of drinking water that is not only safe for one's consumption but also for the environment.

Would this make them insist on a Bisleri at the retail or feel good about sporting a Bisleri when they are presented with options?

I think it would.

Is there a brand fit?

Bisleri a brand of bottled water in India with 60% marketshare has made it a practice to protect what it thrives on since its inception – water. Today, it boasts of harvesting 10 billion litres of rain water every year. Besides this, it also is the first brand in the category to install bottle crushers to aid recycling of plastic than let it become an environmental hazard. Add to that the unique green color of the brand in a category obsessed with blue. This green gets a whole new meaning with the 'nature' tag and could become a symbol

for responsible consumption over a period of time and feed the cause.

Protecting the environment>protecting water>protecting people – then adds a new dimension to the idea of 'staying protected'. Nature + You = Stay Protected is a simple task of broadening the brand's vision that could breathe a fresh life into the brand and its consumers. However, it would change the consciousness of the uninitiated towards their relationship with nature for a greater good and gain. It aims as counting nature in for a harmonious co-existence and sustainable consumption.

It is just natural to open this outlook and open its initiatives to consumers who are increasingly getting 'nature-minded' in their consumption.

'Drink Green' can be built as a social movement and a brand with real content than just cover.

The ritual could be created around insisting on a bottle of Bisleri at the point-of-sale in the favor of protection, not just for the self, but for the entire environment and water. The idea here is to turn this behavior into a token of participation.

This way Bisleri could make the consumption of water not only deliver on sensorial thirst but also on the thirst of collective responsibility.

The social change attempted here is a shift from the 'transactional relationship with nature' to an 'endearing communion with nature' as a social value.