

Theories of Social Change

The Meaning of Social Change:

The word “change” denotes a difference in anything observed over some period of time. Social change, therefore, would mean observable differences in any social phenomena over any period of time.

- ✓ **M. D. Jenson. “Social change may be defined as modification in ways of doing and thinking of people.”**

- ✓ **Anderson and Parker. “Social change involves alteration in the structure or functioning of social forms or processes themselves.”**

- ✓ **Lundberg and others. “Social change refers to any modification in established patterns of inter human relationships and standards of conduct.”**

- ✓ **Koenig, S. “Social change refers to the modifications which occur in the life patterns of a people.”**

- ✓ **Jones. “Social change is a term used to describe variations in, or modifications of, any aspect of social processes, social patterns, social interaction or social organisation.”**

- ✓ **Mazumdar, H. T. “Social change may be defined as a new fashion or mode, either modifying or replacing the old, in the life of a people, or in the operation of a society.”**

social change refers to the modifications which take place in the life patterns of people. It does not refer to all the changes going on in the society. The changes in art, language, technology; philosophy etc., may not be included in the term ‘Social change’ which should be interpreted in a narrow sense to mean alterations in the field of social relationships.

The main characteristics of the nature of social change are as follows:

Social change is a universal phenomenon:

Social change occurs in all societies. No society remains completely static. This is true of all societies, primitive as well as civilized. Society exists in a universe of dynamic influences.

The population changes, technologies expand, material equipment changes, ideologies and values take on new components and institutional structures and functions undergo reshaping. The speed and extent of change may differ from society to society. Some change rapidly, others change slowly.

Social change is community change:

Social change does not refer to the change in the life of an individual or the life patterns of several individuals. It is a change which occurs in the life of the entire community. Social change is social and not individual.

Speed of social change is not uniform:

While social change occurs in all societies, its speed is not uniform in every society. In most societies it occurs so slowly that it is often not noticed by those who live in them. Even in modern societies there seems to be little or no change in many areas. Social change in urban areas is faster than in rural areas.

Social change occurs as an essential law:

Change is the law of nature. Social change also is natural. It may occur either in the natural course or as a result of planned efforts. By nature we desire change. Our needs keep on changing. To satisfy our desire for change and our changing needs social change becomes a necessity. The truth is that we are anxiously waiting for a change.

Definite prediction of social change is not possible:

It is difficult to make any prediction about the exact forms of social change. There is no inherent law of social change according to which it would assume definite forms. We may say that on account of the social reform movement untouchability will be abolished from the Indian society; that the basis and ideals of marriage will change due to the marriage laws passed by the government; that industrialization will increase the speed of urbanisation but we cannot predict the exact forms which social relationships will assume in future. Likewise it cannot be predicted as to what shall be our attitudes, ideas, norms and values in future.

Nature and speed of social change is affected by and related to time factor:

The speed of social change is not uniform in each age or period in the same society. In modern times the speed of social change is faster today than before 1947. Thus, the speed of social change differs from age to age.

The reason is that the factors which cause social change do not remain uniform with the change in times. Before 1947 there was less industrialization in India, after 1947 India has become more industrialized. Therefore, the speed of social change after 1947 is faster than before 1947.

Social change shows chain-reaction sequence:

A society's pattern of living is a dynamic system of inter-related parts. Therefore, change in one of these parts usually reacts on others and those on additional ones until they bring a change in the whole mode of life of many people. For example, industrialism has destroyed the domestic system of production.

The destruction of domestic system of production brought women from the home to the factory and the office. The employment of women meant their independence from the bondage of man. It brought a change in their attitudes and idea. It meant a new social life for women. It consequent affected every part of the family life.

The five theories of social change are as follows:

1. Evolutionary Theory
2. Cyclical Theory
3. Economic Theory of Social Change
4. Conflict Theory
5. Technological Theory.

A variety of reasons have been offered throughout history to explain why social change occurs. The problem of explaining social change was central to nineteenth century sociology. Many earlier theories of society that claimed to be scientific were in fact theories of change. They sought to explain the present in terms of the past. Auguste Comte, the French sociologist, who coined the term 'sociology' described society as starting from the 'logical' stage, passing through a 'metaphysical' stage and finally reaching a 'positivistic' stage.

Many different theories were propounded to define and explain social change. Broadly, theories of nineteenth century may be divided into theories of social evolution (Saint-Simon, Comte, Spencer, Durkheim etc.) and theories of social revolution (Marx).

Evolutionary Theory:

Despite the wide variety in the possible directions change may take, various generalisations have been set forth. Because the lot of mankind generally has improved over the long term, by far the most numerous classes of theories of the direction of change comprise various cumulative or evolutionary trends. Though varying in many ways, these theories share an important conclusion that the course of man's history is marked up 'upward' trend through time.

The notion of evolution came into social sciences from the theories of biological evolution. With the advent of Darwinian Theory of biological evolution, society and culture began to be regarded as undergoing the same changes and demonstrating the same trends.

It was conceived that society and culture were subject to the same general laws of biological and organism growth. Some thinkers even identified evolution with progress and proceeded to project into the future more and more perfect and better-adapted social and cultural forms.

Charles Darwin (1859), the British biologist, who propounded the theory of biological evolution, showed that species of organisms have evolved from simpler organisms to the more complicated organisms through the processes of variations and natural selection. After Darwin, 'evolution', in fact, became the buzz word in all intellectual inquiry and Darwin and Spencer were the key names of an era in the history of thought.

Herbert Spencer (1890), who is known to be the forerunner of this evolutionary thought in sociology, took the position that sociology is “the study of evolution in its most complex form”. For him, evolution is a process of differentiation and integration.

Basic Assumptions And Distinctive Features Of The Evolutionary Change:

The basic assumption of this theory is that change is the characteristic feature of human society. The present observed condition of the society is presumed to be the result of change in the past. Another assumption is that change is inevitable or it is ‘natural’.

It was assumed that the change is basically the result of operation of forces within the society or culture. Underlying all theories of evolution, there exists a belief of infinite improvement in the next stage over the preceding one.

All these assumptions can be summarised as under:

1. That change is inevitable and natural.
2. That change is gradual and continuous.
3. That change is sequential and in certain stages.

4. That all successive stages of change are higher over preceding stage, i.e., evolution is progressive.
5. That stages of change are non-reversible.
6. That forces of change are inherent in the object.
7. That the direction of change is from simple to complex, from homogeneity to heterogeneity, from undifferentiated to the differentiated in form and function.
8. That all societies pass through same stages of development.

Criticism of Evolutionary Theory:

Evolutionary scheme (gradual and continuous development in stages) of any kind fell under both theoretical and empirical attack in the last century. It was criticised heavily on many grounds but mainly for its sweeping or over-generalisation about historical sequences, uniform stages of development and evolutionary rate of change. The biological evolution, from which the main ideas of social evolution were borrowed, provided somewhat clumsy and unsatisfactory answers.

Such explanations came under attack for lack of evidence. Evolutionary scales were also questioned from a somewhat different, but more empirical source. The easy assumption that societies evolved from simple to complex forms, was mainly based on a scale of predominant productive technology turned out to be unwarranted.

The doctrine of 'cultural relativity' inhibited even static or cross-sectional generalisation, provided a new basis for satisfying the common features of societies. The evolutionary scheme also failed to specify the systematic characteristics of evolving societies or institutions and also the mechanisms and processes of change through which the transition from one stage to another was effected.

Most of the classical evolutionary schools tended to point out general causes of change (economic, technological or spiritual etc.) or some general trend to complexity inherent in the development of societies. Very often they confused such general tendencies with the causes of change or assumed that the general tendencies explain concrete instances of change.

Because of the above shortcomings, the evolutionary theory is less popular today. A leading modern theorist Anthony Giddens (1979) has consistently attacked on evolutionism and functionalism of any brand. He rejects them as an appropriate approach to understanding society and social change. Spencer's optimistic theory is regarded with some skepticism. It is said that growth may create social problems rather than social progress.

Modern sociology has tended to neglect or even to reject this theory, mainly because it was too uncritically applied by an earlier generation of sociologists. In spite of its all weaknesses, it has a very significant place in the interpretation of social change. The recent tentative revival in an evolutionary perspective is closely related to growing interest in historical and comparative studies.

2. Cyclical Theory:

Cyclical change is a variation on unilinear theory which was developed by Oswald Spengler (*Decline of the West*, 1918) and Arnold J. Toynbee (*A Study of History*,

1956). They argued that societies and civilisations change according to cycles of rise, decline and fall just as individual persons are born, mature, grow old, and die. According to German thinker Spengler, every society has a predetermined life cycle—birth, growth, maturity and decline. Society, after passing through all these stages of life cycle, returns to the original stage and thus the cycle begins again.

On the basis of his analysis of Egyptian, Greek Roman and many other civilisations, he concluded that the Western civilisation is now on its decline. The world renowned British historian Toynbee has also upheld this theory. He has studied the history of various civilisations and has found that every civilisation has its rise, development and fall such as the civilisation of Egypt. They have all come and gone, repeating a recurrent cycle of birth, growth, breakdown and decay. He propounded the theory of “challenge and response” which means that those who can cope with a changing environment survive and those who cannot die.

Thus, a society can grow and survive if it can constructively respond to the challenges. Cyclical theory of change or sometimes called ‘rise and fall theory’ presumes that social phenomena of whatever sort recur again and again, exactly as they were before in a cyclical fashion.

A variant of cyclical process is the theory of a well-known American sociologist P.A. Sorokin (Social and Cultural Dynamics, 1941), which is known as ‘pendular theory of social change’. He considers the course of history to be continuous, though irregular, fluctuating between two basic kinds of cultures: the ‘sensate’ and the ‘ideational’ through the ‘idealistic’. According to him, culture oscillates like the pendulum of a clock between two points.

The pendulum of a clock swings with the passage of time, but ultimately it comes to its original position and re-proceeds to its previous journey. Thus, it is just like a cyclical process but oscillating in character. A sensate culture is one that appeals to the senses and sensual desires.

It is hedonistic in its ethics and stresses science and empiricism. On the other hand, the ideational culture is one in which expressions of art, literature, religion and ethics do not appeal to the senses but to the mind or the spirit. It is more abstract and symbolic than the sensate culture.

The pendulum of culture swings from sensate pole and leads towards the ideational pole through the middle pole called 'idealistic' culture, which is a mixed form of sensate and ideational cultures—a somewhat stable mixture of faith, reason, and senses as the source of truth. Sorokin places contemporary European and American cultures in the last stage of disintegration of sensate culture, and argues that only way out of our 'crisis' is a new synthesis of faith and sensation. There is no other possibility.

In Sorokin's analysis of cultures, we find the seeds of both the theories—cyclical and linear change. In his view, culture may proceed in a given direction for a time and thus appear to conform to a linear formula. But, eventually, as a result of forces that are inherent in the culture itself, there will be shift of direction and a new period of development will be ushered in. This new trend may be linear, perhaps it is oscillating or it may conform to some particular type of curve.

Vilfredo Pareto's (1963) theory of 'Circulation of Elites' is also essentially of this variety. According to this theory, major social change in society occurs when one

elite replaces another, a process Pareto calls it 'circulation of elites'. All elites tend to become decadent in the course of time. They 'decay in quality' and lose their 'vigour'. According to Marx, history ultimately leads to and ends with the communist Utopia, whereas history to Pareto is a never-ending circulation of elites. He said that societies pass through the periods of political vigour and decline which repeat themselves in a cyclical fashion.

Economic Theory of Social Change:

Owing largely to the influence of Marx and Marxism, the economic theory of change is also known as the Marxian theory of change. Of course, economic interpretations of social change need not be always Marxist, but none of the other versions (such as Veblen who also stressed on material and economic factor) of the doctrine are quite as important as Marxism.

The Marxian theory rests on this fundamental assumption that changes in the economic 'infra-structure' of society are the prime movers of social change. For Marx, society consists of two structures—'infra-structure' and 'super-structure'. The 'infra-structure' consists of the 'forces of production' and 'relations of production'.

The 'super-structure' consists of those features of the social system, such as legal, ideological, political and religious institutions, which serve to maintain the 'infra-structure', and which are moulded by it. To be more clear, according to Marx, productive forces constitute 'means of production' (natural resources, land, labour, raw material, machines, tools and other instruments of production) and 'mode of production' (techniques of production, mental and moral habits of human beings) both and their level of development determines the social relation of production, i.e., production relations.

These production relations (class relations) constitute the economic structure of society—the totality of production relations. Thus, the socio-economic structure of society is basically determined by the state of productive forces. For Marx, the contradiction between the constantly changing and developing ‘productive forces’ and the stable ‘production relations’ is the demiurge of all social development or social change.

Conflict Theory:

Social theorists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century's were concerned with conflict in society. But, the label of conflict theorists is generally applied to those sociologists who opposed the dominance of structural-functionalism. These theorists contend that in function-alism there is no place of change and as such it cannot explain change.

They have neglected conflict in favour of a unitary concept of society which emphasises social integration. By contrast to function-alist approach, conflict theorists contend that institutions and practices continue because powerful groups have the ability to maintain the status quo. Change has a crucial significance, since it is needed to correct social injustices and inequalities.

Conflict theorists do not believe that societies smoothly evolve to higher level. Instead, they believe that conflicting groups struggle to ensure progress (Coser, 1956). Conflict theorists assert that conflict is a necessary condition for change. It must be the cause of change. There is no society, changing or unchanging, which does not have conflict of some kind or another. Thus, conflict is associated with all types of social change in some way or other.

The modern conflict theory is heavily influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx. It may be regarded as the offshoot of his economic theory of social change which states

that economic change only occurs and produces other change through the mechanism of intensified conflict between social groups and between different parts of the social system. Conflict would ultimately transform society. While Marx emphasised economic conflict. Max Weber based his arguments on conflict about power. Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), although critical of Marxist notions of class, tried to reconcile the contrast between the functionalist and conflict approaches of society.

He contends that these approaches are ultimately compatible despite their many areas of disagreement. He disagreed with Marx not only on the notions of class but on many other points also. Marx viewed social change as a resolution of conflict over scarce economic resources, whereas Dahrendorf viewed social change as a resolution of conflict over power. Marx believed a grand conflict would occur between those who had economic resources and those who did not, whereas Dahrendorf believed that there is constant simultaneous conflict among many segments of society.

Commenting on this theory, Percy S. Cohen (Modern Social Theory, 1968) writes: "This theory is plausible, but it is not necessarily true. The contention that group conflict is a sufficient condition for social change is obviously false. It is arguable that structured conflict, when it involves a fairly equal balance of forces, actually obstructs change which might otherwise occur.

For example, in societies where there are deep divisions between regional, ethnic or racial groups, there may be little possibility of promoting economic development or welfare policies; such 'ameliorative' changes require some degree of consensus. The simple point is that conflict may lead to impasse not to change. It should be emphasised that social conflict is often as much the product of social change as the cause. And it is commonly a great obstacle to certain types of change."

Technological Theory:

When the average person speaks of the changes brought about by 'science', he is generally thinking of 'technology' and the manifold wonders wrought thereby. The 'technology' refers to the application of knowledge to the making of tools and the utilisation of natural resources (Schaefer and Lamm, 1992). It involves the creation of material instruments (such as machines) used in human interaction with nature. It is not synonymous with machinery as it is understood in common parlance. Machines are the result of the knowledge gained by science but they themselves are not technology.

Social change takes place due to the working of many factors. Technology is not only one of them but an important factor of social change. When it is said that almost whole of human civilization is the product of technological development, it only means that any change in technology would initiate a corresponding change in the arrangement of social relationships.

It is believed that Marx has attached great importance to technology in his scheme of mode of production, which forms the main basis for the change in society. For Marx, the stage of technological development determines the mode of production and the relationships and the institutions that constitute the economic system. This set of relationships is in turn the chief determinant of the whole social order.

Technological development creates new conditions of life which forces new conditions in adaptation. W.F. Ogburn, in his article, 'How Technology Changes Society' (1947), writes: "Technology changes by changing our environment to which we, in turn, adapt. This change is usually in the material environment, and the adjustment we make to the changes often modifies customs and social

institutions.” Anthro-pologist Leslie White (Science and Culture, 1949) held that “technology, particularly the amount of energy harnessed and the way in which it is used, determines the forms and content of culture and society”. Technology affects directly and indirectly both.

Certain social consequences are the direct result of mechanisation, such as new organisation of labour, destruction of domestic system of production, the expansion of the range of social contacts, the speciali-sation of function etc. Its indirect consequences are the increase of unemployment, the heightening of competition etc. Conflict between the states, as they strive for dominance, security or better prospects are the result of competition.

The invention of wheel, compass, gunpowder, steam engine, printing press, telephone (now mobile phone), radio, TV, internet, aeroplane, motor car and so many other inventions in medical and other fields have revolutionised the human life. Advances in agricul-tural technology, ranging from the iron-tipped plow to the tractor technology and the three-crop rotation system made possible the creation of a surplus. One of the earliest books on social change written by W.F. Ogbum (1922) has analysed such changes in detail.

He has narrated about 150 such changes (both immediate and distant social effects) in social life brought about by the invention of radio alone. Ogbum gives many illustrations of this kind. He suggests, for example, that the invention of the self-starter on automobiles had something to do with the emancipation of women. The self-starter gave them freedom of a kind. Similarly, many labour saving devices in the home have also contributed to the emancipation of women.

In this connection, Ogbum and Nimkoff (1958) argue: “An important invention need not be limited to only a single social effect. Sometimes it exerts many influences which spread out in different directions like the spokes of a wheel.”

Technological developments have affected a lot of changes in attitudes, beliefs and

even in tradi-tions. These influence almost all aspects of our life and culture. These include social customs and practical techniques for converting raw material to finished products.

The production and use of food, shelter, clothing and commodities, physical structures, and fabrics all are also aspects of society's technology. The most important aspect of technology in that a man thinks rationally and objectively about things and events. Man has become more pragmatic in his outlook. He is more disciplined (time-oriented) in his working habits. New forms of transportation and communication, which have contributed to significant changes in social life, are all due to the change in technology.

There is a greater mobility of population today than that was in the nineteenth or twentieth century because of the modern rapid means of transport. The life of the modern man is always on wheels. It is an important factor in the determination of spatial aspect of social relationships. Changes in communication devices (e-mail, internet, mobile phones etc.) have also influenced all aspects of social life (work, leisure, family, friendship, sports etc.) enormously. The basic function of all communication and transportation devices is the conquest of time and space. Shrinking space and time through the speed and low cost of electronic communication and air travel has developed a new phenomenon called '*globalisation*'.

“Any technological change which is great enough will produce some other social change as a consequence” (Cohen, 1968). This is summum bonum (gist) of this theory. For example, new techniques of manufacture are found to affect social relations in the relevant industry. A single invention of geared wheel has produced thousands of inventions which in turn affected social relations enormously. The automobile has brought number of social changes which have altered individual

lifestyles. Computers and the Internet are the latest of a long line of developments to prompt Utopian and anti-utopian visions of a world transformed by technology.

Computers have affected almost all aspects of our life from reservations at the railway ticket window or registration for hospitals or colleges to the maintenance of accounts in banks and large business corporations. The popularity of science fiction (Harry Potter) and the films like Jurassic Park are other indicators of the mythical and abundant power which technology can have in the modern world.

Modern technology has also revolutionised the concept and quality of the systems of production, communication, social organisation and various processes of acculturation and symbolisation in societies. Technology helps in realising of our goals with less effort, less cost and with greater efficiency. Technology creates desire for novelty and innovation. Novelty is sought everywhere and transient interests give a corresponding character to social relationships.

Technology has advanced in leaps and bounds over the last 25 years and the single invention that has had the greatest impact on our lives is the cell phone. It is now not only used as a means of communication but it has enabled us to operate home appliances and entertainment devices, monitor our home's safety, customise our internal home environment.

In the light of these technical advances the anthropologist Peter Worsley (1984) was actuated to comment, "until our day, human society has never existed", meaning that it is only in quite recent times that we can speak of forms of social association which span the earth. The world has become in important respects a single social system as a growing ties of interdependence which now affect virtually everyone.

The idea of 'global village' developed by Marshall McLuhan (1960) reflects that the world is becoming more integrated in economic, political and cultural terms.