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# The ultimate sacrifice : a comparative study of self-immolation as a tactic of political protest in India and South Korea.

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THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELF-IMMOLATION  
AS A TACTIC OF POLITICAL PROTEST IN INDIA AND SOUTH KOREA

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A Thesis  
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College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
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for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2013

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A Thesis Approved on

April 19, 2013

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Laurel,  
who has been the source of  
my strength and inspiration every step of the way.

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I would like to thank those sacrificed their time by agreeing to serve on my thesis committee. A special thanks to Dr. Laurie Rhodebeck, my thesis director, for her guidance, expertise, and encouragement. I would also like to thank Dr. Anne Caldwell whose generous feedback was instrumental in the initial stages of the development of this topic. Dr. Margaret D'Silva also deserves thanks for her invaluable advice and perspective. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Jean Abshire, Dr. Cliff Staten, and Dr. Thomas Kotulak for providing the foundations necessary for academic success.

## ABSTRACT

### THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELF-IMMOLATION AS A TACTIC OF POLITICAL PROTEST IN INDIA AND SOUTH KOREA

Sean Goff

April 19, 2013

In recent years, self-immolation has become a pervasive tactic of political protest. To this point, however, it has been unclear why self-immolation has become so widely employed, calling into question the social and political efficacy of the tactic. The purpose of this thesis is to determine self-immolation's impact on three target groups: the core, the periphery, and the political system. In doing so, I conduct a comparative study of India's anti-reservation movement and South Korea's prodemocracy movement, both of which experienced high frequencies of self-immolation. I demonstrate that while self-immolation was ineffective at mobilizing the core and only moderately effective at mobilizing the periphery and initiating political change, in South Korea, self-immolation was highly effective on all three groups. I argue that the differences in efficacy can be attributed to variations in social structure, political culture, issue diffusion, and institutional access to the political system.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

For Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit and vegetable vender in the town of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, December 19, 2010 began like any other day. A college graduate, Bouazizi turned to street vending to support his family during times of severe Tunisian unemployment. In doing so, he had become familiar with the harassment and shakedowns that were common from police and state officials. However, on this occasion, the harassment went too far. Bouazizi was approached by government officials and solicited for bribes. When he refused, he was beaten and his inventory and equipment were confiscated. In an attempt to redress his grievances, Bouazizi went to the local municipal building to file a complaint and retrieve his property. However, he was turned away without an audience. For the disgruntled street vender, this was merely another injustice emblematic of the severe corruption within the system. Bouazizi decided to make a public statement that could not be ignored. In an act of protest, he returned to the municipal building, doused himself in flammable liquid, and set himself on fire. Upon hearing news of the incident, outraged crowds of protesters spontaneously poured into the street of Tunisia leading to violent conflict with authorities. Within three weeks, civil unrest had erupted in both Egypt and Algeria. By the one year anniversary of the self-immolation, protests had taken place in 17 countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa, and regime change had occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.



The political magnitude of the events that unfolded during what many have dubbed the “Arab Spring” is undeniable. For decades, authoritarian regimes have had a virtual monopoly on power in the region. In an almost unprecedented popular response to perceived political injustices in the Arab world, masses of citizens rose up collectively to challenge their oppressors.

The self-immolation of Bouazizi, while horrific and unconscionable to most, is certainly not an isolated event. If we look closely, we can find accounts of self-immolation scattered throughout history, some dating back thousands of years. Prior to the 1960s, self-immolation was often a type of ritualistic behavior, committed in accordance with the norms and values of society. For instance, it was common for individuals to commit suicide, often times in extreme and theatrical ways in order to fulfill socially prescribed responsibilities, such as the demonstration of familial loyalty or the restoration of honor within a community. Another common practice, typically associated with Buddhism, was the sacrifice of one’s life in the name of spiritual devotion and asceticism. However, since 1963 when Thich Quang Duc self-immolated in full view of thousands of observers and international media, the practice has become an ever-present method of political protest (Biggs, 2005; Crosby, Rhee, & Holland, 1977; H. Kim, 2008). Although Crosby et al. prematurely observed in 1977 that self-immolation is “yielding to more aggressive acts of terrorism as popular methods of forcing political change,” (Crosby, et al., 1977, p. 68) the world has witnessed an increase in frequency of epidemic proportions, particularly in recent years. Furthermore, self-immolation appears unconfined by geographic boundaries, cultural norms, or demographic characteristics. Self-immolations have occurred in almost every part of the world, and have been

committed by a variety of people, regardless of gender, political ideology, religious affiliation, education, age, or economic status (Biggs, 2005).

Despite its apparent universality and political significance, self-immolation has yet to become a fashionable topic in the study of political science. Contemporary political science deals almost exclusively with politics in an institutional context, primarily focusing on the structures and functions of governments, and how individuals and collective groups behave within the framework of institutional processes (i.e. voting behavior or interest groups). It typically ignores extra-institutional political activity, such as protest or, to use Sidney Tarrow's terminology, *contentious politics* (Tarrow, 1998). For Tarrow, arguably the only political scientist currently taken seriously by the academic community in the study of collective action, contentious politics is an act that is "used by people who lack regular access to institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities" (Tarrow, 1998, p. 3). Tarrow's notion of contentious politics is particularly relevant to this study for two reasons. First, it removes the assumption that politics is necessarily institutional. The fact is that the social and political spheres are not mutually exclusive, and contentious politics is a manifestation of the interactive dynamic between the two. Thus, the social and the political spheres cannot be separated without sacrificing elements essential to understanding extra-institutional political behavior. Second, self-immolation is a form of contentious politics, albeit an extreme form, because it is an act of the powerless used to express or remedy a political grievance by contesting an institutional political authority. This struggle by a social actor in opposition to an institutional entity or actor is what I refer to as counter-institutional action.

The primary objective of this work is to explore the role of self-immolation in the interaction between the social and political structures. This extreme form of protest is a social phenomenon because the immolator is operating outside of the legitimate political processes, and often influences the actions of non-political actors. But, the immolator also has a political agenda – to express a political grievance, to influence the actions of political actors, or both. There is a socio-political structural overlap not only because self-immolation can simultaneously have social and political consequences, but also because the social effects can indirectly have a political impact. In other words, it can serve a mobilizing function, influencing political change that the act would not have achieved on its own. The central question here, however, is how effective is this tactic?

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the social and political efficacy of self-immolation, specifically the ability of the act to induce social mobilization and changes in the structure and behavior of the political system. In doing so, I will conduct a comparative study between two socio-political movements in recent history that are associated with mass instances of self-immolation: the anti-reservation movement in India and the prodemocracy movement in South Korea. Specifically, I will look at the impacts of self-immolation on three distinct groups: the *core community/activists* (those who do or will experience the adverse effects of a particular political action or condition, and who can expect to benefit from changing such an action or condition); the *peripheral community/general public* (those who will either not benefit from political change, or who view the benefits as unimportant);<sup>1</sup> and the *primary political target* (those whose

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that there may be some instances in which there may be multiple audiences. Tibetan Monks, for example, might target both the Tibetan and Chinese general publics. However, the responses of

behavior is the cause of the grievance).<sup>2</sup> I argue that both countries were *moderately open*, conceptually falling between a closed autocratic system and a fully open democratic system. In other words, at the time of the self-immolations and respective movements, both India and South Korea were experiencing conditions of socio-political liberalization. However, the effects of the self-immolations on social mobilization and political change in each case were drastically different. On the one hand, India's anti-reservation movement experienced almost no effects in terms of core mobilization, limited effects on peripheral mobilization, and only modest, short-term political change. The prodemocracy movement in South Korea, on the other hand, experienced significant effects on all three groups. I contend that this disparity is attributable to variance in social structure, political culture and values, issue diffusion, and institutional access to the political system. While India is a stratified social system based on a long history of caste and class distinction, South Korea is an integrated and largely homogenous society. The social dynamics in these two countries have resulted in corresponding political cultures. In India, social stratification has promoted a political culture of frustration and social animosity, sometimes leading to caste/class related violence.<sup>3</sup> South Korea has developed a communitarian political culture that promotes the values of cooperation and sacrifice of the individual for the good of the whole. Furthermore, while the issue of anti-reservation held practical importance for only a small segment of Indian society, democratic reform in South Korea held practical implications for all. Finally, the

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these two targets would understandably be very different. While it is important to acknowledge such a distinction, detailing the nuances of target audiences is beyond the scope of this research.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the body of this work, I will use certain terms such as core and activists, or periphery and general public interchangeably for stylistic purposes.

<sup>3</sup> India's social structure consists of four casted groups that together contain thousands of distinct classes, and one un-casted group commonly referred to as Dalit.

political/institutional context has considerable influence on the way self-immolation is perceived. In other words, the degree of institutional access largely determines whether or not society and political actors will identify and empathize with the self-immolator. In systems with little or no access, people tend to rally around the self-immolator, thus promoting social cohesion and group identity, because it is understood to be an act of the desperate, as opposed to an act of the disturbed or maladjusted, which is the case in systems which a high degree of institutional access.

The structure of this work will proceed as follows. In Chapter 2, I will provide the reader with an understanding of self-immolation, as well as the methodological approach I use in this study. I will begin with a survey of the existing literature on self-immolation, which will highlight current methodological weaknesses and identify areas that have, thus far, been unaddressed. Next, I will outline a conceptual definition of self-immolation by distinguishing it from other types of socially and politically related suicide. Specifically, I define self-immolation as a politically motivated act, committed in opposition to a legitimate institutional political authority, and in which death is the primary objective. Following the conceptual definition, I will discuss pertinent contributions to the theory of collective action, including rational cost-benefit analysis (Olson, 1965), the theory of the “critical mass” (Marwell & Oliver, 1993; Oliver, Marwell, & Teixeira, 1985), opportunities in the political structure (Tarrow, 1998), and the selection and application of protest tactics (Della Porta & Diani, 1999; McAdam & Tarrow, 2000; Oberschall, 1970). I will then briefly describe the methodological approach of this study, the processes of data collection and analysis, operational definitions of efficacy and political openness, and certain unavoidable limitations of this

approach. In Chapter 3, I will present the reader with a discussion of the anti-reservation movement in India and the prodemocracy movement in South Korea. In this chapter, I will first demonstrate that these movements occurred during periods of socio-political liberalization in both countries making these two cases appropriate for comparison. I will then continue with a description the events, as well as the social and political circumstances surrounding each movement. I will devote Chapter 4 to a comparative analysis, focusing on the effects of self-immolation on the core, the periphery, and the political target, in each case respectively. Specifically, I will look at the organization, structure, actions, and political outcomes of each movement. In Chapter 5, I will discuss why each of the previously mentioned socio-political variables dramatically influenced the efficacy of self-immolation as a tactic of political protest. In the last Chapter, I will summarize the conclusions of this thesis, discuss certain limitations and difficulties I encountered throughout the course of this research, and propose ideas for future research on this topic.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DEFINITIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Although the phenomenon of self-immolation is increasing at an apparently exponential rate throughout the world, as we shall see, there have been only limited attempts at studying it. Those scholars who have addressed the issue, have frequently come to different conclusions, partly due to methodological and conceptual discontinuity. In the following sections, I will outline self-immolation in the current academic literature, offer a conceptual definition of self-immolation, and discuss the methods of this study, including operational definitions and measurements of mobilization and political change.

#### Self-immolation in the Literature

To date, the study of self-immolation has scarcely been addressed by scholars outside the field of psychiatry. As a consequence, the most ubiquitous explanations are derived from studying the act itself or from within the framework of individual motivations. Some, for example, have argued that self-immolators suffer from psychopathological disorders, such as depression, substance abuse, and schizophrenia, and are, therefore, psychologically predisposed to commit suicide (Ashton & Donnan, 1981; Geller, 1997; Rothschild, Raatschen, & Schneider, 2001). In a study of suicide by fire in the United States between 1965 and 1994, Geller found that “the distribution of psychopathology does not appear to differentiate self-incinerators from those who

attempt or complete suicide by other means” (Geller, 1997, p. 369). Likewise, Ashton and Donnan found that, of the 82 cases of suicide by fire that occurred in the United Kingdom between 1978 and 1979, none appeared to be politically motivated and the majority had histories of mental illness (Ashton & Donnan, 1981). Rothschild, Raatschen, and Schneider echoed this claim in a study of self-immolations that occurred in Berlin between 1990 and 2000. Out of 46 cases, they identified only two that were politically motivated (Rothschild, et al., 2001). At first glance, it would appear that self-immolations are merely random acts caused by mental disturbances. However, if we look more closely we will see that these scholars adopt very broad definitions of self-immolation. They define self-immolation in terms of the act itself, rather the empirical conditions under which the act occurred (H. Kim, 2008). Ashton and Donnan, for instance, included “all persons in England and Wales whose death certificates mentioned suicide or suspicious death by burning” (Ashton & Donnan, 1981, p. 736). Employing an equally expansive definition, Geller identifies self-immolation simply as “intentionally setting oneself on fire” (Geller, 1997, p. 355). For Rothschild et al., self-immolations include “deliberately setting oneself on fire and thereby sustaining burns covering 2% or more of the body surface area” (Rothschild, et al., 2001, p. 163). As we can see, such broad conceptual definitions encompass a variety of suicidal acts, and thus fail to identify political suicide as a distinct type. Biggs highlights this problem stating that many “studies by psychologists and psychiatrists defined their subject as self-inflicted death by fire, thus including personal suicide” (Biggs, 2005, p. 174).

A study by Crosby, Rhee, and Holland (1977) represents one of the first to acknowledge a political dimension of self-immolation. They found that the frequency of



self-immolations increased by 250 percent between the periods of 1790-1962 and 1963-71 (Crosby, et al., 1977). The authors also found that many occurrences during the latter period were indeed instances of political protest (Crosby, et al., 1977). Similarly, however, Crosby et al. do not draw a distinction between political motivations and mental illness, and instead suggest that political motivations do not necessarily preclude psychopathological factors (Crosby, et al., 1977). For them, self-immolation may be exclusively politically motivated, exclusively a product of psychopathology, or on rare occasions, a combination of the two in varying degrees.

By situating self-immolation, at least partially, into a political context, Crosby et al. take a major step toward a more nuanced understanding of this extreme form of protest. Where they fail, however, is that they continue to classify and compare cases that are dissimilar. Like their colleagues in the field of psychiatry, they bundle together acts of political protest with instances of suicide. They include political circumstances as motivating variables, rather than as defining characteristics. As Kalleberg appropriately observes, in order for two concepts to be compared, they “must already have been shown to be of the same class (Kalleberg, 1966, p. 81). The fact is that, although these acts may appear similar on the surface, suicide and suicide protest are not of the same class, regardless of how the act was carried out. In treating these events as if they are the same, these authors erroneously construct an inappropriate system of classification, which renders the conclusions drawn from comparisons useless.

If we were to reverse the situation, we can easily illustrate the absurdity of such conclusions. Let us imagine a situation in which a political scientist concluded that a suicide that occurred in a psychiatric ward must have been a political protest, simply

because it was a suicide by fire. Failure to acknowledge and discriminate based on the environmental circumstances leads one to consider irrelevant data. As it happens, suicide is “among the three leading causes of death among those aged 15-44 years in some countries, and the second leading cause of death in the 10-24 years age group,” which translates to “one death every 40 seconds” or approximately one million annual suicides worldwide (WHO, 2012). It is reasonable to assume that if we sample from a population of total suicides, we are going to be left with a sample that over-represents psychopathological variables and under-represents socio-political variables. To reemphasize, incorrect definitions lead to fallacious classifications and comparisons. In order to properly classify and compare self-immolation, it must not be identified as an act that may sometimes be politically motivated; self-immolation, as an effective comparative concept, must always be politically motivated. Otherwise it is merely another form of elaborate suicide.

Other studies have strayed away from the psychopathological explanation, but continue to approach self-immolation from an individual context. In doing so, they concentrate their attention on demographic risk factors (Ahmadi et al., 2009; Alaghebandan, Lari, Joghataei, & Islami, 2011; Poeschla, Combs, Livingstone, Romm, & Klein, 2011). One study, for example, suggests that those who are the first or last born, and those without children are statistically at a greater risk of committing self-immolation (Ahmadi, et al., 2009). Others have pointed to marital status, urban or rural residency, and conflict within the family as factors of importance (Alaghebandan, et al., 2011). Still, others have suggested an economic link to self-immolation, arguing that there is a correlation between instances of self-immolation and the level of economic

affluence of the country in which the act occurred. In less economically prosperous countries, the frequency of self-immolation is much higher than in wealthier countries (Poeschla, et al., 2011).

While studies that focus on demographic risk factors (Ahmadi, et al., 2009; Alaghehbandan, et al., 2011; Poeschla, et al., 2011) are not without merit and certainly should not be dismissed as irrelevant to the study of self-immolation as a form of political protest, they share the same problems of definition and classification as studies that advance the psychopathological approach. Namely, these studies fail to distinguish between acts of protest and cases that are nothing more than instances of suicide. Although demographic variables may increase the likelihood of a politically aggrieved individual committing self-immolation, they are not the cause. These studies contribute little to the understanding of self-immolation in a socio-political context. Furthermore, many of the demographic variables cited likely indicate spurious relationships. For example, those in rural areas may be more likely to be politically alienated, single individuals might be more active in the community, and self-immolations may occur less frequently in developed countries not because of wealth, but because wealthy countries tend to be more politically open. We might therefore extrapolate that demographic variables are more than just risk factors; they might actually be indicators of broader socio-political conditions that contribute to extreme forms of protest.

A study by Singh and colleagues was one of the first to select cases solely on the basis of a political issue. In looking at a group of 22 students in India who self-immolated in response to a policy of reserving educational and employment opportunities for members of lower castes (one of the cases selected for this study), the authors

concluded that nearly all of their subjects were exclusively motivated by a common political experience (S. P. Singh, Santosh, Avasthi, & Kulhara, 1998). They write that “With the exception of one subject, our study group did not show any psychopathology or diagnosable psychiatric illness” (S. P. Singh, et al., 1998, p. 74). Singh et al. did find, however, that each of the 22 students experienced feelings of political alienation and powerlessness as a consequence of the policy. They point out that the students demonstrated a “high degree of hostility” and that “protest of some kind was the only option left to show their resentment” (S. P. Singh, et al., 1998, p. 74). Thus, rather than being a product of psychological predisposition or suicidal tendencies, self-immolation, in these instances, were responses to a power shift in the deeply entrenched socio-political hierarchy.

The work of Singh et al. demonstrates how some recent scholars have begun to utilize a more discriminatory definition, taking into account only those cases which may be politically linked. In doing so, they have sampled cases that are conceptually similar which lends more credibility to their findings. However, Singh et al. continues to approach self-immolation from the perspective of individual behavior. While this is not necessarily a methodological problem, it neglects the role of self-immolation in broader socio-political context. Specifically, Singh et al. fail to address the social or political implications of self-immolation.

More recently, several scholars have attempted to bridge this gap by shifting away from the individual approach. Kim (2008) and Uehling (2000), for example, look at self-immolation in terms of issue framing and mobilization. In a study of self-immolations in South Korea (the second case selected for this study), Kim contends that protesters

sought to “spawn and invigorate movement activism among half-hearted activists and apathetic bystanders and instigate further protest activities” (H. Kim, 2008, p. 549). They did so, according to the author, by drawing attention to and framing the issue as an injustice that demanded immediate action (H. Kim, 2008). Similarly, Uehling argues that the self-immolation of Musa Mamut effectively framed the issue of Crimean Tartar repatriation by reconstructing the community’s conception of the nation (Uehling, 2000). Michael Biggs (2005) wanted to understand the social and political motivations behind self-immolation. In his study Biggs argues first that self-immolation can be “an appeal to others to change their behavior” (Biggs, 2005, p. 196). In this case, the appeal is directed at either a primary target, namely the power-holders, or a secondary target, specifically public opinion. It can also be a means of mobilization, aimed at “others who already share the collective cause,” by galvanizing them to engage in protest” (Biggs, 2005, p. 197).

The recent works by social scientists, although relatively few in number, have made important contributions and advancements in the study of self-immolation. Most notably, they have moved beyond the common treatment of the immolator as an irrational, one-dimensional subject, who is insulated from the influence of exogenous variables. However, many questions have remained unaddressed. Specifically, is self-immolation effective in the process of mobilization and the initiation of political change? As Biggs observes, “The efficacy of suffering is an unexplored dimension of protest, and deserves further research” (Biggs, 2005, p. 208). Kim and Uehling, on the other hand, have examined self-immolation as a tool of mobilization among those in a similar political community – those who share common goals and identities (H. Kim, 2008;

Uehling, 2000). But, they do not consider its efficacy in mobilizing the periphery or in initiating political change.

At this point, it is important to note an additional methodological concern which hinders many of the studies previously cited here. As we have seen, these studies are narrowly focused on specific geographic, cultural, or political areas. For example, the studies by Geller, Ashton et al., and Rothschild et al. sample only from the US, the UK, and Germany (Ashton & Donnan, 1981; Geller, 1997; Rothschild, et al., 2001), respectively. Similarly, the data collected by Singh et al., Kim, and Uehling are taken exclusively from distinct socio-political populations, and each study includes only cases that are directly associated with one political issue (H. Kim, 2008; S. P. Singh, et al., 1998; Uehling, 2000). In other words, they fail to look for consistent patterns that may cross geographical, cultural, and socio-political boundaries, thereby inhibiting the generalizability of the authors' findings. Kim appropriately acknowledges this concern by stating that "it is hard to generalize the Korean cases to other incidents of suicide protest around the world" (H. Kim, 2008, p. 574).

In sum, the weaknesses in the literature are primarily due to broad and inconstant conceptual definitions, which in turn lead to inappropriate classification and comparison. In addition, previous authors have confined their analysis to single cases, significantly confining the generalizability of their conclusions. In the following sections of this chapter, I will rectify these conceptual and methodological shortcomings.

### Self-immolation: A Conceptual Definition

So what is self-immolation, and how does it compare to other forms of social and political suicide? As it turns out, self-immolation is a complex and nuanced concept, subject to a multitude of interpretations. We have seen thus far that there is a propensity for scholars to oversimplify what constitutes self-immolation. These vague and broad interpretations render them insufficient for the purposes here, and highlight the need for conceptual clarification. Therefore, in this section I will systematically outline a conceptual typology of self-immolation, comparing and contrasting it to a variety of other social and political suicide types. As I proceed, it should progressively become apparent to the reader that the act of self-immolation, while certainly akin to some types of suicide, stands on its own as a unique socio-political phenomenon.

At the broadest level suicide can be broken down into two types. The distinction primarily hinges on the motivations of the individual.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, someone may commit suicide for strictly personal reasons (Farberow, 1975). For instance, a person who suffers from depression, poverty, or terminal illness might decide to take their own life to escape the pains they have come to associate with living.<sup>5</sup> Others derive their suicidal motivations from an intense attachment to an identifiable community. This

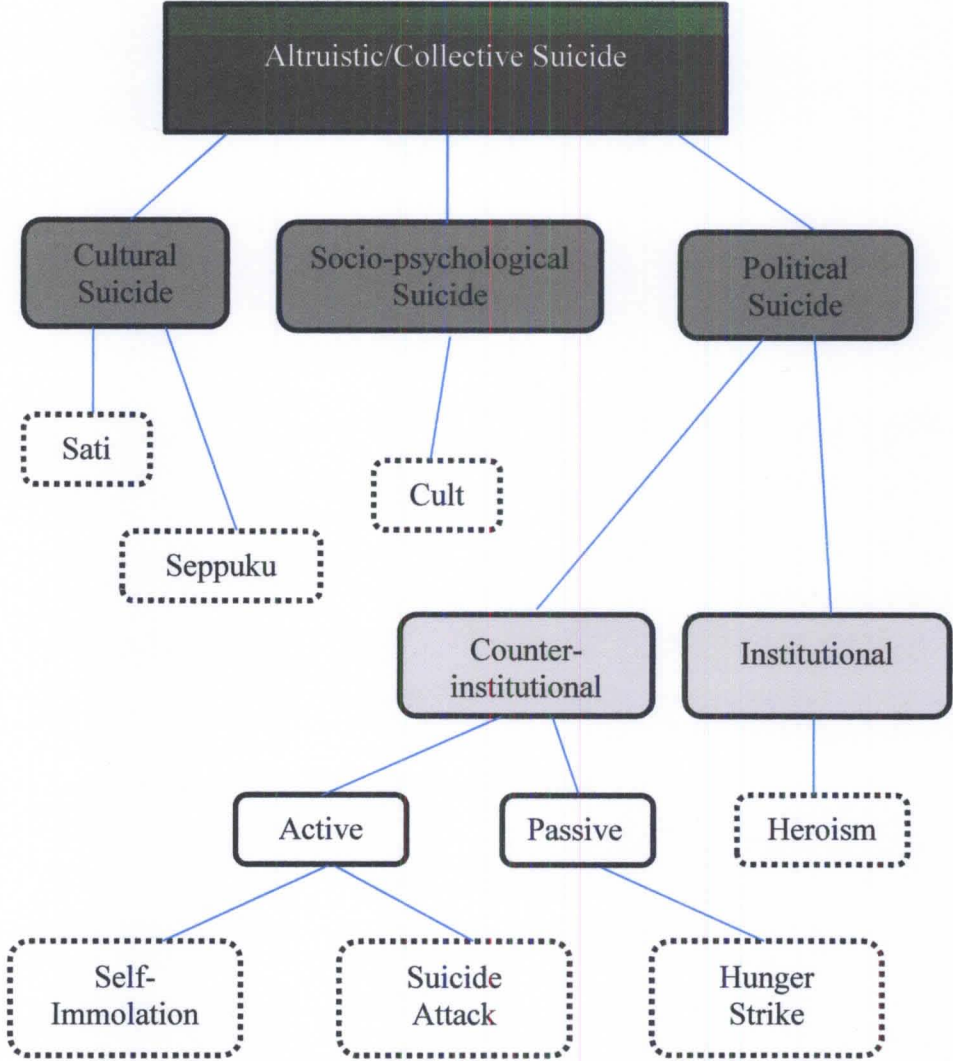
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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that determining the motivations behind a suicide may sometimes be a difficult task without the victim explicitly divulging them (i.e. in a note or message). One can certainly imagine instances of personal suicide that resemble collective suicide, and vice versa. However, a reasonable observer should be able to frequently and accurately extrapolate the motivations from the circumstances surrounding the incident. For example, it would be careless to assume that someone who took their life in the privacy of their home following an emotionally devastating personal experience had non-personal motives. Similarly, it would be equally careless to dismiss an obviously detailed and choreographed suicide that took place in the midst of a public demonstration as the result of depression or personal problems.

<sup>5</sup> It might be argued that personal and political motivations are not mutually exclusive. For instance, those who wish for the right to commit suicide for personal reasons may make the act a political statement. However, the primary intent in this case is suicide itself with secondary political consequences. The intent of self-immolator is strictly political. A simple way to determine this is to ask whether the desire for suicide or the political issue existed first. If the desire for suicide is the political issue, the former logically precedes the latter.

social variant of suicide, which Durkheim refers to as altruistic suicide, is a manifestation of collective behavior (Durkheim, 1951). It is this latter type that will be the primary focus here.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Flowchart of Altruistic/Collective Suicide**



Altruistic suicide can be broken down further into what I refer to as cultural, socio-psychological, or political types. Cultural suicide would include practices that are imbedded in and prescribed by tradition and historical beliefs and values. Two



illustrative examples of cultural suicide are *sati* and *seppuku*. *Sati*, practiced almost exclusively in the Asian subcontinent, involved a widow throwing herself upon the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. *Seppuku* was a ritualized method of disembowelment mostly practiced by the Japanese Samurai when they believed they had brought dishonor to themselves, their family, or their community. Both of these practices were long-standing traditions in the cultural history of each respective civilization. However, although there have continued to be isolated cases of *sati* and *seppuku* in recent history, both were ultimately abandoned, presumably in part as a result of the diffusion of Western cultural values during colonialism and the Meiji Restoration, respectively.

The socio-psychological type refers almost exclusively to cult mass suicides, such as the incident that occurred at Jonestown. Unlike cultural suicide, which is based on social traditions that have been handed down over the course of generations, the motivations for socio-psychological suicide are powerful and emerge rather quickly, largely due to the groups' authoritarian hierarchical structure and strict isolation from mainstream society (Richardson, 1993). In fact, the common perception of these groups is that they are "unfamiliar and perhaps even disliked or feared" (Richardson, 1993, p. 348).

So, how is self-immolation different from cultural or socio-psychological suicide? First, while many of the instances of self-immolation that occurred prior to the twentieth century might fall into one of these two categorical types, the alarmingly high number of modern self-immolations beginning in the 1960s have been politically motivated (Biggs, 2005). Furthermore, modern self-immolators seek to elicit a response from both the public and the political realm. Conversely, the other two types of suicides are either

integrated within the fabric of society (cultural) or completely removed from it (socio-psychological). This logically results in social and political ignorance in the former type and ambivalence in the latter.

Political motivation, however, does not define self-immolation, *per se*. In fact, there are a variety of types of politically motivated suicides that could not reasonably be labeled self-immolation. To continue with our typological discussion, let us separate politically motivated suicide into two categories. The first I refer to as institutional suicide. These are suicides in which the subject is operating on behalf of a legitimate political entity. In such cases, the suicide is often perceived as an act of patriotism or heroism. It is a sacrifice of one's life for the preservation and promotion of the national political interests, particularly security. Institutional suicide is most prevalent amongst members of the armed forces during times of war. An obvious example would be the soldier who, in the threat of imminent danger to their mission or fellow soldiers, accepts the brunt of a destructive force. Another example would be the Japanese kamikaze pilots during World War II who willfully flew their planes into military targets.<sup>6</sup>

This leads us to the second type of politically motivated suicide, which I refer to as counter-institutional. Unlike institutional suicide, which is sanctioned by a legitimate political authority, counter-institutional suicide is committed by an individual or individuals who are acting in opposition to that authority. It is first important to note that there are almost no limitations on the relationship between the individual and the target political system. On the one hand, the political system may be of foreign or domestic

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<sup>6</sup> Some might take issue with the term suicide being used to describe wartime "heroism." Admittedly, I use this term broadly, simply suggesting that it is an act of an individual taking their own life. Again, however, the nuance of such a concept lies in the intent itself. Neither heroism nor self-immolation is *suicide* for personal reasons. They are both *sacrifices* for an external objective.

orientation to the individual. A foreign political power may be one that is not the recognized political authority over the state or territory – as was the case following the installation of the Iraqi Interim Government in 2004. While the US was not officially in power, it maintained a political/military presence. A foreign power may also be one that is the recognized authority. This is a much more common situation, exemplified by the relationship between China and the Tibetans. Although Tibet is internationally accepted as part of China, it is an autonomous region. A domestic political authority, on the other hand, is indisputably recognized by the public.

To briefly restate, collective suicide can be motivated by cultural norms and traditions, socio-psychological conditions prompted by the circumstances prevalent in socially isolated groups, and political relationships that manifest as either actions of institutional devotion or counter-institutional protest. Furthermore, each of these situations results in a different public perception. In the case of cultural suicide, the incident is understandably met with public approval, thus reinforcing the tradition. Socio-psychological suicide often elicits public reactions of ambivalence or even revulsion. Institutional political suicide is generally met with public pride and honor. But, what specifically is counter-institutional suicide and what are its consequences?

I identify two types of counter-institutional suicide: the passive and the active. While both have similar motivations, the approaches and/or consequences are different. Let us begin with the passive approach. Passive suicide is a form of protest intended to initiate political change by evoking an emotional response, typically sympathy, from the observer. The primary objective of the passive approach, however, is to initiate political change. Thus, death is not a goal; it is merely an accepted risk. The ideal type of the

passive approach would be a hunger strike. Like many political protesters, the hunger striker is impotent relative to the political authority, and thus, seeks to shift the balance of power through unconventional means. One way of doing this is by rallying sympathizers to their cause. However, the hunger striker does not actively seek death. The hunger strike is merely a bargaining tool. In other words, unlike the self-immolator whose “death is not conditional on the opponent’s (in)action,” if the hunger striker’s demands are met, the strike will presumably end (Biggs, 2005, p. 174).

Like their passive counterparts, those who commit active counter-institutional suicide seek political change by eliciting an emotional reaction from observers. However, the desired effect is dependent upon the protesters method of destruction. In the case of suicide attackers, the destruction is directed outward to maximize the physical damage inflicted on persons and property in proximity of the attack, and the psychological damage inflicted on the observers (Pape, 2005). Self-immolation, on the other hand, is directed inward, focusing the destruction on the protester.<sup>7</sup> While physical damage can occur in cases of self-immolation (Biggs, 2005), it is typically relatively minimal compared to the suicide attack. But, the psychological effects can be every bit as destructive. Additionally, the perception by the target audiences of these two types of action is significantly different. While suicide attacks terrorize, and therefore, anger and alienate moderate elements of society, self-immolation produces feelings of horror, disgust, and empathy for the protester (Pape, 2005).

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<sup>7</sup> A common understanding of self-immolation is that it specifically means suicide by fire. However, self-immolation is merely a sacrifice of one’s life, regardless of how the suicide was carried out. Therefore, although most of the instances of self-immolation are indeed self-incinerations, as we shall see, other methods of politically suicides are included in this study.

It is also important to distinguish between two types of self-immolation cases. On the one hand, there are those that seek to initiate political change. For these individuals the motive is to mobilize supporters and sympathizers, and further a political agenda. This type is exemplified by the immolation of Thich Quang Duc in Vietnam in 1963. His primary objective was to contribute to the existing political struggle (Biggs, 2005). He even coordinated his act with the help of other protesters (Biggs, 2005). On the other hand, there are those who merely seek to express a political grievance. While the primary motive of this type is not necessarily to mobilize collective action, it often serves as the impetus. This type is represented in the case of Bouazizi in Tunisia. There is no evidence to suggest that Bouazizi wanted to mobilize protesters. He was simply angry with the political conditions in Tunisia and the injustices he had experienced, and wanted to express his political frustrations (Gardner, 2011). However, as it turned out, Bouazizi's political expression caused massive public outrage which ultimately led to revolution.

In short, I define self-immolation in this study as a politically motivated act, either to mobilize supporters or express a political grievance, which is independent of cultural and socio-psychological variables. It occurs in opposition to a legitimate political authority, rather than being sanctioned by it. Additionally, the self-immolator's primary goal is to achieve a political objective through death, regardless of method. Finally, unlike the suicide attacker, the self-immolator does not seek to physically injure others or damage property. They only wish to generate the maximum psychological impact.

#### The Collective Action Framework

So, how can we begin to approach a phenomenon that is a manifestation of social and political interaction, an act that clearly has significant political implications but occurs outside the institutional political framework? Given the common existence of political grievances and the means by which the self-immolator seeks to rectify them, it is necessary to consult the theoretical literature on collective action. Collective action theory is especially relevant to this study because it addresses, not only functions of individual actors and collective groups in the social processes of mobilization, but also the extra-institutional opportunities that expand and contract with changes in the political structure.

As is the case with the psychopathological approach to self-immolation, irrationality seems to be the default theoretical starting point for explaining many behavioral phenomena. However, this answer frequently proves both superficial and insufficient, and is often discarded or discredited as the theory develops. For example, in the theory of collective action, the *collective behavior* and *relative deprivation* approaches marked the initial attempts to offer explanations. These approaches suggest that collective action is merely an emotional response to uncontrollable stimuli of the external world (Gurr, 1970; Smelser, 1963). However, both approaches have largely been abandoned by current collective action scholars and have since been replaced by theories that adopt assumptions of individual rationality and structural-functional importance (Della Porta & Diani, 1999).

Given our interest here in understanding the mobilizing efficacy of self-immolation on the core and periphery, we must first turn our attention to individual rationality. It is convenient to think of communities, whether immediate (core) or

extended (periphery), as tangible and discrete entities with identifiable and continuous characteristics. Communities, however, are nothing more than the sum of their parts. Therefore, it is difficult to accurately predict behavior at the community level. But, if we can understand how individuals typically behave under certain circumstances, we can draw assumptions about collective behavior.

In order to exert influence on the political system, collective groups must mobilize supporters who will actively advance their political agenda. Understandably, the more supporters there are fighting for the cause, the more likely the collective group will be in achieving its goals. But, as Olson points out, it is typically extremely difficult to mobilize supporters because there is a propensity for rational individuals to abstain from action in which the costs outweigh the benefits (Olson, 1965). For Oliver, Marwell, and Teixeira, this difficulty can be overcome with the development of a “critical mass,” or a “small segment of the population that chooses to make big contributions to the collective action while the majority do little or nothing” (Oliver, et al., 1985, p. 524). If an individual or a small group bears the brunt of the burden of sacrifice, they may increase the likelihood of drawing supporters. While Olson and Oliver et al. were primarily referring to the benefits of participation in interest groups, their theories are relevant here. When the benefit in question is the rectification of a political grievance, the stake in participation arguably increases in value, particularly for those who possess the grievance (the core). If we think of the immolator as a critical mass, then they can effectively reach the periphery by producing devastating and lasting psychological effects through powerful imagery and feelings of horror (Cavarero, 2007). Thus, as it relates to instances of self-immolation, the success of mobilization is dependent on the diffusion of

the grievance throughout the core, and the ability of the immolator to elicit sympathy and cause unsettling psychological consequences on the periphery.

Mobilization is also affected by the structure of the political system and the opportunities that emerge as a consequence. The likelihood of mobilization, for proponents of the *political opportunity* school of thought, can be directly attributed to the existence of four conditions (Tarrow, 1998). First, the degree of access to the political processes can foster, stymie, or neutralize attempts at mobilization (Tarrow, 1998). Systems that offer a high degree of access provide an outlet for political action through legitimate institutional mechanisms. In closed political systems, on the other hand, there is little opportunity for collective groups to organize. It is in systems with only moderate access to legitimate institutional processes that tend to be the most fertile environment for collective action to occur. Political opportunity is also created by systemic instability caused by shifting political alignments and divisions within the elites (Tarrow, 1998). Thus, instability diminishes a regime's ability to react to the mobilization of collective groups. Additionally, opportunity is created when a group has access to a powerful ally within the system (Tarrow, 1998). It might be argued that this is related, not only to procedural institutional access, but also the opening of the social system, including loosening restriction on political discourse and the development of social networks. Finally, political opportunity opens or closes depending on the perceived tolerance of the state for collective action (Tarrow, 1998). If a regime is likely to respond with repressive tactics, opportunities for mobilization decrease. The theory of political opportunity provides a framework for understanding self-immolation in relation to the political system. As we shall see in later chapters, both India and South Korea were moderately



open socio-political systems that had recently expanded political competition (India) and tolerance for social mobilization (South Korea).

Finally, depending on the social structure, the existence of political opportunity, and the grievance itself, protesters select tactics that are perceived to have the most advantageous impact. Generally speaking, protest tactics have three primary functions and are selected on the basis of the desired goal or effect. According to Della Porta and Diani, protest tactics are used 1) to draw support to the cause, 2) to disrupt social, political and economic functions, and 3) to demonstrate the protester's willingness to sacrifice themselves for the cause (Della Porta & Diani, 1999). Additionally, protest tactics can be divided into two sub-categories: the violent and the non-violent. The frequency and magnitude of violence is likely to be exacerbated if the group and its grievances are not recognized by the opposition (Oberschall, 1970), and therefore is not conditional on the type of political system. In other words, violent protest may occur in democratic and non-democratic systems alike. Non-violence, according to McAdam and Tarrow, can also be an effective strategic method of protest, but its effects tend to vary depending on system type (McAdam & Tarrow, 2000). In democratic systems, non-violence constrains the response capabilities of the state (McAdam & Tarrow, 2000). Theoretically, this is because democratic regimes are accountable to the public. In non-democratic systems, on the other hand, non-violence can effectively mobilize a base of sympathizers (McAdam & Tarrow, 2000). Self-immolation is a unique protest tactic because, in varying degrees, it fulfills all three functions outlined by Della Porta and Diani. Furthermore, it resides in a theoretical gray area between violent and non-violent, depending on the interpretation of the observer. I propose that self-immolation, in terms

of outcome, might actually fit both the violent and the non-violent models of protest tactics, simultaneously.

### Data and Methods

Since one of the goals of this research is to reach beyond the limitations of single case studies which, as we have seen, are prevalent in the existing literature, I conduct a systematic comparative study between the anti-reservation movement in India and the prodemocracy movement in South Korea. These two cases represent moderately open socio-political systems that both experienced a high number of self-immolations during their respective protests. However, each movement's ability to mobilize and initiate political change differed significantly.

The data for this work will consist of descriptive accounts of the selected self-immolations and the corresponding social and political events that transpired immediately after. I draw data from two types of sources. In the case of South Korea's prodemocracy movement, I am able to rely exclusively on academic accounts, including data compiled by the *Stanford Korea Democracy Project*. However, the academic community has given far less attention to the events surrounding India's anti-reservation movement. Therefore, it is necessary to supplement the academic work with accounts published in newspaper articles retrieved from the *LexisNexis* database. In retrieving these articles, I cross-referenced the keywords "India" along with 1) "self-immolation," "immolation," or "immolate," or 2) any combination of the keywords "suicide" and "protest."

It is also important to note that, because the study of self-immolation is still in its infancy, data are scattered and incomplete. To date, there is no centrally accessible,

organized, or comprehensive location from which to retrieve information on instances of self-immolations. The data that do exist have been compiled by scholars in pieces for the purposes of their respective studies. Biggs is the only scholar to aggressively pursue the compilation of a database, which is unavailable to independent researchers. However, even Biggs acknowledges that the 533 cases he identifies falls grossly short of the actual number (Biggs, 2005). In fact, he estimates that the number of self-immolations occurring between 1963 and 2002 likely ranges from as few as 800 to as many as 3000 (Biggs, 2005). In addition, some data have yet to be uncovered by scholars. This discrepancy can be explained by a number of reasons. First, some cases have been reported but only appear in publications not frequently accessed by the international audience, including most scholars (Biggs, 2005). Second, a vast number of cases are not reported at all, or are suppressed by government officials or power-holders (Biggs, 2005). Finally, some accounts exist only in periodicals or newspaper articles that are only available in the primary language of the country in which the event occurred. It should be evident that this is a considerable hindrance when compiling data on self-immolations. While it is important to acknowledge such limitations, they are unavoidable at this time.

Additionally, defining and measuring the concepts used in this study are admittedly challenging tasks. Efficacy, for the purposes here, refers to the ability of self-immolation to initiate changes in the social and political systems. But, the types of changes are dependent upon which target group we are discussing. In terms of core mobilization, I am looking for evidence of increased protest activity and organizational capacity. The former is evidenced by a rise in the number of protesters or frequency of protest events. The latter exists when there is an emergence of a central leadership, a

consolidation of smaller organizations or groups, or an overall and consistent change in protest tactics. An ancillary factor that would suggest greater organizational capacity is the movement's long-term sustainability because it is reasonable to assume that movements that are able to survive over a longer period are more organized. Periphery mobilization refers to a shift in the cognitive framework of a large segment of society. Evidence of periphery mobilization can manifest not only in direct participation in the movement's activities, but also in indirect activity, such as the emergence of propaganda or changes in political support. I define political change as any shift in institutional political behavior in favor of the immolator's cause, such as compromise, conciliatory action, or policy reform. It also refers to alterations of the political structure, such as regime change. Finally, I define openness in two ways. The first is political openness, determined by access to institutional political processes (i.e. voting rights, the existence of interest groups, or the existence of two or more competitive political parties) and the tolerance of a regime for extra-institutional political appeals. In other words, is the regime likely to forcibly repress extra-institutional political action? The second is social openness, or the ability of individuals and groups to organize and engage in politically related discussion without political interference. While these definitions and measurements might at first appear to be somewhat abstract and complex, they should become much clearer in the following chapters when they are applied to the anti-reservation and prodemocracy movements of India and South Korea.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CASES

Michael Biggs (2005) argues that instances of self-immolation are positively correlated with the existence of democracy, highlighting the propensity for totalitarian regimes to suppress information. Adopting a rational choice approach, he states that “Because self-immolation is less likely to have an impact [due to information suppression], individuals in totalitarian states are less likely to commit such an act” (Biggs, 2005, pp. 187-188). Two countries offered in support of this claim are India and South Korea, ranking first and third, respectively, in Biggs’s tally of self-immolations. But, can we really place countries such as India and South Korea in the late 1980s and early 1990s alongside countries with fully open socio-political systems, such as the United States, as Biggs does? Biggs’s conclusions regarding a self-immolation/democracy correlation is corrupted primarily by two methodological errors. First, he applies a dichotomous definition of procedural democracy, failing to account for varying factors like electoral competition. This leads him to lump together a number of vastly different types of political systems under the heading of democracy, without considering the implications of the extent of democratization on, not only the propensity for someone to self-immolate, but also how society and the political system will react. Second, he fails to acknowledge the importance of liberalization in the social structure. However, it is not enough to consider the conditions of the social and political structures

independent of one another because the two are interactive. Thus, in determining openness, or what I refer to as level of participation, I account for the overall socio-political climate.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first part, I will demonstrate that although India and South Korea were different in a number of ways, at the time of their respective movements, the two countries were in stages of *moderately open* socio-political participatory systems. Specifically, while India was becoming more electorally competitive, South Korea was developing significant organizational and communicative capabilities at the social level. In the second section, I will focus on introducing the cases of the anti-reservation and prodemocracy movements. This will include a description of each case in order to provide the social and political contexts in which these the self-immolations occurred. In doing so, I will discuss the recent history of each country leading up to the events of each movement, and offer a description of the political environment, including such factors as institutional access, level of electoral competition, and strength of the regime. I will also cover the social environment, which will include factors such as social cohesion and the existence of a civil society. As it turns out, when we take into account both social and political dynamics, the cases more closely support the theory that collective action is most likely to occur in moderately open systems (Tarrow, 1998), whether the openings exist in the social or political spheres, or both.

At the time of the anti-reservation and prodemocracy movements, India and South Korea were experiencing substantial socio-political structural changes that were dramatically affecting the participatory opportunities available to the people. Put simply, both countries were transitioning toward more open participatory systems. India, while

nominally a multi-party constitutional democracy since 1950, was in reality almost exclusively a single-party aristocracy until the late 1980s. This was largely a consequence of divisions of political interest along caste and class lines, and inequity of power due to the imbalanced distribution of socio-economic resources. In other words, the India National Congress Party (Congress), which maintained almost uninterrupted control<sup>8</sup> throughout these four decades, consisted of and represented the privileged elites of Indian society. Thus, not only were the interests of these elites consistently the primary concern of the Indian government during this period, the wealth and resources of its elite constituency perpetuated the Congress's hold on power. Furthermore, from 1975 to 1977, India experienced authoritarian rule, a crackdown on opposition groups, and the suspension of civil liberties during the Emergency period under Indira Gandhi. It was not until the late 1980s that India began to show signs of electoral competition and the emergence of a strong civil society.

Similarly, South Korea experienced almost uninterrupted authoritarian rule beginning with its independence from the Japanese until the democratic elections of 1987. During this time, a string of autocratic leaders came to power and maintained control through fraud, coercion, and sometimes military clout. Elections, when held, typically consisted of only one candidate: the incumbent. And, when a change of power did occur, it was usually the result of either the incapacitation of the current leader, or a military backed *coup d'état*. However, beginning in the early 1980s, South Korea, while still institutionally non-participatory, began to relax its restriction of social activity. This

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<sup>8</sup> An opposition coalition briefly ousted the Congress in 1977, but remained in power for only two years before the Congress reclaimed control. As we shall see later, this short change in party rule was the result of a perfect storm of social and political variables rather than the existence of true political competition.

opened the door to the formation of vast networks of social organizations (many of which were politically oriented) and increased discussion of previously taboo topics such as constitutional reform (S. Kim, 2012).

As we can clearly see, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, both India and South Korea were undergoing substantial structural changes that greatly increased the public's participatory capacity. However, there still existed significant limitations on participation, both socially and politically. Although the opposition parties in India were emerging as political contenders, even as a coalition they still did not have the clout or the resources of the Congress. In South Korea, participation was completely limited to the social sphere; politically the country was still completely non-democratic. Furthermore, as we shall see later, both regimes were capable of launching a violent response to extra-institutional collective action. Thus, I maintain that, when taking into account the overall socio-political environment, both India and South Korea were moderately open. Let us now take a look at the anti-reservation and prodemocracy movements, and the social, political, and historical contexts in which they occurred.

#### The Anti-reservation Movement of India

India has a long history of social stratification and discrimination resulting from the hierarchical social order of the caste system. The legacy of this system has not only institutionalized inequality and constrained social mobility, it has also established a culture of animosity, frustration, and social division anchored in cultural identities that have been passed down over countless generations (McCormick, 2004). Throughout the last century, however, India has clearly made a considerable effort to minimize the



consequences of this antiquated social hierarchy, most notably through reservation initiatives that expanded opportunities for social and economic advancement to those of castes and classes identified as historically disadvantaged (Sharma, 2005).

Initially, reservation was limited to Muslim minorities and Untouchables, granting each group its own electorate (Sharma, 2005). However, following independence, the reservation policy was expanded to include social and economic opportunity as well. In 1950, the newly enacted Constitution established that 22.5 percent of all academic admissions and public sector jobs, the most coveted jobs in India, would be set aside for members of the “Scheduled Classes and Scheduled Tribes” (SC/ST) (Sharma, 2005). Furthermore, in accordance with the Constitution, the Indian government assumed responsibility for identifying and protecting disadvantaged groups (Sharma, 2005).

According to Article 46 of the Constitution:

The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation (cgsird.gov.in).

So, what constitutes a disadvantaged group, and what measures should the government take? In order to address these questions the Constitution allows for the appointment of a special commission to define (or redefine) disadvantaged groups and offer recommendations as to the course of action. Article 340 states:

The President may by order appoint a Commission consisting of such persons as he thinks fit to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes within the territory of India and the difficulties under which they labour and to make recommendations as to the steps that should be taken by the Union or any State to remove such difficulties and to improve their condition and as to the grants that should be made for the purpose by the Union or any State and the conditions

subject to which such grants should be made, and the order appointing such Commission shall define the procedure to be followed by the Commission ([cgsird.gov.in](http://cgsird.gov.in)).

While the initial reservations provided in the Constitution were certainly controversial, the policy was widely recognized as an evil necessary to achieving stability and ensuring that India's democratic experiment would be a success. But, as Sharma points out, reservation did little to eradicate caste identity, or heal the social cleavages and contention between groups (Sharma, 2005). As a matter of fact, if anything, the policy served only to highlight caste and class distinctions and institutionalize contention both socially and politically (Sharma, 2005).

The social and political consequences of caste-based divisions are interrelated, and can best be demonstrated by looking at the way in which the social translates into the political. We can clearly see the legacy of social fragmentation in the structural and functional political dynamics that emerged in post-colonial India. Just as caste ensured social inequality, it also institutionalized political inequality; caste defined political affiliations, not just party affiliation but any type of cooperative organization; it dictated the issues and platforms for which political groups stood; and it shaped the way in which power was distributed. In short, the social legacy of the caste system was the foundation for India's entire political system between Independence and the anti-reservation protests of 1990.

With this in mind, the manifestation of social inequality as power inequality and contention in the political system can be clearly demonstrated in the political history between 1950 and the early 1990s. As we shall also see, this socio-political dynamic ultimately served as the basis for India's turmoil in 1990. From 1950 to 1977, the

Congress continually trounced its opposition. In fact, until 1967 it had “never won less than 73 percent of the seats in Parliament” (Heitzman & Worden, 1995). The Congress experienced a very brief decline in 1977 when it lost power to the Janata coalition. As Heitzman and Worden note, this was partly due to poor economic conditions and changes in demographics, as well as a split within the Congress (Heitzman & Worden, 1995). However, by 1980, it was back to business as usual when the Congress reconsolidated and defeated Janata. By 1989, however, there was once again trouble on the horizon for the Congress. Mired in scandal, the Congress lost much of its support base to either abstention or defection, ensuring victory for the reorganized Janata. It must be stated, though, that the results of the election were more a condemnation of the Congress than genuine support for Janata. The 1989 election was effectively a referendum on the Congress more than approval of the opposition (Heitzman & Worden, 1995). But, as fate would have it, this referendum was all that was needed to set in motion the tumultuous and devastating chain of events of 1990.

So, what led to the anti-reservation protests and the myriad self-immolations that ensued? Two years after the defeat of Congress in 1977, the Janata regime exercised its constitutional right and appointed the Mandal Commission to revisit the issue of class identification and reservation. In its report, Mandal vastly expanded the definition of the SC/STs to include 52 percent of India’s population, and recommended that an additional 27 percent of government jobs be reserved, bringing the total to 49.5 percent (Sharma, 2005). But, by the time of the report’s publication in 1981, the Congress had already been returned to power and, in consistency with the interests of its constituency, quickly shelved Mandal’s findings. The crisis had been averted for the time being but not for

good. After the Janata emerged victorious in the 1989 elections, its leaders, headed by Prime Minister V. P. Singh, had no illusions that its hold on power was anything other than tenuous. Thus, Singh decided to make a bold political move in an effort to consolidate his base. On August 7, 1990, Singh announced that he would fully enforce the expansive recommendations of the Mandal Commission (Heitzman & Worden, 1995).

Although the implementation of the Mandal recommendations was almost certain to spark public outrage due to the controversial nature of the issue, India had experienced and dealt with reservation policies before. It is doubtful that leaders in the government, including Singh, expected the extent of chaos and instability that ultimately occurred. Almost immediately after the announcement, student protesters poured into the streets. Within a matter of days, protests had spread across the country, having the greatest impact in Uttar Pradesh, New Delhi, Bihar, and Hyderabad (Lahiri, 2008). Additionally, the intensity of many of the protests was extremely high, frequently resulting in violence and conflict with authorities. Protesters rioted, blockaded entire sections of cities, and set fire to buildings and vehicles. Police often responded with tear gas, beatings, arrests, and in some cases gun fire. However, the intensity of individual protests and the use of specific types of tactics varied greatly. While many protesters rampaged violently, others demonstrated peacefully, using tactics such as sit-ins (Lahiri, 2008). During the first six weeks of collective action, many protesters, mostly students, were killed or injured, schools and businesses were closed, and neither side was giving an inch of ground (Lahiri, 2008).

On September 19<sup>th</sup>, Rajiv Goswami, a student from the New Delhi University of Deshbandhu, emerged in the center of a protest, doused himself in kerosene, and lit himself on fire. Goswami was rushed to the hospital with burns covering 55 percent of his body (Lahiri, 2008). Although he survived the attempted self-immolation, his actions became a model for many future protesters in the anti-reservation movement (Lahiri, 2008). Within days of Goswami's self-immolation, the gruesome act was being mimicked everywhere. The first death from self-immolation came on September 24 when Surinder Singh Chauhan sustained burns covering 98 percent of his body (Bose, 1990). Over the next six weeks, India was hit with a wave of self-immolations, some by fire, some by poisoning, and others by hanging. By the time the unrest was over, approximately 130 people had self-immolated, with more than 60 resulting in death (Lahiri, 2008).

Although remaining vigilant and uncompromising during the first month and a half of protests, V.P. Singh extended an invitation to protesters "to open talks with his Government" just eight days after the self-immolations began (Hazarika, 1990). After months of increasing incidents of self-immolation and sustained protest, Singh lost a confidence vote and was forced to resign on November 7, 1990 (Heitzman & Worden, 1995). Several months later, the Janata coalition collapsed and the reservation policy was once again sidelined, which marked the abrupt evaporation of the anti-reservation movement. As it turns out, the Mandal recommendations were ultimately implemented two years later with little public response (Heitzman & Worden, 1995), perhaps a sign that both the Congress and Janata had politicized the issue. In short, the anti-reservation movement was a manifestation of caste conflict and social inequality. It can be

characterized as widespread and highly intense, yet inconsistent in terms of strategy and tactics. I will discuss the characteristics, structure, and functions of the movement more in the next chapter, which will in part deal with the mobilization efficacy of self-immolation.

### The Prodemocracy Movement of South Korea

Following Korean independence from the Japanese and the subsequent North/South split, the initial democracy established in the South was on shaky ground. Although Syngman Rhee had been legitimately and decisively elected president, it soon became clear he would not relinquish power quietly. Facing widespread disapproval, Rhee embarked on a series of constitutional engineering campaigns, political strong-arming tactics, and electoral fraud, in order to maintain his position as president (Savada & Shaw, 1990). It is surprising, however, that despite Rhee's ability to manipulate and control the political and electoral processes, he was unable to constrain popular action. The streets of South Korea were regularly packed with crowds of dissidents (S. Kim, 2012). On April 19, 1960, the people, most of whom were students, had reached their threshold of tolerance for Rhee's authoritarian tactics and political shenanigans, and once again mobilized. The consequences of this popular uprising were twofold. First, the protesters forced Rhee to resign a week after the action began. Second, the protest, "known and celebrated as the April 19 Student Revolution," initiated a culture of popular contention against the government, a culture that remains vibrant to this day (Savada & Shaw, 1990).

The democratic regime that succeeded Rhee, however, was short-lived. The country suffered from weak leadership that was unable to effectively facilitate cooperation among the elites. Consequently, the economy stagnated, and the protesters, “to whom the Democratic Party owed its power, filled the streets almost daily, making numerous wide-ranging demands for political and economic reforms” that the Party was unable to deliver (Savada & Shaw, 1990). The leadership also faced another significant problem. It did not have the power or the clout to control the military, a dilemma that ultimately sealed its demise (Savada & Shaw, 1990). A year after the Democratic Party took control, the military staged a *coup d’ tat*, installing General Park Chung Hee as president, and initiating a return to autocratic rule. Popular mobilization during the Park era, while still existent, underwent a significant decline in frequency. This is largely due to the fact that the economy was booming, resulting in the emergence of a substantial middle class, whose members were satisfied with their economic conditions, and therefore, accepted the political circumstances (Savada & Shaw, 1990). In addition, many of the activists who had previously constituted the bloodlines of political protest were imprisoned.

Following the assassination of Park in 1979, South Korea experienced a period reminiscent of the post-Rhee era. In other words, there was a brief rule by a democratic regime committed to open electoral competition, the drafting of a new constitution, and the reinstatement of civil liberties. This was followed almost immediately by another military *coup* and authoritarian regime under Lieutenant General Chun Doo Hwan in 1980. However, the Chun era differed from the Park era in several ways. First, the political activists who had been imprisoned under Park were released and began

establishing new social networks of activism. Second, it appears that the South Korean people's reintroduction to democratic governance, although brief, was enough to rekindle desires for meaningful democratic reform. Finally, with social networks expanding throughout society and the renewed desire for political reform, the contentment of economic progress among the middle class had begun to wane and the public's propensity for contentious extra-institutional collective action reemerged (Savada & Shaw, 1990).

These factors first manifested during the Kwangju protests that occurred from May 18<sup>th</sup> to May 27<sup>th</sup> of 1980. The Kwangju Uprising, often referred to as a massacre, became infamous for the government's brutal handling of the situation (Savada & Shaw, 1990). As the days went on, the demonstrators, who included both students and local residents, were repeatedly assaulted by military and police forces. This ultimately led to mass riots and the swelling of the protesters' ranks. By the end of the event, more than fifty thousand people were participating, nearly two thousand had been arrested, and two hundred had been killed (Savada & Shaw, 1990). Although the government ruthlessly crushed the Kwangju demonstrations, the repression did not stymie the prodemocracy movement; it intensified it (Savada & Shaw, 1990).

Throughout the early and mid-1980s, Chun further consolidated his power. He engaged in an effort to purge his opposition as well as anyone who had been active in the political system prior to his ascension to the presidency. Despite his efforts to eliminate political competition, Chun paid little attention to the growing social opposition to his authority. In fact, he actually took steps that facilitated it. During Chun's administration, the social networks of activism expanded and thrived, and a political culture of popular



contention, sometimes referred to as *minjung*, was taking hold (Lee, 2007). I will discuss *minjung* in more detail in the next chapter.

Throughout the early and mid-1980s, protest was a regular occurrence, and it appeared as though the prodemocracy movement just needed a spark to set the inevitable in motion. As Kim observes:

South Korea was being swept in a swirl of popular contention...Demonstrations were everywhere, and in major cities hardly a day passed without passing by violent clashes between protesters and the police, or the smell of teargas. It was a time of renewed opportunity, and it was at this point that the number self-immolators started to swell (S. Kim, 2012, p. 11).

The first spark came in 1985 when Hong Ki-Il self-immolated at the site of the Kwangju crackdown. This incident was followed by three more self-immolations the following year. Finally, in 1987, the prodemocracy movement, after steadily picking up momentum over the previous two years, exploded (S. Kim, 2012).

By 1987, opposition to the Chun regime had spread throughout the population, with more and more people joining the radical vision of political reform touted by students and the leaders of an increasingly powerful civil society. On April 13, 1987, Chun attempted to reestablish control over the social system, announcing that he would no longer tolerate discussion about constitutional reform. However, this attempt to reign in dissent among an increasingly angry public proved futile. The movement was already barreling forward, too powerful to stop. To add insult to injury, information was revealed that Chun's government had tortured and killed a student activist, sending protesters into frenzy (S. Kim, 2012). Less than three months later, government leaders recognized that the public would no longer accept Chun in power, and on June 29, selected Roh Tae Woo

to replace him; surprisingly, Chun agreed to step aside. Upon assuming power, Roh declared his intention to adopt a “new democratic constitution that embodied all the opposition’s demands” (Savada & Shaw, 1990). However, the movement had not come so far and put so much at stake to end the fight with an empty promise. After all, despite the rhetoric, Roh was still just another unelected president. Determined to ensure real democratic reform, the protesters relentlessly challenged the establishment, all the while leaving behind more and more deaths from self-immolation. In December of 1987, South Korea held elections that formally brought Roh to power.

While this may have looked like victory to many, for the activists of the prodemocracy movement this was just the first step. Over the next several years, activists continued to push for additional reforms and concessions. By 1991, there was a second major push, accompanied by another massive wave of self-immolations. However, by this time, South Korea had created enough political space through which to vent discontent via institutional mechanisms. As Kim observes, “by 1991, the political opportunities that were available during the 1985-1987 pro-democracy struggle were all but gone...This partly explains the high peak of 1991 self-immolation coming to an abrupt decline, to no self-immolation in 1992” (S. Kim, 2012, p. 15).

To this point, I have shown that both India and South Korea were in the midst of reshaping their social and political structures, which resulted in increasing participatory capacity. Additionally, I have outlined the details of each movement, highlighting the context in which they occurred. Now it is time to proceed to a discussion of the social and political effects of self-immolation. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how the structural and functional differences of these two movements gave way to considerably

divergent outcomes in terms of mobilization of core and peripheral groups, and the political changes that ensued.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EFFECTS**

As collective action theory suggests, movement activists choose protest tactics that are likely to have the greatest impact on the success of the collective group. In most cases, success is directly related to the group's ability to attract new members to the cause, to draw supplementary support from the public by eliciting emotional responses (i.e. sympathy, anger, or disgust), and to influence the behavior of a political actor or actors. In this chapter, I will assess the extent to which the acts of self-immolation during the anti-reservation and prodemocracy movements affected changes in the actions of three target groups: the core base of support, the periphery or general public, and the political actors. In order to accurately gauge change, it is important to have a holistic understanding of each movement, including characteristics such as intensity and sustainability, each movement's lifecycle and duration, structure and organization, and political outcome. I will begin with an overview of the lifecycle of each movement in order to demonstrate how they are polar opposites in terms of sustainability, patterns of intensity, and structure and organization. This portion will include how each movement began, progressed, and ultimately collapsed. In other words, while the anti-reservation movement was linearly structured, disorganized, brief, and exhibited consistent, high levels of intensity, the prodemocracy movement had a clear leadership hierarchy, was remarkably organized, lasted more than a decade, and progressively gained in intensity,

before experiencing a slow decline. Next, I will discuss the impacts of self-immolation on the mobilization of the core, the mobilization of the periphery, and the political outcomes of each movement. I argue that, while there was little to no impact on core mobilization, and only marginal impact on periphery mobilization and political change in India, there were significant effects on all three groups in South Korea.

Before I begin, however, it is important to restate how efficacy is defined for each group. Core mobilization, for the purposes here, refers not only to an escalation in participation, but also an increase in the group's capacity for organization. Organization would include group or faction consolidation, the emergence of a central leadership or development of a hierarchical order, increased cooperation between groups, or a strengthening of group cohesion. There are several indicators that a movement has mobilized its core. The first and most direct way is to identify whether or not there is a change in number of core participants or events organized by core supporters. While accurate, this approach requires access to highly detailed accounts of protest events, a luxury that rarely exists in the study of collective action. A second indicator is the length of the movement's existence. A movement that is well organized and structured will tend to have greater life expectancy. Another indicator is an increase in the number of formal organizations, or the consolidation of already existing organizations. Finally, we can infer changes to the organizational structure of the movement by observing the way it operates collectively. Specifically, a notable shift in the repertoires of protest across the movement as a whole would suggest an increase in organization and communication.

Mobilization of the periphery occurs when there is a shift in the overall cognitive framework of those who either do not stand to benefit, or to whom the benefits are

perceived as largely unimportant. The difficulty, of course, lies in determining when a shift in cognitive framework occurs. Short of conducting survey research (which is beyond the scope of this thesis) or locating survey data that would indicate such a shift (which does not exist), I must rely on conclusions drawn from the events of each movement. Specifically, I am looking for evidence of direct participation by non-activists, such as joining demonstrations, riots, or conflicts with authorities, or indirect participation, such as political expression, propaganda, or electoral influence.

Political efficacy refers to any change in either behavior of political actors, or a shift in the political structure. When considering political efficacy, it must be noted that self-immolation can have both direct and indirect consequences on political behavior. While it is possible for the act itself to influence political change by evoking an emotional response in a public official, it is more likely that the change will indirectly stem from pressure caused by core and peripheral mobilization. Direct and indirect effects can sometimes be difficult to distinguish. However, in looking at the circumstances under which political change occurs, we can reasonably draw conclusions about the origin of the influence.

### The Movement Cycles

The lifecycle of the anti-reservation movement can best be described as explosive; it was spontaneous, brief, and highly volatile. First, the movement did not come into existence through the development of networks of communication, the cultivation of a collective identity, or extensive efforts to mobilize supporters. It was instantaneously triggered by a single political event. Although there were most likely

those who opposed such a policy, possibly even groups that held an anti-reservation stance, there is no evidence to suggest any concerted effort by these individuals or groups to engage in or organize mass collective action prior to Singh's announcement. The collective response following the announcement, however, was immediate and pervasive. Within the first two weeks, protests were occurring in cities and provinces across the country; "the most affected areas were in UP [Uttar Pradesh], Bihar, New Delhi, and Hyderabad" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 185). The spontaneity of the movement is evident not only in its rise, but also in its abrupt decline. Unlike most movements that experience stages of decline, the anti-reservation effort transitioned from fully active to non-existent within a matter of a couple of weeks. Second, this movement was extremely short-lived. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment of beginning and end, the anti-reservation movement lasted for at most four months. Finally, the movement was highly contentious, often times violent, with this level of intensity persisting throughout the movement's entire lifecycle. Instances of riots, destruction of property, injury, and death (not including suicide) are consistent throughout the existence of the movement. In fact, the only change in protest tactics occurred approximately six weeks into the movement with the first instance of self-immolation, initiating a wave that lasted until the movement collapsed.

South Korea's prodemocracy movement differed from the anti-reservation movement in several ways. First, unlike the spontaneity of the anti-reservation movement, the issue of democratic reform had been simmering for years, perhaps even decades. The beginning of collective action advocating democratic reform in South Korea can be traced at least to the Kwangju Uprising in 1980, and possibly as early as the

April 19 Student Revolution of 1960. It was during the 1980s, however, that a true prodemocracy movement began to take root. Over the course of the next ten years, the movement became increasingly organized, forming a web of social networks and consolidating countless groups and organizations under one leadership structure (Shin, Chang, Lee, & Kim, 2007). Furthermore, the intensity of the prodemocracy movement was progressive rather than constant. Although there were certainly contentious events early in the movement's history, they were low in frequency. As the movement progressed into the mid-1980s, the frequency of protest events began to exponentially increase (Shin, et al., 2007). Similar to the anti-reservation movement, the self-immolations associated with South Korean prodemocracy movement did not initiate collective action. However, in the case of South Korea, self-immolation, beginning in 1985, did immediately precede a dramatic rise in the frequency and intensity of collective action. It is also interesting to note that the instances of South Korean self-immolations peaked in the years 1987 and 1991 (Shin, et al., 2007). As we know, it was in December of 1987 that South Korea took its first major step toward institutional democracy, electing Roh as president. But, by 1991 the prodemocracy movement was in serious decline, having lost virtually all but its most extreme activists. It appears that the peak in 1991 was a last attempt to regain the movement's momentum, unsuccessfully as it turns out.

To recap, these two movements exhibited very different characteristics and lifecycle patterns. The anti-reservation movement was spontaneous and brief with a high level of consistent intensity, and rapid decline. The prodemocracy movement, on the other hand, simmered at a low level of intensity for years before progressively increasing and peaking in the late 1980s. After summiting the apex of intensity, the movement



began to experience a steady decline, at which point there was a final mobilization effort that manifested in another spike of self-immolations.

### Mobilization of the Core

The lifeline of a movement is its core base of support. These are individuals who identify deeply with the movement's goals and values. They sacrifice their time, resources, and in some instances, even their safety and liberty to further the collective agenda. In short, members of the core are the workforce of the movement. Thus, the ability of a movement to mobilize and engage its core base of support is essential to its success and long-term viability. But, as some have pointed out, despite the perceived importance of the movement's objectives, it is often extremely difficult to mobilize the core into action (Olson, 1965). But, in some instances, a powerful act of sacrifice can overcome this difficulty, turning the apathetic into dedicated activists (Marwell & Oliver, 1993). Was this the case in our two studies? Let us first turn to India.

There is nothing in the accounts of the anti-reservation movement that would suggest that there were any notable changes in the number of student protesters or frequency of events following the first self-immolation on September 19<sup>th</sup>. But, there is one factor that might likely explain this. The issue in question was one of extreme contention, one perceived as not merely an attack on the students' prospects for future success, but also an attack on their cultural identity and natural rights. It is reasonable to assume that an issue of this magnitude would almost certainly draw most of its supporters and produce protest activity of the highest intensity early. This point is supported by the explosive beginning of the protests. In other words, any student who was going to be

involved would have done so well before Goswami's self-immolation, and thus there would be no more core individuals to join the collective action. In addition, it is hard to imagine a situation in which there would be opportunity for an increase in frequency, given the movement's extremely active beginning. Although the number of protesters and frequency of events offer little to suggest whether or not self-immolations helped mobilize the core, other structural-functional factors will offer some insights.

First, if the core mobilized, it would be evident in an increase in the movement's overall structural organization. The anti-reservation movement consisted almost exclusively of a large number of student organizations (Lahiri, 2008). Most of these organizations had no association with other groups, and the ones that did had only loose affiliations (Lahiri, 2008). Furthermore, most of these organizations acted independently, making little or no effort at forming a coalition or consolidating the movement under one organized hierarchy of leadership (Lahiri, 2008). As Simanti Lahiri puts it, "no single student group took a dominant position within the movement... The creation of a single organization or even a strong coalition of groups was hindered by caste, class, and political divisions, many of which were replicated within the number and variety of student organizations working against Mandal" (Lahiri, 2008, pp. 186-187).

Another factor to consider is this movement's lack of sustainability. This is directly tied to its organization because a movement that is organized is logically more sustainable over the long-term. While it is unclear exactly when the protests ended completely, it appears the intensity began to wane between three and four months after they started. As conventional social movement theory tells us, the rapid decline of a movement is typically the result of one of two things: either the movement's goal was

achieved or it has suffered from organizational problems (Della Porta & Diani, 1999). While one could make the argument that the anti-reservationist protesters achieved their goal, it is much more likely that the movement collapsed due to its inability to organize and its lack of structure and leadership. I will discuss the movement's success in a later section.

Finally, this movement had no consistency in its use of protest tactics, and there was no change in repertoire. From the beginning of the protests, anti-reservationists employed a multitude of tactics. Some were peaceful; most were violent; and, some began as peaceful but quickly became violent (Lahiri, 2008). The protesters used tactics such as demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, rioting, vandalism, and disruption of daily activity, to name a few. This was as true in the end as it was in the beginning. In fact, the only identifiable change to the movement's repertoire after Goswami's self-immolation was more self-immolations. Due to the highly visible nature of self-immolation, we cannot assume that others committed this act in order to emulate a prior self-immolation, not because of the direction or influence from a central leadership.

South Korea's prodemocracy movement, on the other hand, had a sharp increase in "the number of protest events by general activists" between 1987 and 1991, with only a slight dip in 1990 (Shin, et al., 2007, p. 45). As Shin and colleagues (2007) point out, by the mid-1980s groups such as students, laborers, and those opposed to American "imperialism" were finding a common cause under which to unify: democratic reform. Now, it is admittedly difficult to say for certain whether or not this increase in general activism represents an actual increase in the number of activists. It is quite possible that this increase is simply a reflection of a multitude of groups coming together under one

flag. It might also be some combination of the two. What is interesting, however, is that, regardless of which is correct, there is evidence of increased core mobilization: in raw participant numbers, in greater organizational structure, or both. While Shin et al. do not directly address the number of activists (as opposed to total number of participants) they do point out that “in 1987 the number of individuals participating in protest events reaches a high of over 6 million participants” (Shin, et al., 2007, p. 10). Regarding greater organizational structure, the authors point out that this trend “demonstrates not only the rise of coalition organizations but also increasing solidarity and strength of the social movement sector” (Shin, et al., 2007, p. 45).

The prodemocracy movement also differed from its Indian counterpart in its sustainability. The movement in total lasted well over a decade. Even if we dismiss the years in which the movement was largely dormant, it was still very active for four years. Furthermore, not only did the movement survive for several years under an authoritarian regime, it was able to thrive when opportunity opened. Additionally, the prodemocracy movement continued for several years following the country’s first democratic elections in order to advocate for further reforms (S. Kim, 2012).

Finally, there were notable changes in the protest tactics that were used following the initial self-immolations. While it is worth noting that the first self-immolations in 1987 and 1991 sparked repeat occurrences during those years, this is not the most important point. What is important is that the types of protest tactics used before 1987 were mostly “non-disruptive,” such as petitions, public statements, debates, propaganda, and the like (Shin, et al., 2007, p. 12). From 1987 until 1992, the tactics of choice were “disruptive,” which include conventional forms of protest such as strikes, sit-ins, and

public demonstrations, as well as violent manifestations such as riots, vandalism, the taking of hostages, and self-immolations (Shin, et al., 2007, p. 12).

### Mobilization of the Periphery

In addition to mobilizing the core base of support, it is optimal for a movement to engage the general public. While the core is essential to the fundamental operations and advancement of the movement's agenda, the periphery can potentially provide both logistical and moral support for the movement. In addition, an engaged periphery can be an extremely potent political force, particularly in democratic systems because the public can exert significant electoral pressure on those in power. A sympathetic periphery can often mean the difference between a movement's success and failure.

In India, participation in the anti-reservation movement was almost exclusively confined to higher caste students of urban universities. There appears to be little direct involvement in the movement by the general public. Recounting the structure of the movement, we can see that it was almost entirely comprised of preexisting student organizations. And, although there was a slight escalation of protest frequency in the first couple of weeks, the frequency and intensity of the movement quickly plateaued, remaining relatively constant until the end (Lahiri, 2008). This plateau occurred several weeks before the first instance of self-immolation. Thus, in terms of direct participation in protest activities, we can infer that, like core mobilization, self-immolation had virtually no impact on the periphery's inclination to *directly* support the movement through collective action. The only exception appears to be an instance in Uttar Pradesh in which thousands of rural residents "some armed with spears and sticks," flooded into

the streets of New Delhi “to back the student-led rally” (“Thousands Pour into Delhi in Jobs Protest,” 1990) This isolated infusion of public support occurred just days after the first instance of self-immolation.

However, despite the minimal effects on direct participation, there does appear to be a shift in higher caste public perception of the coalition government following the beginning of the wave, particularly in the urban areas where the vast majority of self-immolations took place. As it turns out, the coalition Janata Party was widely supported across caste and geographic lines prior to the reservation announcement (Lahiri, 2008). Although there may have been those among the upper caste public who opposed the government’s proposed action, even when the protests began, there is no evidence to suggest that this segment of India’s population was prepared to speak out. However, following the first self-immolation, public outrage, particularly in the urban areas of Northeast India, began to surface. For instance, newspapers started publishing articles demonizing the Singh Government, and affirming its culpability for the chaos and death that occurred (Brown, 1990). Furthermore, many of these articles “portray the dead and the maimed as heroes” (Brown, 1990). Moreover, many in these areas begin displaying anti-Singh propaganda, calling for an procedural remedy (T. Singh, 1990). Finally, there is political evidence to suggest that a shift in public opinion occurred. Prior to the self-immolations, Singh’s cabinet remained unified and committed to the implementation of the reservation policy. But, after the self-immolations began, much of the cabinet engaged in a political mutiny, continually calling for Singh’s resignation (Akiyama, 1990), which they eventually received after Singh lost a confidence vote (Heitzman & Worden, 1995). A political panic of this nature and magnitude suggests only one thing:

there was a significant shift in the public opinion among a large portion of the electorate, and the politicians knew it.

While mobilization of the periphery in India was largely confined to instances of political expression and legitimate procedural means, by the late 1980s the periphery in South Korea was highly mobilized and engaged in direct challenge to the government through protest activities. Prior to 1986, students and activists constituted the vast majority of the ranks of the prodemocracy movement (Shin, et al., 2007). However, by early 1987, it had transformed from a movement once driven and sustained by professional activists and intelligentsia, into a truly popular movement. The struggle for democratic reform had unquestionably become part of the mainstream. In fact, citizen participation in protest events had increased approximately ten fold between 1986 and 1987 (Shin, et al., 2007). In other words, ordinary citizens, from all walks of life and from all over the country, were now directly participating in the struggle for democratic reform.

This enormous influx of popular support carried with it significant implications for the movement's success. First, it increased the ability of the movement to execute protest events on a massive scale. Second, it lent the movement popular credibility. With the backing of a significant portion of the Korean public, the government could no longer ignore the demands of the movement without placing its own survival in jeopardy. Shin and authors describe the general public's participation in the movement as follows:

The first peak [of public participation] was in the June democracy movement in 1987. Citizens' participation was especially important for the struggle because it meant that the large-scale demonstrations could be supported and justified by ordinary people, which in turn seriously

delegitimized the regime. The main supports of protest had traditionally been workers and students, but ordinary citizens including the middle class began to join the democracy movement. We can see an expansion of the democracy movement into every corner of Korean society, which was not confined to a small number of activist groups anymore. Mass participation was the key in bringing about constitutional reform after the June democracy movement (Shin, et al., 2007, p. 46).

What is interesting is that the increase in periphery mobilization does not coincide with the rise of democratic activism. Instead, it spikes shortly after the first self-immolations in late 1985 and throughout 1986. For years, the general public showed little interest in participating in a push for democratic reform. This is most likely because economic and political conditions were far better than they had been in decades. First of all, the Chun regime, although not democratically elected, was far less repressive than regimes of the past. Second, South Korea had recently experienced remarkable economic success due to rapid industrialization. This led to a considerable improvement in quality of life and the emergence of a large middle class. As a consequence, many had become satisfied and therefore politically apathetic.

### Political Change

So far, I have demonstrated that in terms of self-immolation's effects on core mobilization, South Korea's prodemocracy movement was far more mobilized, not only in number of protesters and frequency of events, but also in its degree of organization, than India's anti-reservation movement. Similarly, the periphery in South Korea was more directly engaged with the activities of the movement, although there is evidence to suggest some indirect periphery mobilization in India. So, what were the political consequences of self-immolation in these two cases?



When the anti-reservation protests began following the announcement of the enforcement of the Mandal recommendations, it was evident that the Singh government had no intention of reversing its stance. Up until the first case of self-immolation, Singh continually made comments that alluded to his commitment to follow through with reservations. For example, he is quoted as stating, "The goal of my Government is to provide social justice and not to deprive anyone of employment opportunities...I am prepared to take any step consistent with the basic need for social justice" (Hazarika, 1990). Singh's position remained consistent in the face of the violence, disorder, injury, and death that occurred in the first several weeks of the protests. However, following the self-immolations, the government began to show signs that its resolve was weakening. For instance, Singh extended an invitation to the protesters to open discussion on the issue stating, "Only through a dialogue can we learn the extent of their fears, dispel those that are unjustified and find ways of meeting those that have substance" (Bhaumik, 1990).

It is unclear whether this change was the result of an emotional impact of the suicides, or fear of a political backlash that was becoming a clear and present danger to the regime, as the country was being ripped apart by conflict. Whatever the motivations, the results are clear. As the number of self-immolations continued to escalate, the ruling government was becoming more and more unstable, ultimately devolving into political cannibalism. Singh was not only a target of blame by protesters, the public, and the opposition Congress, he was also offered up as a scapegoat by his own cabinet. Although he dodged political demise on multiple occasions, Singh finally succumbed to a vote of no confidence on November 7, 1990 (Heitzman & Worden, 1995). Furthermore, the

Janata coalition lost control in the subsequent election. As we have seen, although the reservation policy was put on hold, it was eventually implemented anyway without incident (Heitzman & Worden, 1995).

This raises the question as to whether or not the anti-reservation movement and violent tactics such as self-immolation were actually effective at all. Lahiri argues that self-immolation was not effective because it failed to arouse feelings of shame and fear from the government (Lahiri, 2008). However, I contend that self-immolation was in fact marginally politically effective, although only in the short-term. This can be seen by the fact that the government began to give ground in the struggle by extending opportunities for discussion to the protesters. Additionally, the Supreme Court offered a ruling which temporarily placed an injunction on the implementation of the policy (Sharma, 2005). Next, it caused a political disaster for the Singh regime, creating rifts in the party, even among supporters of reservation, largely based on the handling of the protests. This in turn significantly inhibited the regime's ability to function effectively. Finally, the public largely reversed its support of the ruling Janata coalition, voting it out of power in the subsequent elections. Self-immolation ultimately failed, however, because it was unable to cultivate a unified identity under which the movement could coalesce. In fact, it is quite possible that this failure, combined with the high intensity of the protests, actually caused the movement to prematurely collapse because of emotional fatigue.

While the political consequences of self-immolation in India were moderate and short-term, they were extensive and lasting in South Korea. Prior to the beginnings of the self-immolations, the influence of the prodemocracy movement was unclear. On the one hand, Chun exercised strict control over the activities of his institutional opposition, and

those who had previously held political office, while simultaneously opposing popular elections. At the same time, however, he significantly decreased restrictions on non-institutional political activity, demonstrated by his campaign to release political dissidents from prison, and toleration for discussion of constitutional reform (S. Kim, 2012). However, in retrospect, it is clear that these ostensibly conciliatory measures were nothing more than means of appeasement for the opposition. It is likely that Chun, in a display of short-sighted judgment, saw no danger in releasing the political prisoners. And, as we now know, he later cracked down on discourse related to constitutional reform, a decision that ultimately led to his fall from power.

After the self-immolations started and the prodemocracy movement began to mobilize, elites collectively decided that in order to ensure stability, the unelected Chun should step down from power, a suggestion to which he reluctantly agreed (S. Kim, 2012). But, again, this was not intended to be a step toward democracy. The intention of the political elites was merely to place Roh Tae Woo in power, another authoritarian leader who was not the subject of widespread public anger. Much to the surprise of the elites, however, Roh announced his commitment to democratic elections (S. Kim, 2012). Although it is unclear whether this announcement was an empty promise aimed at neutralizing the momentum of the prodemocracy movement, the extent to which the core and periphery had already mobilized, coupled with the continued instances of self-immolation, virtually guaranteed that Roh would have to follow through on his commitment, which he ultimately did, resulting in the democratic elections of 1987.

In sum, the evidence suggests that self-immolation had varying degrees of success at mobilization and political change in these two cases. In India, mobilization efficacy

was largely confined to the periphery, and was modest at best. Self-immolation had no notable impact on the anti-reservation movement's ability to increase its core support base or to organize the existing participants into a viable and coherent entity of extra-institutional political change. However, the modest mobilization of the periphery consequently had a modest impact on the political environment. In South Korea, self-immolation had considerable effects in all areas. Following the first acts, there was a steady increase in the number of participants, both activists and citizens, as well as frequency of protest events. South Korea's prodemocracy movement became remarkably organized and ultimately led to meaningful political change.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

To briefly recount, I have shown that these two movements occurred in moderately open socio-political systems, and that they both experienced mass epidemics of self-immolations. I have also demonstrated that there were substantial differences in the efficacy of self-immolation as an impetus for core and periphery mobilization and political change. But, what can account for such radically divergent outcomes? The first logical place to look would be at each country's civil society. But, as it turns out, at the time of the self-immolations, India and South Korea had both developed vibrant civil societies (Heitzman & Worden, 1995; Savada & Shaw, 1990). Are there any other factors that might minimize or enhance the efficacy of self-immolation as a tactic of political protest? If so, how would they reconcile with the two cases presented here? In this chapter, I look at several variables, including social stratification, political culture, issue diffusion, and institutional access, and argue that differences in these factors can have an impact on the efficacy of self-immolation.

The first factor that I will discuss is the structure of the social system, namely the degree of stratification or integration. When a society is stratified, and a movement overlaps social divisions, it is less likely that self-immolation will have any effect on mobilization. This is because in a stratified society, inequality tends to be prevalent,

group identity is inherently more entrenched, and thus social divisions are more pronounced. Therefore, social stratification inevitably creates a more contentious socio-political environment. The result is less cooperation, which is fundamentally counter to the potential success of any form of collective action. It is important to note, however, that a stratified society is not necessarily synonymous with ethnic heterogeneity, although the two frequently coincide. It is possible to have an ethnically homogenous, yet simultaneously stratified community. One might consider the example of China, which is about as close to ethnically homogenous as is possible in the modern globalized world. With Han Chinese making up 91.5 percent of the population, China suffers from significant social and political instability due to rifts in the social system (cia.gov). Even when we discount cultural factors such as religion in China, we are still left with a remarkably high level of economic inequality, particularly along geographic lines. This is especially prevalent in the rural/urban divide, and the extent to which certain social groups are limited in their mobility potential (i.e. education and employment).

Too often, when scholars observe collective action phenomena, they tend to assume the existence of a common identity based on the shared objective of the group. However, in many cases, a common objective on its own is not sufficient for the development of a collective identity; instead there must first be at least the potential for the development of a common social identity based on mutual respect among those seeking to advance the objective. Let us now look at each case through the lens of social stratification.

In India, social fragmentation had disastrous effects on the ability of the anti-reservation movement to organize, much less execute an effective strategy. This limited the ability of the movement to achieve anything other than marginal success, and rendered it unsustainable over the long-term. As we have seen, this movement was made up primarily of students from higher castes and classes who opposed to the government's plan to reserve jobs for lower castes and classes. When looking at the movement in terms of the policy itself, the natural inclination is to simply divide the actors into two categories: opponents and proponents. However, we do a disservice to this study if we stop short at such a superficial analysis. We must go further by diligently accounting for the social, not just the political, make-up of the movement. While it is convenient for the observer to indiscriminately apply the term "higher castes," in doing so we lose sight of the fact that this movement was made up of extremely different social groups with little in common other than mutual disdain for a policy. To elaborate, it is essential to understand that the anti-reservation movement actually consisted of three distinct castes, and a countless number of classes. And, as history has shown us time and again, deeply entrenched social divisions do not easily conform to changing political dynamics. In fact, the multi-level social stratification means that animosity almost certainly existed within the movement itself.

Having a look at the structure and organization of the anti-reservation movement will help to illustrate this point. As it turns out, this movement had no identifiable organization, and its structure was more linear than hierarchical. This is evidenced by three consistent and interrelated factors. First, the anti-reservation movement had no discernible central leadership. As Lahiri points out, the movement was comprised of

countless unaffiliated student organizations, and none of them emerged in a leadership role (Lahiri, 2008). Second, the movement exhibited no consensus on strategy or coordinated application of protest tactics. While some groups exercised moderation, others adopted a more extreme approach, with an inclination toward violence (Lahiri, 2008). Finally, the movement demonstrated limited cultivation of social networks or lines of communication. Instead, each group chose to largely operate independently (Lahiri, 2008). Combined, these three factors reinforce Lahiri's description, that it was "an ad hoc movement, created solely to fight the adoption of Mandal into state policy. It is more correct to view the Anti-reservation movement as a loose confederation of a variety of caste-based student organizations" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 185). In other words, these were groups organized on the principle of caste differentiation and exclusion, principles inherently not conducive to cooperation. The implication is that, while fighting to stop the policy was clearly important to all protest groups, it was less important than bridging social divides. The overall structure and lack of organization of the anti-reservation movement suggests that the student groups involved had no intention of cooperating with one another. But, why is that? It seems common sense that groups that unite, organize, and cooperate are more effective than those that do not. In fact, the anti-reservation movement emerged as a spontaneous amalgamation of dissident groups and student organizations acting simultaneously yet almost independently in pursuit of a common goal. According to Lahiri, "The creation of a single organization or even a strong coalition of groups was hindered by caste, class, and political divisions, many of which were replicated within the number and variety of student organizations working against Mandal" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 187).



Furthermore, while the lack of organization in the beginning of a social movement does not necessarily preclude future organization or cooperation, one aspect of Lahiri's description is telling in light of what we know about the social dynamics in India. The fact that the movement did not operate as a cohesive unit, but rather as an assorted bunch of organizations based on caste identity suggests that, while they all shared a commitment to the anti-reservation cause, the deeply entrenched social hierarchy condemned the movement to factionalization, and ultimately little chance of collective success or movement sustainability. Ironically, the very social cleavages that pitted the protester against the prospective beneficiaries of the reservation policy were the same cleavages that ensured the movement's failure. Thus, the wave of self-immolations was largely ineffective at mobilization, not necessarily because of the act itself, but because no mobilization tactic, no matter how powerful was likely to overcome the depth of caste-based social division.

Unlike India's clearly defined and historically and culturally embedded social structure, there is far less distinction between classes in South Korea. In fact, South Korea actually enjoys a great deal social cohesion and equality. First, South Korea is very much a homogenous society. South Korean's share a common language, history, cultural identity, and ethnicity (with the exception of approximately 20, 000 Chinese) (cia.gov). Furthermore, the economic boom during South Korea's transition to a modern industrial economy facilitated the emergence of a large middle class and a high standard of living, relative to the rest of the world (S. Kim, 2012). As a result, there are far fewer sources of contention among social groups, making it more likely for citizens to cooperate with one another when faced a struggle for a common objective. The history

of collective action in South Korea overwhelmingly supports this point. In fact, popular mobilization is one of the defining traits of modern South Korean history, and its society is one of the most effective mobilizing machines in the world (Lee, 2007).

This is also evident in the structure and organization of the prodemocracy movement. The movement was comprised of groups and organizations which focused on a variety of issues ranging from workers' rights, to anti-US "imperialism" (Shin, et al., 2007). Despite their differences, all of these groups united in the struggle for democratic reform. Furthermore, the movement quickly developed a central leadership hierarchy, and demonstrated a remarkable ability to organize and execute a consistent strategy (Shin, et al., 2007). In short, the strategy and composition of the movement largely echoed the highly communitarian and egalitarian social dynamics of South Korea.

Another factor to consider in the mobilization of the core (and is also applicable to the mobilization of the periphery) is the nature of political culture. Political culture in both South Korea and India is closely related to the historical and cultural social dynamic in each country. In India, there exists a political culture of contention between those who value historical traditions and those who wish to pursue a system based on modern social and political values (McCormick, 2004). Given the interests inherent in these two opposing beliefs, contention is often divided along caste and geographic lines.

McCormick points out that frustration is endemic to India's political culture, and that "Political, social, and religious conflicts regularly lead to physical violence" (McCormick, 2004, p. 347). Conversely, South Korean political culture values the good of the community as a whole over the good of individual groups. As a consequence, conflict is typically between society and the political system rather than within society

itself. A product of this socio-political dynamic was the development of the minjung ideology (Lee, 2007). According to Lee, minjung “meaning ‘common people’ as opposed to elites and leaders...came to signify those who are oppressed in the socio-political system but who are capable of rising up against it” (Lee, 2007, p. 5) Although Lee points out that elites often included intellectuals, the minjung ideology was actually cultivated by students and academics. Minjung became a powerful ideology, and most students were subject to indoctrination early in their academic experience. Fundamental to minjung ideology is a devotion to activism, and a willingness to sacrifice one’s self for the cause (whatever the cause of the day happens to be) (Lee, 2007).

The diffusion of the issue and its importance is also fundamental to the efficacy of self-immolation. Clearly, the more people who identify an issue as important to their own well-being or the well-being of those with whom they share an emotional connection, the more likely the movement will attract supporters. At first glance, the reservation policy would seem to impact a substantial segment of the Indian population. If we look at issue diffusion in terms of caste percentages, we find that eligible beneficiaries of the policy total approximately 52 percent of the population. Thus, the issue of anti-reservation should be important to roughly half of India’s population (or about 400 million at the time of the protests). However, this statistic is misleading. In actuality, the anti-reservation issue had a relatively low level of diffusion throughout Indian society. The reason is that we need to separate those of the higher castes and classes into two categories. First, there are those who could expect to experience the practical impacts of reservation, specifically those who were about to enter the workforce. This would primarily include university students, consequently the group that

almost exclusively filled the ranks of the protests. These individuals opposed the policy for both practical *and* ideological reasons. The second group would include the remainder of higher caste members, most of whom were already employed. For these individuals, opposition would likely be solely ideological. We can therefore conclude that the issue was not nearly as pervasive as one would expect.

The events that transpired support this conclusion. While it is unclear exactly how many individuals participated in the movement, it is safe to say that only a small fraction of the higher castes took to the streets. If ideological opposition was sufficient to attract direct support of the movement, the streets of India would have been flooded with nearly half a billion people, an event that the world would certainly have noticed. However, this did not happen. The fact is that, while there were isolated instances of protesters who participated for strictly ideological reasons, the vast majority were those who were facing the adverse, practical consequences of the policy. However, as we have seen, this did not completely prevent the periphery from taking part, but they chose an indirect, less confrontational means of participation.

In South Korea, there was a much higher level of issue diffusion, given that democratic reform is what Mancur Olson would refer to as a “public good,” in the sense that it cannot be denied to some and granted to others (Olson, 1965). Thus, democratic reform held practical implications for everyone. What is interesting is the importance of the issue for the periphery seems to have changed between 1987 and 1991. In 1987, the importance of democratic reform was high among most of the South Korean population. However, by 1991, institutional democracy was already in place, and the movement that

continued to push for further constitutional reforms was in decline and unable draw support beyond the activist community (Shin, et al., 2007).

The final factor that impacts the efficacy of self-immolation is the accessibility of the institutional political process. When institutional mechanisms exist through which political change can be attained, extreme forms of protest like self-immolation are much less effective. Efficacy increases as institutional access decreases. The reason is that, in accessible political systems, extreme acts of protest appear as irrational acts of mentally disturbed individuals. Conversely, when access is limited or non-existent, extreme forms of protest are more accepted because they are considered to be acts of the desperate, allowing observers to identify, or at the very least sympathize, with the protester.

India's political system at the time of the anti-reservation movement could be considered at least moderately accessible, especially to those of the higher castes and classes. Although competition in the Indian electoral system was limited, the country did hold regularly scheduled, free and fair elections. And, as we have seen, the modest changes that occurred were achieved almost exclusively through procedural avenues. South Korea, on the other hand, was still a non-democratic political system when the self-immolations began, allowing more people to justify the act as reasonable, and even necessary. Therefore, political change occurred primarily as a means of maintaining social and political stability. In other words, it was an act of national self-preservation.

In short, the efficacy of self-immolation is dependent upon a number of socio-political variables. In moderately open countries with stratified social structures, self-immolation tends to be less effective at mobilizing the core base of support and general

public because of preexisting social cleavages. This is because of the inherent difficulty in cultivating a common identity in contentious socio-political environments. Similarly, political cultures that emphasize conflict over cooperation further diminish the mobilization efficacy of self-immolation because groups will be unable to overcome these social divisions. Furthermore, low levels of issue diffusion reduce the potential number of those who will be drawn to the cause, inhibiting the movement's strength. Finally, when there is at least moderate access to institutional mechanisms of political change, self-immolation is viewed as irrational act, reducing its effectiveness in eliciting the desired emotional response from the observer. The existence of any combinations of these conditions greatly undermines the likelihood of meaningful, long-term political change.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

As self-immolation increasingly becomes a part of the protester's arsenal worldwide, it is fundamental that political scientists take this elaborate and extreme form of political participation seriously. We have seen that self-immolation can potentially have significant impacts on the interactive dynamics between the social and the political spheres. Its influence can range from very limited, resulting in little or no notable change, to moderately effective, prompting minimal changes in social and political behavior, to extremely effective, sparking mass mobilization and even complete shifts in political structures and power dynamics.

This project has focused on the anti-reservation movement in India and the prodemocracy movement in South Korea. I chose these two cases for several reasons. First, they represent two of the highest frequencies of movement specific political self-immolation in history. Second, they fit a particular socio-political profile: specifically, at the time of their respective movements, both India and South Korea were in the initial stages of opening their socio-political structures. While India was beginning to experience minimal electoral competition, South Korea was becoming less restrictive on social activity and communication. This presented socio-political opportunities for participation that had not existed previously. Finally, these two cases conveniently occurred at almost exactly the same time. This fact offered the unique advantage of

being able to confidently eliminate the possibility that exogenous factors were the cause of variance in the social and political outcomes.

After conducting an analysis of the events that occurred prior to and after the initial self-immolations in both cases, several points became evident. In India, the self-immolations had virtually no impact on core mobilization. There was no evidence of an increase in participation or organizational capacity following the self-immolations. Similarly, there were very limited effects on the direct mobilization of the periphery. However, the periphery did exhibit signs of moderate indirect mobilization in the form of propaganda and shifts in the electoral support of the incumbent regime. The political results were also moderate and only short-term. In South Korea, there was substantial evidence of both core and direct periphery mobilization. Not only did the number of activists and citizens involved in protests increase, the frequency of the events themselves spiked after the first self-immolations. Furthermore, the political impact was substantial, resulting in an institutional shift from autocratic to democratic rule.

I attribute these disparities in outcomes to a number of socio-political variables. First, social stratification prevented self-immolation from being an effective mobilizing tool in India, while social integration facilitated its effectiveness in South Korea. These mobilization effects of self-immolation were further amplified by the political culture of contention in India and that of communitarianism in South Korea. In addition, the issue of anti-reservation was far less diffused than prodemocracy, thus limiting the power of self-immolation to draw people to action. Finally, self-immolation was less effective in India because there were institutional mechanism in place through which to initiate political change, diminishing the ability of the self-immolator to elicit an emotional



response or establish a connection with potential supporters. Combined, these factors necessarily have an indirect impact on the efficacy of self-immolation on political change because an increased capacity for mobilization translates to greater political influence.

In conducting this research, there were obstacles and limitations that must be addressed. The first has to do with definitions and measurements. When dealing with concepts such as efficacy and openness in the social and political structures, there is an inherent problem of subjectivity. Because there is no universal understanding of these concepts, their meaning, even when accompanied by a conceptual or operational definition, is open to interpretation by the reader. Unfortunately this limitation carries over to measurement, and in turn, the corresponding conclusions. However, when dealing with topics such as the efficacy of self-immolation, these limitations are unavoidable. A second has to do with data and data collection. Because the study of self-immolation is still in its infancy, the data that are currently available are scattered and incomplete, at best. Thus, much of the data had to be extracted from qualitative accounts of the events. In researching South Korea's prodemocracy movement, I found that the academic community had fairly comprehensively chronicled these events. However, academic work on the anti-reservation movement was extremely limited. In dealing with the lack of scholarship in this area, I turned to newspaper accounts, a method that presented its own set of limitations. When searching newspaper databases, I was often presented with inconsistent results. Even attempts to replicate database searches of other scholars yielded inconsistencies. In the end, I drew articles from the *LexisNexis* database because it offered the most consistent and comprehensive search results.

Despite the limitations, this research has provided a new approach to the study of self-immolation. However, there is still much work that needs to be done. First and most important, with the number of self-immolations rapidly increasing, it is imperative that scholars begin to rigorously document and compile data on these events as they occur. Many details of past self-immolations have unfortunately been lost to history, likely to never be retrieved. But, there is hope for future research. If we begin to build a solid foundation of data now, future studies of self-immolation will be able to provide more conclusive findings to more specific questions. Future research should also focus on the efficacy of self-immolation in other types of socio-political systems. For example, how effective is self-immolation in open systems, such as the United States or countries of Western Europe? How about in closed systems, such as China or the countries of the Arab Spring? Another topic to explore is how the media impacts the efficacy of self-immolation. On the one hand, it might be argued that the media is an arm of the powerful, and therefore is less likely to cover self-immolation because doing so would offer a voice to the powerless. An interesting fact uncovered in the course of this research was that, in the United States, a country with the fourth highest number of self-immolations (Biggs, 2005), there was almost no mention of American occurrences by major news outlets or popular, non-academic websites. In fact, one recent (2012) self-immolation in the United States was only addressed by a local independent news organization, and a page that had been devoted to the instance on the popular, user-generated website *Wikipedia* had been inexplicably deleted. On the other hand, perhaps the media is more likely to cover self-immolation because of its extreme nature. This might be especially true in the modern age of technology if media is defined to include

social networking capabilities. Tools that allow instant documentation (i.e. cellular phone cameras) combined with social networking platforms (i.e. *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Youtube*) diminish the ability of corporate media organizations to control the flow of information. Finally, while I chose to focus on two cases with extremely high frequencies, there are many more cases with only a very small number of occurrences. Future research should look at whether or not the efficacy of self-immolation increases, decreases, or remains the same as the number of instances rises. In short, with more time and research, the scholarly community will be able to provide a greater understanding of this largely neglected socio-political phenomenon.

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