FACTORS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

**PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

Certain geographic changes sometimes produce great social change. Climate, storms, social erosion, earthquakes, floods, droughts etc., definitely affect social life and induce social change. Human life is closely bound up with the geographical conditions of the earth.

Human history is full of examples that flourishing civilizations fell prey to natural calamities. The distribution of population over various regions, the variations in the population densities, the agricultural production, flora and fauna, the joys and hardships—all indicate a change when a change in the physical environment occurs.

What to talk of rise and fall of civilizations, even our day-to-day life—our clothes, eating material and habits, shelter design etc., all are influenced by the geographical conditions. Generally, changes in physical environment force migration of people in large numbers and this brings major changes in social life and cultural values also. Migration itself encourages change, for it brings a group into a new environment, subject to its new social contacts, and confronts it with new problems.

Though physical environment is an important factor which deeply affects social life, still it cannot be regarded as the only factor responsible for the growth of human society. This extreme approach was laid down by some geographical determinists (Buckle, Huntington, Miss Sample, J. Huxley etc.), who held that geographical setting ultimately governs the form of society (family, marriage, economy, religion, government) and explains social change. But this is not true today.

Now man is in the position to affect change in his physical environment. Men adapt themselves to their environment but they have the capacity to transform their physical environment according to their needs and requirements. Bennett and Tumin (1949) aptly remarked: “It is perhaps as reasonable, if not more so to insist that man modifies his physical environment rather than the environment modifies man.”

**DEMOGRAPHIC OR BIOLOGICAL FACTOR**

Broadly speaking, demography is concerned with the size and structure of human population. The social structure of a society is closely related with the changes in the size, composition and distri­bution of population. The size of the population is based mainly upon three factors—birth rate, death rate and migration (immigration and emigration).

The composition of population depends upon variables like age, sex, marital status, literacy etc. Changes in demographic structure, which may be caused by changes in mortality rates, will produce changes in the ratio of breadwinners to dependents.

Such a change can have consequences for the structure of family, kinship, political and other institutions. The size of population affects each of us quite personally. Whether we are born into a growing or a shrinking population has a bearing on our education, the age at which we marry, our ability to get a job, the taxes we pay and many other factors.

Population analysis shows that there is a relationship between population changes and economic, social and cultural variables like poverty, illiteracy, ill-health, family structure, forms of marriage, work etc. Population growth is the most important factor in poverty.

Poverty is related with health and the size of the family also. Nations with large population (e.g., China and India) are more poverty- stricken than the countries which have not much population. Sex imbalance affects the forms of marriage (monogamy or polygyny). It is seen that communities, which have more males than females, resorted to polyandry system. Polygyny was generally found in such communities where females were in more numbers than males.

The population of every society is always changing both in numbers as well as in composition. Population changes have occurred all through human history because of migration, war, pesti­lence, changing mores etc. In modern times, adoption of two artificial ways to population growth, viz., birth control and abortion are also affecting the number and composition of population structure.

The decline of both the birth rate and the death rate bring social transfor­mation. With changes in size go changes in composition. While the birth rate is falling, the proportion of younger people in the proportion of youth’s declines and that elders advances significant social changes occurs.

**CULTURAL FACTOR**

It is an established fact that there is an intimate connection between our beliefs and social institutions, our values and social relationships. Values, beliefs, ideas, institutions are the basic elements of a culture. Certainly, all cultural changes involve social change.

Social and the cultural aspects are closely interwoven. Thus, any change in the culture (ideas, values, beliefs etc.) brings a corresponding change in the whole social order. Social institutions cannot live on life shells within which life is extinct.

Social systems are directly or indirectly the creations of cultural values. The history of culture offers many evidences which confirm the role of culture. A religious doctrine, which persisted with variations throughout many centuries, has affected the course of society. For instance, a certain attitude toward sex formulated by the Church Fathers in the early Middle Ages still hold good in the Catholic sect.

Culture gives speed and direction to social change and deter­mines the limit beyond which social change cannot occur”. (Dawson and Gettys, 1948). If we choose to travel by a ship, the direction in which we travel is not predestinated by the design of the ship but it is the culture that decides the direction and the destination both. The port we sail to remains a cultural choice. Cultural factor is not only responsive to technological change but also acts back on it so as to influence its direction and its character.

**Cultural change in society has two major aspects:**

(a) Cultural change by discovery and invention, and

(b) Cultural change by diffusion and borrowing.

The first comes from within a society and culture, and the second from another culture outside of the society. A discovery or an invention adds to the fund of our verified knowledge which later on becomes a factor of social change. Knowledge of bacterial infection brought about many changes in the behavior of people in the form of prevention and cure of disease.

Socio-cultural changes are also brought about by people from other cultures all over the world. Diffusion is the spread of cultural traits or patterns from group to group. Borrowing refers to the adoption of a cultural trait by people whose culture did not have that cultural trait. We have borrowed many cultural traits (such as use of knife and fork in eating) from Western culture.

Culture operates not only directly as a source of change but also indirectly, by its impact on the utilitarian order. This idea was best exemplified by a German sociologist Max Weber in his study of sociology of religion.

In his study ‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’ (1930), he saw that there is a direct relationship between the practical ethics of a religion and the character of its economic system, but he refused to accept the position that the letter determines the former as argued by Karl Marx. (Marx believed that the nature of a society is determined by the manner in which economy is owned and organized.) Though Weber too appreciated the importance of economic factors, but he did not ascribe to them the importance that they have in Marxian theory. For Marx economic influences were paramount and determined ell the rest, including religion, whereas for Weber economic phenomena themselves rest upon a broad ideological base and particularly upon religion.

In his above-mentioned study, Weber asserted that the devel­opment of modern capitalism could be attributed to Protestant reformation, particularly Calvinism. Protestantism emphasized the autonomy and independence of the individual rather than dependence on the church, priesthood and ritual. Weber argued that Calvinist Protestantism motivated men to seek worldly success. It laid emphasis on rational calculation, the willingness to accumulate for long-term profit and success and the emphasis on entrepreneurial success as a virtue.

Weber maintained that the ideas, ideals and attitudes towards work (work is virtue, time lost, money lost etc.,), savings and life played an important role in the economic devel­opment of Western Europe and USA Protestantism provided much of the cultural content of early capitalism—individualism, achievement motivation, hostility to inherited wealth and luxury, legitimation of entrepreneurial vocations, opposition to tradition and superstition, a commitment to organization and calculation in personal and public life.

In brief, Protestantism provided an element in the rationalization (an important requirement of capitalism) of Western society. Weber did not simply explain capitalist development in terms of religious belief, but argued that the religious factor, if combined with others, of a political, economic and social nature, can produce a certain type of social change.

**IDEATIONAL FACTOR**

Among the cultural factors affecting social change in modern times, the development of science and secularization of thought have contributed a lot to the development of the critical and innovative character of the modern outlook. We no longer follow many customs or habits merely because they have the age-old authority of tradition. On the contrary, our ways of life have increasingly become on the basis of rationality.

Some writers have interpreted social change at ideational level and asserted that all social change is ideational. They argued that ideas could influence the course of social change. For them, ideational changes are important contributory factors to many or most types of social change. Ideas and ideologies together are powerful motivating forces in social change.

For instance, after independence, the directive principles—equality, fraternity, liberty and justice laid down in our constitution—have not only revolutionized the Indian society but it has even affected greatly the relations between the members of the family. Social philosophers, who believed in the force of ideas, argued that no material or social factors can produce change unless there is also a change in ideas within society or ideas about society and nature.

In modern times, not only the way we think, but the contents of ideas have also changed. Ideals of self-betterment, freedom, equality and democratic participation are largely creations of the past two/ three centuries. Such ideals have served to mobilize processes of social and political change, including reformation movements and revolutions.

**ECONOMIC FACTOR**

Of economic influences, the most far-reaching is the impact of industrialization. It has revolutionized the whole way of life, institutions, organizations and community life. In traditional production systems, levels of production were fairly static since they were geared to habitual, customary needs. Modern industrial capitalism promotes the constant revision of the technology of production, a process into which science is increasingly drawn.

The impact of industrialization (science and technology) we can easily see on Indian family system (joint family) and caste system. (For detailed analysis of the influence of economic factor, see Marx’s views discussed in Economic Theory of Social Change).

**POLITICAL FACTOR**

State is the most powerful organization which regulates the social relationships. It has the power to legislate new laws, repeal old ones to bring social change in the society. Laws regarding child marriage, widow remarriage, divorce, inheritance and succession, untouch­ability are some of the examples which have brought many changes in the social structure of Indian society.

The type of political leadership and individuals in power also influences the rate and direction of social change. In many societies the political leadership controls the economy also. Scientific-technological and non-techno­logical change are also dependent on political development which indirectly affects social change.

There is a direct relationship between the type of political organization and social change. In hunting and gathering societies, there were no political organization capable of mobilizing the community, as such; there were minimum changes in the societies. In all other types of society, however, the existence of distinct political agencies, such as chiefs, lords, kings and governments strongly affect the course of development of society takes. A ruler may choose to channel resources into building up his castle, for example, even when this impoverishes most of the population.

Political development in the last two or three centuries (in India especially after independence) has certainly influenced economic change as much as economic change has influenced politics. Govern­ments now play a major role in stimulating (and sometimes retarding) rates of economic growth. In all industrial societies there is high level of state intervention in production.