

KEY-NOTE ADDRESS
on
“ SOCIAL CHANGE ”

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Key-note Address

Social Change is the theme of this Seminar. It is therefore but appropriate that I should commence my key-note address by attempting an answer to the question, "What is Social Change?" A standard answer perhaps is the one given by Wilbert Moore who writes: I quote

"Social change is the significant alteration of social structures, including consequences and manifestations of such structures embodied in norms, values, and cultural products and symbols".

The social structure of any given society manifests itself in the classification it makes of its human beings, the rights and duties assigned to each category, the relations of superiority, subordination and mutual dependence that is postulated between these categories, and the visible or invisible integration of its activities towards a common endeavour to reach a given goal that may be specified or lie imbedded in tradition or in the deep subconscious of the collective personality constituted by the many individuals who form the society in question. Social structure is thus essentially a frame-work of human relations by categories and sub-categories. And it gets its sustenance and perhaps also its origins by its modes of production, production relations which include both the relation between man and means of production and between the men engaged in production, its traditions which embody the values and norms obtained over many years of experience and aspiration and institutions like the family, caste, guild, village and city governments, law, property, panchayats and parliaments, monarchy and aristocracy, and the State. At some given mythical or ideal time, this social structure is in a state of rest like *Vishnu* reclining on the *Adishesha* or to use modern terminology, the social structure is in equilibrium both internally

and externally and there is no social change. This ideal or what I would call mythical state is of course a fiction and does not exist in fact at any time in history. In every living society, there is always some movement from within and some movement caused from without and therefore there is always some change. When the change is minor, however, there is either a return to the previous position or toleration including a peaceful and almost unconscious adaptation, and the social structure retains its tranquil stability, the 'great tradition' remains unscathed, and there is apparently no social change. In other words, though there may be some change in actual fact, it belongs to the second order of smalls and can therefore be regarded as a state of no-change without doing violence to language. Social change, as we use the expression, arises only when the quantum, comprehensiveness and time-span of change is such as to induce or result in *significant* alterations in the social structure, the relations between categories, and all the institutions, norms, symbols, and values associated with the old order. That is why factors like volume, extent, and time assume such cardinal importance for even identifying social change, let alone explaining its emergence, analysing its consequences, and predicting its future.

Even a casual student of history, whether of one country or of the world as a whole, must admit that social change occupies an important place in the human chronicle. Whether this can be proved or not in the case of extinct societies is a matter for anthropological research, but what is evident to the current observer is the reality of this phenomenon in the case of all living societies. That is why I feel that when Milton Singer writes of the current status of Indian civilisation as 'a great tradition modernising', he does not do justice to the social changes which have taken place in India long before the advent of either British rule or industrialisation or democracy and independence. In my amateurish view, Indian civilisation has undergone many social changes which have left visible impacts on its social structure and traditions. But India is a continental country with continental dimensions and diversities; and social

changes have tended to remain regional rather than become national. Even this statement, however, is subject to major qualifications as can be seen from the national changes brought about in the social structure by the two endogenous forces released by Buddha and Shankara and the exogenous force released by Mahamadan invasions and political hegemony over the country. Moreover the Indian social fabric has such a long-standing tradition of tolerating contradictions in customs, norms, symbols, values and institutions and rationalising the illogicality contained therein that to all outward appearances, Indian society appears to present a picture of no-change over the centuries. In defence of Milton Singer, however, I must add that the combination of endogenous and exogenous forces released in India during the past few decades combined with the simultaneous development of science and technology and communications, that has now resulted in a shrunken and shrinking world, have combined to start a chain of social change in India that is more massive and national in its dimensions than anything we have seen in the past. So much so that even the appearance of a grand social stability has now begun to fade. Milton Singer therefore is not wrong when he gives to his book the title "When a Great Tradition Modernises", though I would have liked the inclusion of a sub-title somewhat like this "The biggest social change in Indian History".

I must now proceed to the next item in my address, namely, an explanation of social change or the factors that are responsible for social change. Social Change can be the result of endogenous factors or of exogenous factors or a combination of both. Change can begin from one item or part in the social framework and then spread itself to others and the inter-action resulting therefore may lead to a change in the social structure through omissions and additions, adaptation, and a new balance of structure and ideology. Or the change may be triggered off on the plane of ideas effectively propagated by a charismatic personality; faced by such a frontal attack—usually the attack is disguised as reinterpretation of ancient or lost values—the

social structure regroups itself and undergoes change in the process of digestion and absorption of the new ideas. Quite often, the internal components of the social structure may get a shock by contact with external cultures or social systems that intrude upon its quiet with a violence that cannot be wished away ; and then there is confrontation, conflict, co-operation and compromise with a revised social fabric emerging as a result of the social dynamics of the inter-play of exogenous and endogenous factors. Where a society lacks internal vitality and a mystical something that may be called its *Jivaatman*, external contact and collision may destroy it ; and this has been the actual history of many societies. The glory of Indian civilisation or Indian society however is its remarkable capacity for handling factors making for changes whether internal or external. Like *Shiva* who swallowed the deadly poison and survived to become the *Neelakanta*, Indian civilisation and culture has shown a remarkable capacity for adaptation, absorption and digestion of change and, even when changing, continues to maintain an appearance of tranquil stability because of the Indian tradition of pantheism and pluralism, of many gods and creeds and customs and traditions resting together in spite of contradictions and conflicts, and constituting a variegated mosaic of the old and the new and the in-between. Change may also take place because of changes in the methods of production and the failure of production relations to keep in step, as the Marxist asserts in his interpretation of economic and social history. And then there can be philosophies of change, change as a result of internal contradiction and the dialectic process being a constant state of society till the millennium of no-change and the communist society is reached ; or change resulting from functional needs failing to be satisfied by the existing social structure and therefore forcing adaptation, change or destruction of a part or the whole of a social structure, the philosophic principle being the inevitability of a return to functional equilibrium. Or change may result from the conscious or unconscious attempt on the part of a given society to bridge the gap between a committed goal and the widely differing reality. To these must be added a new

force for change that has emerged in the 20th century with the birth of Soviet - Russia and national economic planning, where the power of the State is deliberately and purposively used to bring about what is considered by those in authority as desirable social change. In fact, a study of social change in communist states and under planned economies would provide excellent material for answering the basic philosophic question of the nature of the life of the social structure and how far the social fabric has an internal vitality that can survive controlled attempts to change it, and how, and in what manner, it reacts by way of conflict, compromise and adaptation to change it forcibly and in a given direction. Thus social change can be the result of one or many factors ; and they can originate from part of the system or from an external source ; but in all cases, the actual process of social change is one of dynamics, the several factors acting and reacting upon each other ; in the final result, it would be difficult to assign shares or to distinguish the independent from the dependant variables.

I shall now proceed to the subject of the social change that is taking place in India. It is difficult to give any definite time-dimension for the vast social change that is taking place in India today. I have no doubt however that the process of change began in the nineteenth century, and has accelerated during the current century, the first half being dominated by Mahatma Gandhi and the national movement and the third quarter by Nehru and now Indira Gandhi, and independence, parliamentary democracy, socialist professions and planned economy. The process is still on and may not reach its culmination even by the end of the century. There are many landmarks during this period that brought about change in the social structure, social relations, and social ideology. Among the more important of these landmarks may be mentioned unified administration of the whole country, introduction of English, Christian missions, westernism, religious reform and religious revival, railways, posts and telegraphs, Swadeshi movement, revival of Muslim identity, the national struggle for independence, Mahatma

Gandhi, revolt against the caste system, elections, independence and the Constitution, decline and fall of princely states, industrialisation, Trade unions, communist and socialist parties, Congress move towards socialism, Nehru, planning, urbanisation and the new programmes and leadership of Indira Gandhi. It is obviously not possible to trace this historical progress of social change or discuss its various components, manifestations, and consequences within the time at my disposal. What I shall do therefore is to ignore the time perspective and, taking the current Indian scene, outline the various factors that constitute both the causes and the consequences of the social change that is taking place today.

In my opinion, the following constitute the broad factors and forces of the social change that we are witnessing in our country.

1. Sanskritisation
2. Secularisation
3. Westernisation
4. Nationalism and Revivalism
5. Democracy and Elections
6. Socialism and Equalisation
7. Planning
8. Industrialisation
9. Urbanisation
10. Education
11. Politicalisation
12. New look for the submerged classes
13. Changes in family, caste, and Hindu social institutions
14. Science and technology
15. Regionalisation
16. Modernisation.

To these factors, none of which can claim to be newly identified, I would add one more as a factor hitherto neglected by social scientists but playing a vital role in the process of

social change, namely, what I would term as "De-brahminisation". De-brahminisation is not identical with "De-Sanskritisation" but is different from and additional to Sanskritisation though related to it by ties of kinship.

'Sanskritisation' is the description that Prof. M. N. Srinivas has given to the whole process of social emulation and imitation that has swept through the various tiers of the Hindu caste hierarchy as part of the process of social change taking place in India. Milton Singer, who generously but correctly proclaims his indebtedness to the Srinivas theory of Sanskritisation for the development of his own ideas, calls it "the most comprehensive and widely accepted anthropological theory of social and cultural change in Indian civilisation", and quotes from a recent article by Srinivas the following definition of Sanskritisation :

"The process by which a 'low' caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, ritual, beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a twice-born (*dwija*) caste"

Prof. Srinivas points out that this usually takes place when there is either an improvement in the economic or political position of the group concerned or a higher group consciousness resulting from its contact with a source of the 'Great Tradition' of Hinduism such as a pilgrim centre or monastery or proselytising sect. To my mind, Sanskritisation is not only a description of a process of change but also an explanation in so far as the *ideal* position was identified with the high caste and any change either in consciousness for social emulation or possibility for achieving social emulation or both led to imitation of the way of life associated with the higher caste. But the theory has two limitations, on historical and the other contemporary. The historical qualification arises from the fact that, in the past, various groups of Hindus of low castes have broken out of the traditional caste hierarchy in an attempt to improve their social status and

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either become converted to non-Hindu faiths or set up new groups within the Hindu fold that owned no allegiance to the Brahminical caste and denied its claims to represent a superior or an *ideal* social status. Examples would be conversions to Islam or Christianity or formations of new groups like Veerashaivas in the South and Sikhs in the North. In contemporary Indian history an analogous example would be the neo-Budhists. It is true that many persons who underwent this transformation themselves belonged to the higher castes and did so out of their ideological repudiation of Brahminism. But many others who underwent this transformation as a way of getting released from the bounds of Hindu caste hierarchy and attaining a high social status in spite of their being born among the 'low' castes. The other qualification, which is seen in contemporary history, is largely the result of British contact, politicalisation, and economic development and involves a wholesale repudiation of the link between high social status and high caste in the Hindu hierarchy. The most eloquent example of this way to high social status is seen in Tamil Nadu with E. V. R. Naiker as the initiator and the powerful D. K. ; D. M. K. and allied movements as a consequence. I do not know if these qualifications or limitations of the theory of Sanskritisation fall under what is termed "De-Sanskritisation" but if they do, they obviously indicated the non-comprehensiveness of the theory of Sanskritisation as a major factor for social change. They do not however lessen the claim of Sanskritisation as a description (though not necessarily the cause) of social change, as many of those who chose other ways to improve their social status than by moving up the caste ladder or imitating the higher caste, were also influenced in their way of life, though not in particulars, by that of the high caste Hindu hierarchy.

You will forgive me if I do not dwell in detail on the various factors I have enumerated, as that would take much more time than I can legitimately claim for this address. I shall therefore deal with them in a summary fashion, leaving to myself a later opportunity for elaboration.

Secularisation is a new phenomenon that is associated not only with westernisation but also with democracy and socialism. With the decline in state patronage or financial support for rituals and festivals associated with individual religions, there is some weakening in the strength of religious occasions on public support and imagination. Incidentally, it also indirectly leads to the loosening of inhibitive ties between followers of different faiths and lessens the hold of rituals in the social structure. This, combined with education which is secular and the growing recognition of science and technology in every day life, tends to give more importance to political, economic, artistic and other aspects of social life ; and to this extent makes for a change in the traditional social structure and the traditional expenditure-mix of one's time and way of life. I do not want to give the impression however that either religion or rituals have now taken a back seat in Indian life. What has happened is that they now enter more into private than public life and to the extent they still function in public they partake more of the nature of social occasions than of public exhibitions of religiosity. On the whole I would suggest that secularisation is loosening the bonds of inter-caste and inter-religious barriers and indirectly promoting new ways of people getting together than in sectarian groups ; and one obvious indirect result is a greater interest in political or other non-religious activity.

Westernisation is a fact of social change which has widespread consequences and on a national level which is not confined only to the urban areas. A kind of infatuation for the English language, changes in clothing habits, food habits, use of tables and cots on a larger scale, and many other changes have now become absorbed in the Indian way of life ; and even where they are not practised in fact, they have begun to constitute the ideal or the desirable for those who do not yet have them. The Gandhian era and the national struggle did to some extent arrest this inroad of westernisation into the Indian way of life, but the halt has only been temporary and the drift towards westernisation has increased both in pace and extent after the advent of independence.

The process has also been helped by industrialisation, technical advance, and the demonstration effect of the way of life of those who constitute the V. I. Ps by virtue of either political or economic position. The largest single illustration I can think of in this process of westernisation as a part of social change is the change one finds in the way of life of the current generation of Marwadi or Vaishnav Gujarathi youths of the business community as compared with that of their grandfathers and in many cases even of their fathers.

Nationalisation has of course been a significant force in bringing about social change. It has broken down linguistic and caste barriers and resulted in the creation of a multilingual and multi-caste community, shorn of their original roots and constituting what may be termed *Indians at large*, who are evolving a social pattern and way of life considerably at variance with those of the groups from which they originated. Because of their great mobility and the generally important positions they occupy in the power and income structure of Indian society, these Indians at large also exercise a powerful demonstration effect on their fellow citizens and it may well be that, in the immediate decades to come they may become significant carriers of change in the social structure and way of life in the country as a whole. Altogether theirs is a liberalising role and their impact would be in the direction of the lessening of the hold of traditional ways of life and strengthening the move towards modernity.

Democracy, elections, socialism, politicalisation, education, industrialisation, and urbanisation may all be taken together in the way they are producing social change both in width and depth. The net result of all these factors is to break down the strength of the traditional hierarchical structure, diminish the role of caste and birth in determining social status, strengthen the desire for human dignity, give the common and under-privileged a feeling of importance and to some extent a sense of power, and generally make for a less unequal society with more equality of opportunity and more emphasis on functional

superiority at the expense of traditional and hereditary superiority. On the whole, the kind of social change these factors are bringing about is bringing us nearer to the framework of western democratic societies with of course the attendant evils of a larger play of corruption, nepotism, patronage and a new class of power grabbers and power users whose strength is however inhibited by their non-hereditary tenure and the pressure of competing forces that aim at displacing them. In the process, what may be called modernisation is replacing, or at any rate significantly modifying, traditional relations between different categories, creating new categories, downgrading previously important categories and upgrading previously unimportant ones, on the basis of functions, skills, economic activity, and political power and altogether laying the foundations for what may well prove to be a revolutionary change in the Indian social structure.

These very factors have also produced and in turn been strengthened by the new importance given to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other minority groups, as also by the new tools, gadgets, use of electricity and gas, pipe water, underground drainage, and rail and bus transport. The use of science and technology in everyday life is not only changing the utilisation of the environment and reducing the drudgeries of everyday life but also levelling down distinctions and breaking the tyranny of rituals and traditional customs from embodying themselves into social and status differentiations. Equality before the law, the increasing basing of law on social justice and special regard for the underprivileged, and progressive social and welfare legislation are all combining to strengthen the social change towards a less hierarchical, more democratic and less unequal society which is resulting from the factors referred to earlier. Changes are also taking place in the nature of the family, the joint family is giving way to the nuclear family, the age of marriage is rising, inter-sub caste, inter-caste, inter-lingual, inter-regional and even inter-religious marriages are increasing, and relations between in-laws, between parents and children, and between husbands and wives are undergoing visible changes as compared to the traditional

patterns of Indian society. Women occupy a better economic position and have more freedom than tradition had accorded them so far. The overall trend of social change is in the direction of freeing the individual from traditional restraints, restructuring human relations in terms of functions and power in place of heredity and traditional authority, improving the status and opportunity for advancement of the underprivileged and traditionally backward sections of the community, and largely replacing the ritual element in daily life and thinking by economic and political activity. These trends, as also those arising from democracy, secularism, nationalism, and social justice are in line with the social change that has or is taking place in the western democratic and developed world and may well be summed up by saying that social change in India is running generally in the direction of modernisation.

I must not forget to mention the factor I had listed last and described as one usually neglected by students of social change in India. This is what I have called de-Brahminisation. I began by mentioning Sanskritisation as a significant factor and participant in the process of social change. The beacon-star in the Sanskritisation process was the Brahmin, the self-styled highest caste in the Hindu hierarchy, with his traditional authority and deferential position in the eyes of Hindu law-givers, and a way of life that was highly esteemed by all others not only because it was Brahminical but also because it was in many ways an estimable way of life and conduct. Now that both Sanskritisation and de-Sanskritisation are knocking down the Brahmin from his high pedestal either by infiltration or by imitation or by derision, the Brahmin is responding to this challenge to his position by de-Brahminising himself. In most of the factors whether political or economic or social or cultural, that have brought about social change and eroded the very foundations of the traditional culture and social structure by virtue of which he was able to maintain position and status, he has taken the lead. Whether in the national movement or in the fight for democracy and socialism or migration to urban areas or in education or in

persuing science and technology or in upholding the rights of underprivileged and backward classes or in adopting western values and knowledge for attacking or qualifying Indian values or going in for a western way of life and daily habits, the Brahmin has placed himself in the forefront of social change even though it meant his shedding the very traditions, values, symbols and way of life that had given him his hitherto superior position in Indian society. It may appear strange that the Brahmin should take the lead in de-Brahminisation but this does not mean that he is inspired by the death-wish or that he has willingly accepted his dethronment and is proceeding to commit suicide. On the contrary, by accepting the inevitability of social change and placing himself in the forefront in stimulating, organising and leading the factors of social change, the de-Brahminised Brahmin is becoming the leading carrier of social change and the trend towards modernisation. The de-Brahminised Brahmin may no longer be a caste ; but his new ways, being in tune with the forces of change, are likely not only to ensure his survival but also facilitate his retaining a position of high status and authority.

I must hasten to point out that by de-Brahminisation I do not refer only to the members of the Brahmin caste who are giving up many of their old traditions, customs, symbols, norms, values and way of life and taking to the stimulation and leadership of the many factors making for social change in the direction of modernisation. I refer to the whole series of the higher castes, the *dwijas* (or the twice-born) who represent the Brahminical order and subscribe to its traditions, symbols, norms and way of life. A number of people from all these higher castes, the Brahmin caste contributing a larger proportion of their number especially in southern, western and eastern India, are now de-Brahminising themselves and coming forward as the carriers of social change in the direction of modernisation. In some ways, Brahminisation is the counter-part of the Sanskritisation to which Srinivas refers in his explanation of social change in India. It is after reaching a state of Brahminisation that the process of

Sanskritisation is directed ; and now the very custodians of Brahminisation have started de-Brahminising themselves. What effect this de-Brahminisation would have on the contradictory but allied forces of Sanskritisation and de-Sanskritisation and what changes it would effect in the Indian social structure and the traditional caste-based or caste-influenced hierarchy are matters on which I am in no position to give an answer. But what I believe to be correct is that de-Brahminisation is a major force for social change, that its thrust is towards modernisation, and that it will take some more decades before its manifestations and consequences complete themselves and possibly bring about a radical re-structuring of Indian society, including its institutions, norms, symbols, values, and way of life.

Having said all this, academic integrity compels me to add that social change in India is not all in one direction. Against the growth of nationalism we also see the simultaneous growth of regionalism and linguism that seem to be drawing upon even deeper roots in the Indian soil and ethos. Against the general blurring of caste distinctions and the diminishing sway of rituals and traditional customs, we see caste-strengthening through politicalisation ; and religious revivalism adopting strange new forms and symbols for its manifestation. Against the westernising influence of English we see the Indianising influence of Hindi. Against the move for industrialisation we see a conflicting trend of ruralisation and its idealisation. Against secularisation, we see renewed life emerging in Hindu and Muslim communal organisations; while against the movement for social justice, uplift of the submerged classes and a planned economy, we see movements for free enterprise, inequalities defended on the alleged basis of efficiency and functionalism, and social justice countered by the claims of economic growth. While we talk of science and technology and take pride in the growth of rationality and a scientific temper, we also see the mushroom growth of new superstitions and totems and symbols besides the renewed vigour that seems to be attending old superstitions and irrationalities. Exceptions apart,

the saintly preacher draws more crowds today than the political leader, let alone the academic professor ; and religious manifestation is certainly not on the decline in India. In fact, the contemporary Indian scene presents a whole maze of contradictions of norms, symbols, values, and ways of life, of the old and the new, the traditional and the modern ; and no one can confidently assert which way it will end. I have a feeling that it will all end in the Indian way. Indian society will undoubtedly undergo a radical change in the coming years and decades, and yet it will not shed many of its old traits or norms or symbols or institutions. There will be a whole process of confrontation and compromise and change by adaptation and absorption, with appearance concealing and yet influencing reality. We will have radical social change and yet it will never appear as a total change. Through the long centuries of its continued existence, Indian civilisation has acquired the art of adaptation, absorption, and digestion of change. While changing all the time, it has and will in all likelihood continue to have the appearance of stability. It is this flexibility and adaptability to changing situations that has given Indian culture and civilisation its peculiar continuity and diversity and its ability to live with contradictions. It may therefore well be the case that the massive social change now in progress in India may also not succeed in changing the entire face of the Indian social structure, even though it will certainly make some radical dents therein. While therefore social change may not mean a social revolution in the accepted sense of the term 'revolution' this does not mean that social change is not a reality nor that we should give up our attempts to study it in all its ramifications, its origins, its causes, its manifestations, its process and progress and its consequences. That is why we have dared to select 'Social Change' as the subject of this seminar ; and I have no doubt that the scholars assembled here will add to our understanding of this complicated subject both by their written as well as their oral contributions.

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