INTRODUCTION

During the last couple of decades or so, the sociology of social movements has emerged as a very flourishing branch of Sociology. There has been a great deal of writing, both conceptual and empirical on the theme of social movement. This increasing interest of Sociologists in social movements cannot be dismissed simply as accidental. In the contemporary period social movements have become a very important part of the social reality in different societies across the world, both small and big, and developed and under-developed.

The Sociologists have always been deeply interested in understanding not only the statics but also the dynamics of human society. The dynamics of any civilized society cannot be comprehended properly both historically and contemporarily without analysing various processes that had contributed or are contributing to these dynamics. Social movements can be considered as one type of such important processes.

Iranian society is one of the ancient societies in the world. What is now known as modern Iran had been in existence with more or less the same boundaries since several centuries. The Iranian history has been generally divided by scholars into two periods, namely pre-Islamic and post-Islamic. Despite several changes, there has been a continuity in the Iranian culture since the early pre-Islamic period to this date. The major difference between these two periods is the difference in religions of the majority of people. The pre-Islamic period was
marked by the prevalence of Zoroastrianism with its different versions as the main religion of the country. Zarathustra who established this religion sometime between 500 - 1000 B.C. gave an integrated socio-cultural existence to the Iranian people. However, it gradually reached a high level of rigidity and orthodoxy and became a religion of the oppressors and the privileged classes. This caused a number of revolts by the poor people which were inspired by the egalitarian preaching of an Iranian known as Mazdak. But these revolts were brutally suppressed and thousands of people were either killed or escaped to remotest places. Consequently, from eighth century onwards, after the Arabs defeated the Sassanian and Byzantine empires, the masses of Iranian people gradually accepted Islam. But right from the early Islamic periods most of the poor and under-privileged people were attracted to Shi'ism, which upheld the principles of justice, equality and brotherhood. Therefore like the Mazdakism in pre-Islamic period in the Iranian history, Shi'ism had been the ideology of the oppressed and exploited Iranian people over centuries and continues to be so even to this date. The land of Iran provided a passage joining the Orient to the Occident and so it had to experience numerous incursions from the outside, not only political but also cultural. So the Iranian people always had to fight to preserve their identity and stop oppression and exploitation, and this was largely responsible for the emergence of various social movements.

There is another factor which commands our attention historically. The Iranian people have always been largely a sedentary population and,
incursions on Iranian society were mostly by the nomadic tribes. Due to these incursions, the nomadic and sedentary ways of life and culture, the nomadic and sedentary world views came in confrontation with each other. This all pervasive conflicting situation proved to be favourable for the emergence of various social movements. There had been movements of the masses against the oppressor, of the heterodox against orthodox and the like. One cannot really comprehend the Iranian social reality unless one learns and understands these various movements.

An attempt is made in this piece of research work to understand in general, social movements of a particular type, namely Millenarian social movement that took place in Iranian society at different points in history. It must be clearly stated that the focus of inquiry is not laid on these movements to study them in their details. Our attempt is to view these movements from a broader and generalized perspective, to attempt their classification, to identify their general and common features.