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## **UNIT 33 SOCIAL CHANGE**

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### **33.0 OBJECTIVES**

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On going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Define and describe the nature of social change;
- Differentiate the important theoretical approaches to social change;
- Discuss the factors that play an important role in bringing about social change; and
- State the importance of analysing social change.

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### **33.1 INTRODUCTION**

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So far, in this block you have studied the concepts of social control, deviance and conflict. All these concepts help us to understand the universal process of change in society. From its inception, sociology has been closely linked with the study of the rapid changes in societies. This unit is basically concerned with nature, direction and rate of changes in societies.

In this unit we will discuss the meaning and nature of social change; and how terms like ‘evolution’ and ‘progress’ are different from the concept of ‘social change’.

Then we will describe some theoretical approaches to social change, and the important factors in social change. Finally, we will see how the theory of social change is used in sociological inquiry.

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## 33.2 MEANING AND NATURE OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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Change is a very broad concept. Though change is all around us, we do not refer to all of it as social change. Thus, physical growth from year to year, or change of seasons do not fall under the concept of social change. In sociology, we look at social change as alterations that occur in the social structure and social relationship.

The International Encyclopaedia of the Social Science (IESS 1972) looks at change as the important alterations that occur in the social structure, or in the pattern of action and interaction in societies. Alterations may occur in norms, values, cultural products and symbols in a society. Other definitions of change also point out that change implies, above all other things, alteration in the structure and function of a social system. Institutions, patterns of interaction, work, leisure activities, roles, norms and other aspects of society can be altered over time as a result of the process of social change.

### 33.2.1 Three Aspects of Social Change

From these and other definitions of social change, we can see that:

- i) Social change is essentially a process of alteration with no reference to the quality of change.
- ii) Changes in society are related/linked to changes in culture, so that it would be sometimes useful to talk about 'socio-cultural change'.

Some sociologists, however, differentiate between social change and cultural change. Social change is defined as alterations in the social structure, (including the changes in the size of society) or in particular social institutions, or in the relationship between institutions. They feel that social change refers mainly to actual human behaviour. Cultural change, on the other hand, refers to variation in cultural phenomena such as knowledge and ideas, art, religion, moral doctrines, values, beliefs, symbol systems and so on. This distinction is abstract, because in many situations it is difficult, or nearly impossible to decide which type of change is occurring. For instance, growth of modern technology as part of the culture, has been closely associated with alterations in the economic structures, an important part of the society.

- iii) Social change can vary in its scope and in speed. We can talk of small scale or large scale changes. Changes can take a cyclical pattern, e.g. when there is the recurrence of centralisation and decentralisation in administrative organisations. It can also be revolutionary. Revolutionary change can be seen when there is an overthrow of government in a particular nation. Change can also include short term changes (e.g. in migration rates) as well as long term changes in economic structures. We can include in social change, both growth and decline in membership and size of social institutions. Change may include continuous processes like specialisation, and also include discontinuous processes such as a particular technical or social invention which appears at some point of time.

Change also varies in scope, in that it may influence many aspects of a society and disrupt the whole social system. The process of industrialisation which affected many aspects of society. In contrast, the substitution of matches for rubbing sticks to start a fire had a relatively limited scope.

Some changes occur rapidly but others take a long time. Many of the Western nations took many decades to become industrialised, but developing nations are trying to do it more quickly. They do this by borrowing or adapting from those nations which have already achieved it.

Today most sociologists assume that change is a natural, inevitable, ever present part of life in every society. When we are looking at social change, we are focusing not on changes in the experiences of an individual, but on variations in social structures, institutions and social relationship.

### 33.2.2 Some Allied Concepts

Social change is seen to be a neutral concept. The two other terms that have often been allied with this concept are ‘evolution’ and ‘progress’.

- i) Evolution expresses continuity and direction of change. It means more than growth. ‘Growth’ implies a direction of change but essentially in size or quality. Evolution involves something more intrinsic, a change not only in size but also of structure.
- ii) Progress implies change in direction towards some final desired goal. It involves a values judgement.

All changes are not evolutionary and all changes are not progressive. Discussion of the direction of change need not involve any value judgements. The diminishing size of the family, and the increasing size of economic units, are matters of historical fact. ‘Social change’ is a value-neutral term, in the sense that the sociologists do not study social change in terms of “good or bad”, desirable or undesirable. One must admit, however, that it is a difficult task indeed to make a value-free critical analysis of changes, taking place in the structure of a society.

### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** a) Use the space given below for your answers.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Define social change in two lines.

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2) What are the main characteristics of social change? Use four lines for your answer.

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3) Differentiate between the following terms:

Change, Evolution and Progress. Use six lines for your answer.

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### 33.3 THEORIES ON SOCIAL CHANGE

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The major sociological theories of change can be classified in various ways. One can, for instance make a distinction between evolutionary, (linear) and cyclical theories of social change. Among the former, the most significant are those of Comte, Spencer, Hobhouse and Marx. Among the latter, the most prominent ones are those of Spengler, Pareto, and Sorokin. In this unit, we shall briefly examine the following perspectives on change:

- i) the evolutionary perspective,
- ii) the cyclical perspective,
- iii) the structural-functional perspective, and
- iv) the conflict perspective.

#### 33.3.1 The Evolutionary Perspective

The notion of social evolution was taken from the theories of biological evolution. Spencer propounded an analogy between social and organic growth and between society and an organisation. The theories of social evolution are composed of one or more of the following principles—change, order, direction, progress and perfectibility. The principle of **change** states that the present system is the outcome, of more or less continuous modification from its original state. Some evolutionists add to the principles of change the notion that change must have an **order**.

Other evolutionists combine the principles of change and order with the principle of direction, thereby suggesting that there is a natural linear order of change in a social system. The evolutionary process of change implies, that every society goes through distinctive and successive states of existence and orientation. Comte, for instance, proposed a directional theory of society. He suggested that a society evolves from a theological orientation, to a metaphysical orientation to a positivistic orientation. Durkheim classified societies into simple societies united by similarity of their members, (what he called mechanical solidarity) and complex societies based on specialisation and functional interdependence of members (what he called organic solidarity). This also suggests a directional evolutionary pattern.

It has been pointed out that it is sometimes difficult in evolutionary theory, to differentiate simple direction from progress. The common theme in much of the evolutionary literature is that societies progress over time, to a point where they industrialise and develop in the path and manner of western nations. Extreme expressions of this position are contained in the notion of perfectibility. Societies

continue to move toward some ideal advanced state of industrialisation. However, the neo-evolutionary theories that have emerged in recent years, are more tentative than the evolutionary theories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These neo-evolutionary theorists do not assert that change proceeds along the same path. They suggest that there is a general trend towards a more elaborate division of labour. They take on a relativistic view, in that they recognise that different cultures have different ideas of what constitutes progress. One of the greatest problems of older theories of evolution was that they too often contained untestable, sometimes ethnocentric propositions.

### 33.3.2 Cyclical Theories

The basic premise of the cyclical theories is: cultures and civilisations pass through stages of change, starting and often ending with the same stage. This passing through stages is called a cycle. The cycle when completed, repeats itself over and over again. The ancient civilisations in Greece, China and India for instance, can be explained by the principle of cycles.

Some cyclical theorists are pessimistic in that they think that decay is inevitable. Oswald Spengler (1945) believed that every society is born, matures, decays and eventually dies. The Roman Empire rose to power and then gradually collapsed. The British empire grew strong, and then deteriorated. Spengler believed that social change may take the form of progress or of decay, but that no society lives for ever. Pareto (1916) presented in his theory of the circulation of elites, an interpretation of history according to which social change is brought about, by the struggle between groups for political power. His theory was inadequate in that it was based on a limited instance of the circulation of elites in ancient Rome. His conception of political change ignored the growth of democratic government in modern times.

More recently Sorokin (1975) has presented theories which have some features of the cyclical perspective. Sorokin's theory is based on the principle of immanent socio-cultural change. This implies that any socio-cultural system (i.e. society and civilisation) alters by virtue of its own forces and properties. This principle is interlinked to another principle, namely, the principle of limited possibilities of change. There is a limit to the number of alterations that can develop in a system. For example, there is a limit to the new forms of change, and to new patterns of behaviour, that can emerge in a society. The system simply runs out of combinations in due time. If it does not die, it eventually starts running through the changes again. Thus, there is "recurrence" or "rhythm" in the histories of socio-cultural systems.]

Sorokin also makes a distinction between three broad types of culture-ideational, idealist and sensate-which he conceives as succeeding each other in cycles, in the history of societies. Ideational culture is spiritualistic, mystical and indeterminate. Sensate culture is the realm of science and of direct sensory experiences. Idealistic culture has certain characteristic of both the ideational and sensate cultures. These three types of cultures are looked upon as three views of reality that change according to the two principles mentioned above.

#### Activity 1

Keeping in mind Sorokin's distinction between three kinds of cultures, ideational, idealist and sensate; where will you place society in India? Write an essay on "Indian Society and Culture in the Context of Social Change" in about two pages share your essay with other students and Academic Counsellor at the study centre.

Sorokin's work is specially noteworthy not only because it contains a mass of historical analogies and comments on particular social transformations, but also because it saw societies as 'changing' rather than necessarily progressing or decaying.

### 33.3.3 Structural Functionalist Perspective

Structural functional, as you have read in Unit 25 and 28 has its roots in the work of the early sociologists especially Durkheim and Weber. Among contemporary scholars it is most closely associated with the work of Parsons and Merton.

Structural functionalists believe that society, like the human body, is a balanced system. Each institution serves a function in maintaining society. When events outside or inside the society, disrupt the social order, social institutions make adjustments to restore stability.

They also argue that change generally occurs in a gradual, adjustive fashion and not in a sudden violent, radical fashion. Even changes which appear to be drastic, have not been able to make a great or lasting impact on the core elements, of the social and cultural systems. Change according to them comes from basically three sources:

- i) Adjustment of the system to exogenous change (e.g. war, conquests),
- ii) Growth through structural and functional differentiation (e.g. changes in the size of population through births and deaths),
- iii) Innovations by members of groups within society (e.g. inventions and discovery in a society).

The most important and basic factor making for social integration and stability, according to this school of thought, is value consensus.

The term 'cultural lag' is often used to describe the state of disequilibrium between material and non-material aspects of a culture. Ogburn (1886-1959) who coined this word, explained that 'cultural lag' occurs when parts of a culture that were once in adjustment with each other change at different rates, and become incompatible with each other. Ogburn (1922) pointed out how the non-material culture (values, beliefs, norms, family, religion) often lags behind material culture (technology, means of production output of the economic system). For example, family planning technologies (i.e. material culture) have advanced, but people take their time to accept them. Some sections of the population may reject the very idea of 'family planning' and believe in having a large family. Again, when an event such as increase in population or a depletion in natural resources cause a strain in society, it takes some time for the society to understand and absorb the strain and alter its values and institutions to adapt to the change. But in order to function smoothly, societies adjust to maintain and restore themselves.

Critics have pointed out that the amount and kind of changes that can be explained, with the help of the structural functionalist perspective is limited. This view neglects revolutionary changes which are profound and sudden. It also overlooks the possibility of a society going through long periods of malintegration, as during times of economic recession (Eshleman and Cashion: 1983 : 533)

### 33.3.4 Conflict Perspective

The conflict theory takes the principle of dialectic (opposites) as central to social life. Conflict theory also has its origins in early sociology, especially in the works of Marx. Conflict theorists do not assume that societies smoothly evolve to higher or complex levels. According to this school every pattern of action, belief and interaction



tends to generate an opposing reaction. Modern life is full of examples. The legalisation of abortion has provoked the anti-abortion movement. The feminist movement has stimulated a reaction from men and women. The liberalisation of sexual mores has led to open denunciation. The basic premise is that one of the outcomes of conflict among groups is social change. The greatest limitation of this approach is that it lays too much emphasis on conflict, as the most important factor of change.

In more recent sociological writing, there is yet another perspective of social change called the 'development perspective'. The development perspective grew from three main sources:

- i) From the study of economic growth. Economists and to a great extent other social scientists, view quantitative growth in the economic sphere of life, as an important indicator of a country's progress. For example, they point out that a country's prosperity can be measured in terms of GNP (Gross National Product) or per capita income.
- ii) From the categorisation of all societies into technologically advanced, and less technologically advanced. Sometimes, the emphasis is on industrialisation and consequently societies that are highly industrialised, are seen to be more developed than societies which are basically agricultural.
- iii) From the comparison of the capitalist countries with the socialist or communist countries.

Many social scientists have compared the socialist economy and social organisation with Western capitalist economy and organisation. At this juncture we will not elaborate on this perspective, as you are going to look at it in the next unit. The development approach to social change, brought into sharp focus, the need for formulating a broad comparative perspective, which would take into account the complex and diverse relationships between developing countries, between technologically advanced countries, and between technologically advanced countries and developing nations. It can be said from the above discussion of the various perspective, that no single theory can account for the complexity of social change.

### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** a) Use the space given below for your answers.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) Name, in two lines, the five principles on which theories of social evolution are based.

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- 2) How does the structural-functional theory look at social change? Use three lines for your answer.

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- 3) What is the main argument of the conflict perspective? Use two lines for your answer.

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### 33.4 FACTORS IN SOCIAL CHANGE

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The problems of why change occurs and why it has been made possible, and what affects the rate of change, is closely linked with the general problem of the factors in social change. It is more common to speak of the factors that affect social change, rather than the causes of change. Why? A cause implies that a phenomenon or event, is both necessary and sufficient to produce a predictable effect. The word ‘necessary’ suggests that we can never have the effect without the preceding cause. The word ‘sufficient’ implies that the cause alone produces the effect. It is very difficult to establish ‘necessity and sufficiency’ in the social sciences. We prefer to speak of “factors of change” rather than “causes” of social change (Horton and Hunt: 1981).

#### 33.4.1 Three Basic Sources of Social Change

Some sociologists propose that social change takes place basically in one or more of the following three ways:

i) **Discovery**

A shared human perception of an aspect of reality which already exists e.g. discovery of blood circulation in biology. It is an addition to the world’s store of verified knowledge. However, it becomes a factor in social change only when it is put to use, not when it is merely known.

ii) **Inventions**

A new combination or a new use of existing knowledge e.g. the assembling of the automobile from an already existing idea. The idea of combining them was new. Inventions can be material (technology) and social (alphabet, trade union). Each invention may be new in form (i.e. in shape or action) in function (what it does) or in meaning (its long range consequences) or in principle (the theory or law on which it is based).

iii) **Diffusion**

Diffusion refers to the spread of cultural traits from one group to another. It operates both within and between societies. It takes place whenever societies come into contact with each other. Diffusion is a two way process. The British gave us their language and made tea an important ritual for us Indians; but they adopted several terms in English from us, for example, Pacca Sahib, Chchota haziri, Jaggernaut, etc. Diffusion is also a selective process. Majority of the Indians may adopt the English language, but not their beef-eating habits. Diffusion generally involves some modification of the borrowed elements of culture either in form, function or meaning

#### 33.4.2 Exogenous and Endogenous Origin of Change

It is very difficult to determine where and how change originates. Some sociologists have offered a distinction between endogenous change (change originating from within) and exogenous change (change entering from outside). In practice, the origin



of change, can only rarely be assigned wholly to one or the other category. It can be argued that wars and conquest (exogenous origin) have played an active part in bringing about major social changes in societies across the world. Again it could be said that in the modern world, the changes taking place in the developing countries have been stimulated to a large extent, by Western technology which was introduced in most cases following colonial rule. But in all societies, including those in which the initial impetus has come from outside, social change has depended to a great extent upon the activities of various social groups within the society. A major part of sociological analysis consists in identifying the spheres and groups, that are principally affected, and the ways in which innovations are diffused from one sphere to another (Bottomore: 1987: 288)

### 33.4.3 Acceptance of and Resistance to Social Change

This leads us on to another in social change, namely acceptance of and resistance to social change. Innovations (inventions and discovery are together termed as innovations) are rarely accepted totally. The specific attitudes and values of the society in question, the manifest usefulness of the innovations, the compatibility of the innovations with the existing culture, vested interests, and the role of change agents are some of the important factors that affect the degree of acceptance of and resistance to social change.

### 33.4.4 Some Factors that Affect Direction and Rate of Change

Social change has two important aspects: direction and rate. Here, we shall discuss the factors that affect the direction and rate of changes in society.

#### i) Geography, Population and Ecology

These factors are seen to bring about sudden changes or set a limit on social change. Climatic conditions, natural resources, physical location of a country, natural disasters can be important sources of change. A natural disaster like floods may destroy entire population, force people to migrate to another place, or make them rebuild their community all over again. Similarly, increase and decrease in the size of human population through birth, death or migration can pose a serious challenge to economic, and political institutions. Today, many geographic alterations and natural disasters are induced by the activities of the inhabitants or a region. Soil erosion, water and air pollution may become severe enough to trigger off new norms and laws regarding how to use resources and dispose waste products.

#### ii) Technology

Technology is recognised as one of the most crucial factors in social change. You may read Ogburn's concept of 'culture lag' in detail, to understand how technology has been an important factor in social change. The modern factory, means of transportation, medicine, surgery, mass media of communications, space and computers technology etc. have affected the attitudes, values and behaviour of people across societies. To take a simple example, automobiles and other means of modern transportation have spread culture, by increasing interaction among people who live far away from each other. The technological feats in the area of transport and communication have altered leisure activities, helped in maintaining social networks, and stimulated the formation of new social relationships.

#### iii) Values and Beliefs

The role of values in social change has been clearly brought out in Max Weber's book, **The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism**. Weber proposed that



#### Technology as an Import Factor in Social Change

some historical situations, doctrines or ideas may independently affect the direction of social change. He tried to show that the rise of modern capitalism was mainly rooted in religious values as contained in ascetic Protestantism.

Conflict over incompatible values and beliefs can be an important source of change. For instance values regarding racial or caste superiority, may clash with the values of equality of opportunity and status. New laws have emerged to ensure that people do not face discrimination on the basis of caste or race. Conflicts between group within a society, have been and are a major source of innovation and change. For instance, the establishment of political democracy in Western Europe can be said to be largely the outcome of class struggles.

#### iv) **The Great Men and Women : The role of individuals in social change**

It has been pointed out that the contribution by men of genius and leaders to social change is important. The “great men” (which includes several women leaders as well) faced a set of circumstance, and their influence arose in part from their ability

to draw out persuasively the latent aspirations, anxieties and fears of large numbers of people. They were also charismatic leaders. These leaders owed their positions to personal qualities, and left upon events the mark of their own convictions (Bottomore 1987: 283).

There are many more factors that can be discussed while dealing with the questions why, how and at what rate change occurs.

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### 33.5 RELEVANCE OF ANALYSING SOCIAL CHANGE

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No single theory or factor can explain the origin, direction, manner or consequences of social change. Change is such a complex process, that it is difficult to explain its causes, limits and consequences in a definitive specific manner. Sociological research studies in recent years have concentrated on specific process of social change, and its effects on society.

Though, sociologists say that they are trying to look at change in an objective manner, the idea of progress is still very much present in modern social thought. According to Bottomore (1987), it is evident in the serious commitment to economic growth in the industrial countries, and subsequently in the countries of the Third World. More recently, he feels, it has provided the impetus for critical evaluation of unlimited and uncontrolled economic growth. The effects of technology on the environment has animated powerful ecology movements, in most of the industrial and industrialising countries. There are debates about the nature of a “good society” in relation to the rapid advance of science and technology and to unrestrained consumerism. According to Bottomore (1987: 290-1), it is not the business of the sociologist as such to define, a “good” society “or a desirable quality of life” but it is his/her responsibility indeed to:

- i) be aware of those issues relating to human welfare.
- ii) Outline as precisely as possible the alternative courses of change and their implications, and
- iii) Indicate what social forces are at work in producing one outcome rather than another.

#### Activity 2

Discuss about the type of changes in material and non-material culture (such as, values, beliefs, customs etc.) that has taken place in your family, community/society with three persons, one of your Grandfathers generation, one of your father’s and one of your own generation. List out the type of changes observed by these three persons and write a note of one page on “Social Change in My Family”. Compare your note with these of other students at your study centre.

#### Check Your Progress 3

**Note:** a) Use the space given below for your answers.

b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) List out the three basic ways in which change takes place. Use three lines to

answer.

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2) What are the two sources from which change can originate? Use one line for your answer.

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3) What are the five important factors that are seen to affect the acceptance of, and resistance to social change? Use eight lines for your answer.

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4) List out the four factors that affect the rate and direction of change. Use five lines for your answer.

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### 33.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we looked at different dimensions of the complex phenomena of social change. We began our examination by defining social change and outlining its nature. We pointed out, how vast the scope of social change could be. We then proceeded to differentiate between social change, and two other allied concepts like ‘evolution’ and ‘progress’. In our discussion on theoretical perspectives regarding change, we focused on the evolutionary, cyclical, functionalist and the conflict perspectives. We were able to gather that no single theory can account for social change. Social change is occasioned by a constellation of factors like geography, technology, values, leaders etc. We said that discovery, inventions and diffusion are the three basic ways in which change can occur, and the origin of change can be endogenous, exogenous or both. The acceptance or resistance to change varies due to the operation of some factors, that were discussed.

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### 33.7 KEY WORDS

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- Culture lag** : The time gap that occurs when changes in material culture come more rapidly than changes in the non-material culture.
- Cyclical Change**: It refers to a course or series of events, that recur regularly and lead back to the starting point.
- Diffusion** : The process by which cultural traits spread from one culture to another.
- Evolution** : A particular process of change, (intrinsic in nature) which expresses continuity and direction of change, involving alterations in size and structure of a system.
- Innovation** : Discovery and inventions are together considered as innovation.
- Linear Change** : It refers to the direction of change from point A to B to C in a line.
- Progress** : Alterations which proceed in the direction of some desired goal.
- Social Change** : Alterations that occur in the social structure and function of a social system.

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### 33.8 FURTHER READINGS

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Bottomore, T., 1987. *Sociology. A guide to Problems and Literature*, (III Edition), Allen and Unwin: London.

Davis, K., 1981. *Human Society*, Subject Publications: New Delhi.

Ogburn W.F. and M. Nimcoff, 1979. *A Handbook of Sociology*, Emasca Publishing House: New Delhi.

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### 33.9 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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#### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Social change refers to the alterations that occur in the social structure, and social relationships in a society.
- 2) Social Change is essentially a process of alteration, with no reference to the quality of change. Changes in culture are related to changes in society. Changes also vary in scope and speed.
- 3) Evolution expresses continuity and direction of change, implying change not only in size but also of structure. Progress implies change in a desirable direction. Change on the other hand is considered to be a value neutral concept which refers to alterations in both structure and social relationships in a society.

#### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The four principles on which the theories of social evolution are based are change, order, direction, progress and perfectibility.
- 2) According to this school, change disrupts the social order but the social institutions makes adjustments to restore stability. Change generally occurs in a gradual, adjustive fashion and does not affect the core elements in the socio-cultural system.

- 3) The basic argument is that every pattern of action, belief, interaction tends to generate an opposing reaction. The outcome of conflict among groups is social change.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) Discovery, inventions and diffusion are the three basic ways in which changes takes place.
- 2) Change can originate from endogenous and exogenous sources.
- 3) The five important factors are:
  - a) Specific attitudes and values of a society in which change has been introduced,
  - b) The manifest usefulness of the innovations,
  - c) The compatibility of the innovations with the existing culture,
  - d) Vested interests, and
  - e) Role of change agents.
- 4) The four factors that affect the rate and direction of change are:
  - a) Geography, population, ecology,
  - b) Technology,
  - c) Values and beliefs, and
  - d) Role of Great men and women.