

The Changing Face of Indian Society

POINTS TO DEVELOP

Contradictions in Indian society manifestation of change.

What is social change?

Factors responsible for change.

Changes in structure –family, caste, status of women; on the level of ideas, attitudes.

The bright and not-so- bright facets of change.

Inevitability of change in a dynamic society.

Indian society traces its origin to the earliest times, going back to more than 4,000 years. What has evolved is a society that is complex and contradictory. Rooted in spirituality yet giving way to materialistic attitudes that are downright unethical; voicing its commitment to scientific temper; equality among the various groups of people being vouchsafed by the Constitution and yet with the political set-up itself exploiting the caste hierarchy. All these contradictions cannot be explained away easily but they can be seen in the perspective of a society in the process of change or flux, or a society in transition as academics put it.

Social change refers to alteration in the structure infrastructural facilities, their distribution among people and culture, traditions, norms of living, behavioral attitudes of a society. Change is inevitable; the structure and culture of a society do not remain static. Thus, social change is basically a transformation at the levels of thought, behavior and action that does not presuppose either a strictly positive or negative impact. It cannot be limited to one direction only; it may lead the society towards progress or regression. No single cause can be identified with social change. The factors affecting social change can be classified as demographic, technological, political, economic, cultural and legal. Social change does not happen overnight or suddenly. It is a gradual process as people are generally not so ready to give up or even modify firmly established beliefs and notions.

Generally speaking, social conflict and growth of knowledge give rise to social change. But there are diverse factors responsible for social change in India. Demographic factors include high population growth which leads to poverty, illiteracy, housing and health problems, all of which affect social climate. Technology ushers significant changes within the society. Rapid industrialization has brought economic development and urbanization but along side has come the

growth of slums in urban areas as well as a great disparity in standards of living. Economic upliftment has been attempted through abolition of landlordism. This has reduced exploitation of the poor at least in some regions, and has thus been a step towards social equality.

Technological innovations have changed even the common people's way of life. Gas stoves and biogas lighting have brought a different feel to more and more villages. Agriculture in many regions makes use of machines and hybrid seeds. There was a time when crossing the seas was considered a sin; witness the affluent jetsetting all around the globe now. With distances being reduced through development of roads and railways and means of communications revolutionized with satellites, the general awareness of Indians has enlarged. The exposure to outside Indian minds to receive new ideas and views which have certainly influenced the way of life of many sections of the population.

Cultural factors like Sanskritisation- the process explaining the upward mobility of a sub caste group in caste system- have brought about changes in the caste hierarchy. Traditional attitudes and customs of the people. The law, too, has measures to deal with social evils. Even political factors have heralded social change. Elections. For instance, have not only ensured the participation of the adult populace without discrimination in the government-forming process but have also extended a politicized dimension to social entities such as the system.

Family, the backbone of the social structure, has undergone a transformation under the impact of industrialisation, urbanization, education and migration in search of jobs. Nuclear families have been replacing joint families in towns and cities. But due to problems like lack of social responsibility for children, the change is slowing down. Structural joint families, i.e., those with common residence and property are being substituted by functional joint families or those which continue to fulfill their obligations towards each other and help each other.

Social inequalities like caste discrimination – a part and parcel of the Indian culture- were, discouraged social reformers and freedom fighters like Rammohan Roy, Jyotiba Phule and Gandhi in the pre-independence days. Education and the coming together of people from various sections to wage the independence struggle heralded a new consciousness, and social problems like unsociability were sought to be eradicated. Today, unfortunately, rather slowly, it has not been eradicated as it was once hoped it would be. If one analyses the situation it will be seen that such iniquities tend to fade away with urbanization and mobility and mass transport systems. Unfortunately, politicization of castes for election and other political interests is leading to a stronger demarcation between people of various castes.

As for education, in the ancient Vedic civilization, education, restricted to the higher castes, was made, to suit caste needs. The principle got eroded with the emergence of new people and new thoughts. Today, the theme of education for all is being stressed. Adult education programmes in villages conducted by voluntary agencies and persons are being focused upon; free schools for children in rural areas are being opened in keeping with this theme. Nevertheless, in the large towns and cities, the cost of education in urban area is coming to signify costly education thus, money is becoming a governing factor in education, and there is growing corruption in the field.

Accompanying change in family structure, there has been a change in the attitude to work and the traditional male-female role. The view that women as a class are inferior to men is slowly changing, though only in pockets of society. Today, women have begun stepping out of their homes to take up gainful employment even in areas traditionally regarded as male domains. Their role in the decision-making process is assuming significance. Women have begun to raise their voices against the social ills they have been subjected to in the past.

Incomplete social change has, however, also burdened women further; for, in most cases, the change has been superficial, without the accompaniment of the basic thought transformation. For instance, though the woman's economic independence is beginning to be acknowledged and she is being allowed to strive for it, she is denied the benefits exacted to hand over her salary to her husband or in-laws in most urban families. Also, she still sweats it out singly on the domestic scene and this is worsening her predicament. Opportunities, they are in reality considered less competent than men. Thus, we perceive that change in attitude is much slower than superficial changes.

Change is very much apparent in the children of today. They show an awareness and intelligence not evident in earlier generations at that age. They are more vocal, do not show unquestioning deference to their elders, take part in social work activities, even as they appear a bit 'wild' to conservative eyes. They are computer savvy and have minds of their own. They also seem to mature much earlier, losing that innocence one associates with children.

Again, when we take up the caste issue stigma and unsociability may have been 'banned' on paper, but there has been no real awakening in the minds of the masses regarding the system of caste distinction. While a caste group, conscious of its traditional lower status, tries to raise its status, the upper castes have found alternative bases of social status in a westernized life style, higher education and migration to cities and even abroad. At the same time, other forms of discrimination are appearing on the scene, especially in the cities; superior class attitudes are

developing in the society, strengthening inequality. On the whole, change on the mental level has been slow- ideas and beliefs, like habits, die hard.

The changing face of Indian society, has different expressions, different moods. While the element of modernity in dress and behavior are noticeable, traditional beliefs- even if they are redundant- refuse to give up their hold, thus conflict is created. Inequality in development, loss of values accompanied by a greedy , grasping mercenary attitude, and growing corruption on the part of the authorities and the 'elite' have given rise to violent responses from the oppressed and downtrodden. If we see several secessionist movements in India today, much blame is to be attached to the retrogressive changes taking place in the socio-economic scene. On the cultural level too, sadly enough, while obscurantist rituals are not discarded, age old values of tolerance, hospitality and warmth of attachments, humility and patience are fast fading out. There is something wrong if we as a people manifest a selectivity towards those traditional facets that had better be left behind and adopt those modern elements that had better be left alone.

Change is inevitable in a dynamic society but people have to be enlightened enough to direct that change towards a better future.