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Social Movements, Resistance and Contention: A Thematic Review

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Abstract

Scholarship on collective action in South Asia has long been shaped by questions of the postcolonial state, caste and community, and developmentalist dispossession. Recent years have added platformised communication, majoritarian nationalism, and a renewed decolonial turn to the field. This review paper maps themes, concepts, and gaps in recent Scopus-indexed journal articles on social movements, protest, and resistance. A thematic literature review of 50 journal articles published in 2022–2026 and exported from Scopus was conducted; the records were checked for duplicates and document type (PRISMA 2020-style flow), and each article was assigned a primary theme from its title, source and author affiliations. Six themes emerged: identity, nation and caste; digital media and networked activism; land, extraction and ecological struggle; gender, care and feminist politics; knowledge, education and decolonial praxis; and organisation, alliances and repertoires. Three debates cut across themes: state and capital versus community, digital affordance versus constraint, and the Global South as location versus method. The review concludes that the field is moving toward digital, decolonial, and care-centred vocabularies, but it still understudies right-wing movements, comparison, and outcome evaluation.

Keywords: Social movements; Protests, Resistance; Digital activism; Decolonial; Dispossession; Identity politics

Introduction

The study of social movements has long been organised around a small set of concepts: repertoires of contention (Tarrow, 2022; Tilly, 1978), framing (Snow & Benford, 1988), political opportunity and, more recently, networked communication (Castells, 2013). In South Asia these concepts have been applied to, and unsettled by, a distinctive set of problems: a postcolonial state that is both the target and the patron of movements, the persistence of caste and community identities, and conflicts over land, forests and water in which the language of development is itself contested (Guha & Alier, 2013). Over the last five years, new pressures have emerged: platformised communication, majoritarian nationalism, and renewed attention to decolonial and Global South perspectives in social science (de Sousa Santos, 2015).

Review work has not kept pace with this growth. Individual studies are scattered across disciplinary journals in sociology, anthropology, political science, history, communication, psychology, and literary studies, making it hard to see which movements and concepts dominate and

which are neglected. This article addresses that gap by reviewing a defined corpus of 50 recent Scopus-indexed articles. It poses three research questions: what is the bibliographic profile of the corpus (years, venues, authorship, access); which movements, sites and forms of contention does the corpus address; how do they cluster thematically, and which conceptual vocabularies recur; what debates run across themes; and what gaps remain.

Materials and Methods

The study is a narrative thematic review. It borrows reporting conventions from PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021) to document record selection and follows thematic analysis for coding and synthesis. Records were exported from Scopus. Figure 1 shows the selection flow.

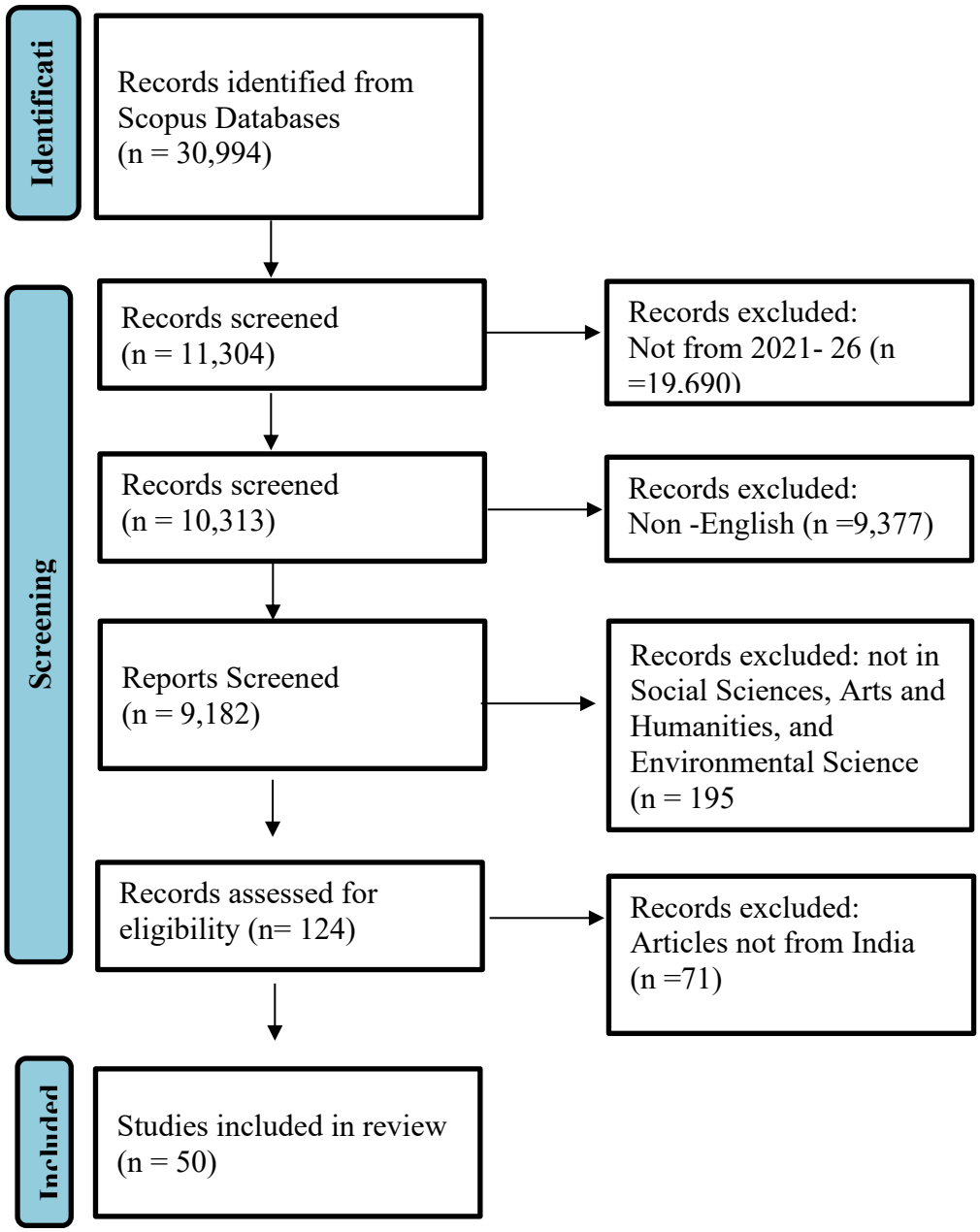

Figure 1- Flow of records for the thematic review

Descriptive counts were computed for the bibliographic variables and for theme frequencies. Within each theme, the articles were synthesised narratively, noting the empirical sites, the concepts used and the stance taken toward the state, capital and media. A final step compared themes to identify cross-cutting debates and gaps.

Results and Discussions

Bibliographic Profile of the Corpus

The 50 articles appeared in 45 different journals. Five journals contribute two articles each: *China Report*, *Modern Asian Studies*, *Oriental Anthropologist*, *Contemporary South Asia* and *Social Sciences*. Figure 2 shows publication years: 13 articles in 2022, 12 in 2023, 13 in 2024, 7 in 2025, and 5 in 2026. The drop after 2024 most likely reflects indexing lag and the date of export rather than a decline in scholarship, and should not be read as a trend.

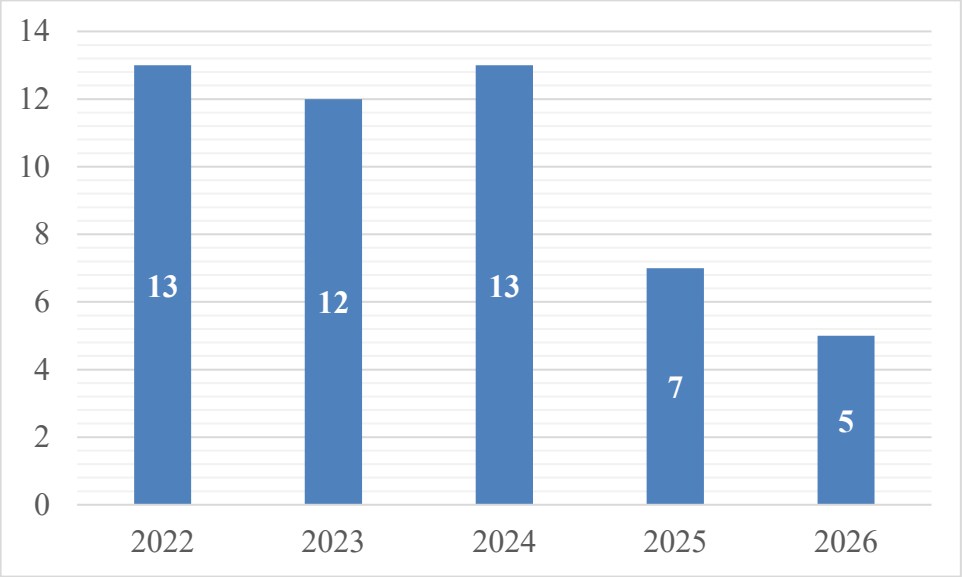

Figure 2 - Number of Articles per Publication Year (n = 50)

Authorship is concentrated in Indian institutions: 45 first authors list an Indian address in the Scopus record. However, most articles are not limited to India. Others concern China, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Israel/Palestine solidarity, Germany, Tibetan exile and a multi-region agrarian studies collective. Three articles list author affiliations with activist or community organisations, pointing to scholar-activist and co-produced research.

Thematic Distribution

Figure 3 shows each article's primary theme. Identity, nation and caste is the largest cluster (11 articles), followed by digital media and networked activism (10) and land, extraction and ecological struggle (9). Land and ecology is the most geographically concentrated theme, with eastern India (Odisha, Jharkhand) as its main site.

Eastern India dominates the theme of Land, extraction, and ecological struggle. The Niyamgiri movement is read through networking, diffusion and scale shift (Rout, 2022) and through indigenous onto-epistemology (Virendra Kumar, 2024); the anti-POSCO movement through the politics of development (M. Das & Pattnaik, 2022); Adivasi resistance in the Koina valley over four

decades (Dungdung et al., 2022); and mining-affected communities and young men's futures in two articles by Dash (2023, 2024). Further south, Satheesh (2025) examines labour-environmental conflicts in Kerala; Jayaraman et al. (2025) examine the fisher struggle for Ennore Creek through counter-mapping and counter-histories; and Rajesh (2023) examines the discursive making of modern Adivasi communities in Kerala. Related ecological and agrarian questions appear in the critical agrarian studies collective (Aguiar et al., 2023), Kuruganti et al.'s agroecology study (2026)and the study of new-media ecological activism in China (Joseph & Karackattu, 2022). Two moves recur here. First, movements are analysed as multi-scalar, linking local resistance to transnational networks (Rout, 2022). Second, knowledge itself becomes a site of struggle: 'onto-epistemology' (Virendra Kumar, 2024) and 'subjugated knowledges' (Jayaraman et al., 2025) suggest that resistance partly depends on whose understanding of land and place counts.

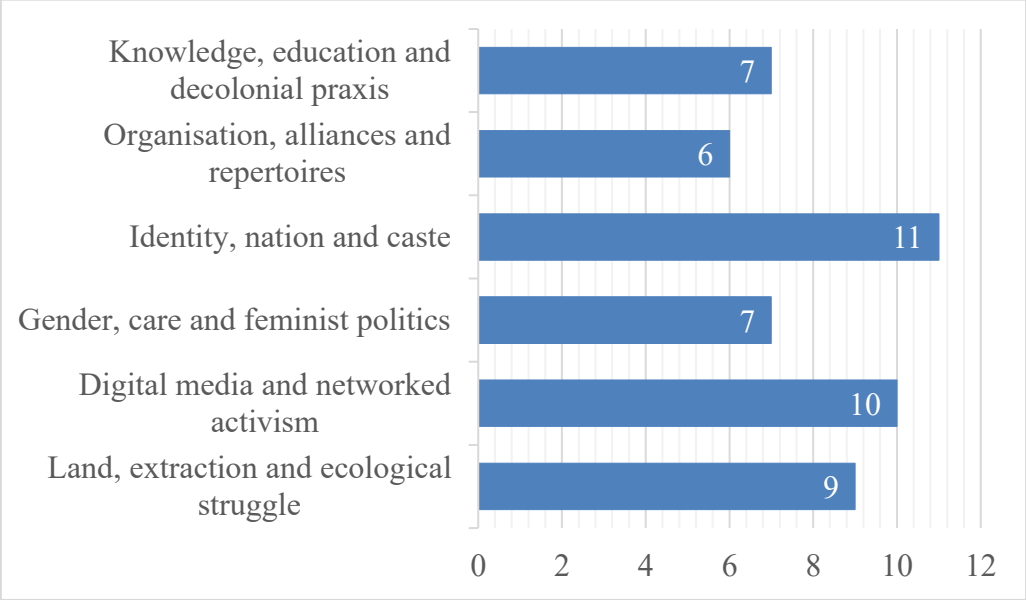

Figure 3 - Articles per Primary Theme (n = 50)

Ten articles address platforms. The farmers' movement and its virtual spaces (P. Gupta et al., 2022), 'Bharatanatyam' and art activism online (Balaji et al., 2023) and #MeToo narratives (Dixit, 2022) (Naresh et al., 2026) show activism conducted through, and shaped by, platform architectures. Dixit (2022) frames 'imagined' platform constraints on individual agency, while Naresh et al. (2026) examine the positive outcomes of disclosure, a rare turn toward consequences for those who speak. Repressive conditions are treated in Irungbam's study of internet shutdowns and networked counterpublics in Manipur (2026). Comparative cases include LGBTQ+ movements and social media in New Zealand (Bandopadhyaya & Kenix, 2023), dating apps and political activism in Hong Kong (Tang et al., 2026), and 'subversive recipes' for communication for development under digital capitalism (Noske-Turner et al., 2024). Amarasingam et al. (2022) link Hindu nationalism, misinformation and Islamophobia, which places digital media on the side of exclusionary as well as emancipatory mobilisation.

Gender politics appears in several registers. Historical and cultural work revisits Mirabai in public spheres (2023) and mothers and grandmothers in the Indian freedom movement (Chaturvedi, 2023). Contemporary work covers the identity tensions of women holding two leadership positions (Banerjee & Memon, 2022), the 'leftover women' question and gendered governance in China

(Chandran, 2022) and decolonial feminist leadership in the Global South (Hoque et al., 2025). Two articles centre relational ethics: 'fraternity as resistance' to anxious masculinity (A. Das et al., 2024) and 'social love' within women's movements (Baek et al., 2026). The care and fraternity vocabulary is notable because it shifts attention from confrontation to the sustaining labour of movements.

Grassroots nationhood as a conceptual frame (Singh, 2022) and Naga tribal identity against the modern state (Robert & Walling, 2023) question a unitary nation. Caste and regional politics appear in the Vanniyar mobilisation (Raja, 2024), anti-Dravidian and anti-caste Tamil nationalism (Bharatvaraj, 2024), Dravidian urbanisation (Kalaiyarasan & Narayan, 2025) and a Dalit magistrate's life in 1920–1954 North India (Vijay Kumar, 2023). Settler–native boundaries are examined in Sikkim using the SIMCA model (Malu et al., 2024). Majoritarian politics and minority insecurity are the subject of V. Gupta & Yadav's study (2024) and the anti-CAA movement is read as cosmopolitanism over ethnonationalism (Loyi, 2024). Verma et al. (2024) treat Tibetan exile as 'everyday mobilisation', and Krishnan (2023) shows how postage stamps carry contested memories of 1857 between India and Pakistan. Together, the cluster suggests that identity is both the basis of mobilisation and an object of dispute.

The smallest cluster is explicitly about movement organisation. Pandey (2022) reclassifies civil rights groups as 'movement allies'; Deodhar (2022) unpacks the action repertoires of right-wing political parties in Germany, a reminder that the repertoire concept travels to conservative actors; Lutz (2022) uses political opportunity structures to explain the fluidity of the BDS movement; Clarence-Smith and Branagan (2024) trace prefigurative politics in the Auroville citizens' assembly; and Raiguru (2025) historicises the public/private divide in India's public sphere, in dialogue with the public-sphere literature (Fraser, 2024). Kuruganti et al. (2026) address the tension between collaboration with the state and civil-society autonomy.

Education and knowledge production form the sixth theme: war and peace in a professional ethics classroom (2023), university resistance under a 'new state' (Peerzada et al., 2024), the #FeeMustFall movement (Mishra, 2024), Luxemburg and Freire on pedagogy as politics (R. Kumar, 2024) and the Global South agrarian scholar-activism collective (Aguiar et al., 2023). Literary and cultural studies contribute to Arora's readings of the Emergency and the J. P. movement in Rahi Masoom Raza's novel (2023) and of decolonial praxes of solidarity in Indian literary discourse (Arora, 2025). The common thread is the university and the text as sites where movements are narrated, taught and sometimes constrained.

In extracted works, the state and corporate actors appear as antagonists across the land and ecology cluster (M. Das & Pattnaik, 2022; Dash, 2023, 2024; Dungdung et al., 2022; Jayaraman et al., 2025; Rout, 2022). Yet Kuruganti et al. (2026) and Pandey (2022) point to more complex entanglements between civil society and the state, suggesting that 'resistance' and 'collaboration' are not clean opposites. Platforms enable disclosure and mobilisation (Amarasingam et al., 2022; Balaji et al., 2023; P. Gupta et al., 2022; Naresh et al., 2026) but they are also shut down (Irungbam, 2026), used to spread misinformation (Amarasingam et al., 2022) and shaped by commercial logic (Noske-Turner et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2026). This aligns with the networked-movement argument (Castells, 2013) but shows that the argument needs qualification when states control connectivity. Aguiar et al., Arora, and Hoque et al. (2023; 2025; 2025) treat the Global South and decolonial thinking as an analytic stance, in line with the epistemologies-of-the-South argument (de Sousa Santos, 2015), while others use the region only as a setting. The distinction deserves explicit theoretical treatment.

Conclusion

Existing scholarship on social movements in this corpus is uneven in what it studies. Progressive and emancipatory mobilisations dominate the literature, while right-wing and majoritarian movements receive far less attention, appearing substantively only in three works. This imbalance limits our understanding of how movements across the ideological spectrum mobilise, frame grievances, and sustain themselves, leaving the field with a partial account of contemporary collective action. The design of existing studies compounds this imbalance. Most work is built around single cases, and comparative or cross-regional analysis remains thin. Outcomes and effectiveness are also rarely the explicit focus of inquiry. Just one study is a notable exception, but it addresses individual-level outcomes rather than movement-level or policy consequences. Without comparison, claims about why some movements succeed and others fail stay largely untested, and the question of effectiveness stays under-theorised. Methodologically, the corpus is mostly qualitative and interpretive. Quantitative and psychological approaches appear only in two works, so the evidence base rarely draws on measurement, survey data or experimental designs. This suggests clear scope for mixed-methods research that pairs interpretive depth with systematic assessment of mobilisation and its outcomes.

Finally, caste, gender, ecology, and digital media are widely discussed, but largely in parallel clusters rather than at their intersections. Few studies examine how these dimensions interact, for instance, how digital platforms reshape caste- or gender-based mobilisation, or how ecological struggles are structured by social hierarchy. The literature therefore lacks an integrated framework for understanding movements as sites where these axes of identity, power and communication operate together. Addressing these gaps through comparative, outcome-oriented, methodologically plural and intersectional research would substantially extend the field.

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