

Process of Social Change in India

Introduction to Social Change and Structure

To understand social change in India, sociologists distinguish between social structure—the continuing arrangement of persons in relationships defined or controlled by institutions—and culture, which refers to socially established norms or patterns of behaviour.

While social change is continuous and ongoing, resulting from countless individual and collective actions over time, social movements are directed toward specific goals and involve sustained social effort.

The processes of change in India are broadly categorised into structural changes (colonialism, industrialisation, urbanisation) and cultural changes (modernisation, westernisation, sanskritisation, secularisation), both of which were profoundly shaped by the colonial experience.

I. Process of Structural Change

Structural change refers to alterations in the fundamental political, economic, and social frameworks of a society. In India, these changes were initiated by the unique structure of British colonialism.

1. Colonialism as a Structure and System

Colonialism is the ideology by which one country seeks to conquer, settle, and rule over another, transforming the colony into a subordinate part exploited for the coloniser's gain.

- **Unique Impact:** Unlike earlier rules in India, British colonialism brought changes on an unprecedented scale and intensity, introducing modern ideas of western liberalism while simultaneously denying those liberties to Indians.

- **Movement of People:** Colonialism facilitated the massive movement of people. Within India, labourers from Jharkhand moved to Assam tea plantations; globally, indentured labourers were shipped to distant lands like Mauritius, Africa, and the Americas.
- **Economic Integration:** India was linked to the world capitalist economy, shifting from being a supplier of manufactured goods to a source of raw materials and a consumer of British manufactured goods.
- **Administrative Legacy:** Modern India continues to use a parliamentary and legal system, a police force, and an educational system built largely on the British model.

2. Industrialisation

Industrialisation refers to the emergence of machine production based on inanimate power resources like steam or electricity.

- **The Colonial Path:** Unlike the West, early industrialisation in India was governed by colonial interests. This led to deindustrialisation in traditional sectors; for example, the Indian handloom industry was destroyed by Manchester's cheap manufactured textiles.
- **Decline of Old Centres:** Traditional manufacturing towns like Surat and Masulipatnam declined, while coastal "port cities" like Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras grew as links to global capitalism.
- **Post-Independence Development:** After 1947, the independent state actively promoted heavy industry (e.g., Bhilai, Durgapur).

- **The Modern Shift:** By 2018-19, while nearly 42.5% of Indians were still employed in agriculture, the service sector (tertiary sector) had grown to contribute more than half of the economic growth. This shift includes the rise of software services and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO).

3. Urbanisation

Urbanisation involves the development of towns and cities and a declining dependency on agriculture.

- **Way of Life:** Urbanisation implies changes not just in settlement density but in "a way of life," affecting production systems, technology, and social interactions.
- **Recent Trends:** For the first time since Independence, the absolute increase in population is now higher in urban areas than in rural areas. This is driven by declining growth rates in villages while urban growth remains steady.
- **Global Cities:** Globalisation has led to the expansion of cities like Bengaluru and Gurugram, which are now hubs for international professional classes.

II. Process of Cultural Change

Cultural change involves the reinterpretation of tradition and the adoption of new values and styles of life.

1. Sanskritisation

Coined by M.N. Srinivas, Sanskritisation is the process by which a "low" caste, tribe, or group adopts the customs, rituals, beliefs, and ideology of a high caste, particularly a "twice-born" (dwija) caste.

- **Scope:** Its influence is seen in language, literature, music, and ritual practices.

- **Regional Variations:** It operates differently across regions; in areas where non-Sanskritic castes were dominant, "de-Sanskritisation" occurred.
- **Criticisms:** Sociologists argue it exaggerates social mobility because it only leads to positional change for individuals rather than a structural change in the unequal caste system. It has also been criticised for eroding Dalit culture and justifying notions of "pollution and purity".



2. Westernisation

Westernisation refers to the changes brought about in Indian society and culture as a result of over 150 years of British rule.

- **Diverse Levels:** It occurs at the levels of technology, institutions, ideology, and values.
- **Sub-cultural Patterns:** One form led to a "westernised sub-culture" among a minority section of Indian intellectuals who adopted western styles of life and supported its expansion.

- **Paradoxes:** Westernisation often co-exists with traditionalism. A person may use modern technology (like medical interventions for female foeticide) while maintaining conservative, discriminatory attitudes toward women.

3. Modernisation

Modernisation is associated with positive, desirable values and the improvement of technology and production processes.

- **Universal Context:** It implies that behaviour is no longer decided by family, tribe, or caste, but by achieved status and individual choice.
- **Scientific Attitude:** It encourages a scientific attitude and rationality over religious explanations.
- **Rethinking Tradition:** Modernity in India has prompted an active questioning and reinterpretation of tradition rather than its simple replacement.

4. Secularisation

Secularisation refers to the progressive retreat of religion from public life.

- **Western vs. Indian versions:** In the West, it means the separation of church and state. In India, it has three senses: (a) strict separation of state and religion, (b) the state showing equal respect to all religions, and (c) an attitude that is the anti-thesis of communalism.
- **Social Reality:** It is linked to the arrival of modernity and the rise of science as an alternative way of understanding the world.

The 19th-century social reform movements were a response to the challenges of colonial society and were led by the newly emerging western-educated Indian middle class.

1. Key Reformers and Movements

- **Raja Rammohun Roy:** Attacked the practice of sati using both humanitarian arguments and Hindu shastras.
- **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar:** Focused on widow remarriage, with his work being translated into various Indian languages.
- **Jyotiba Phule:** Attacked both caste and gender oppression simultaneously. He opened the first school for women in Pune and recalled the glory of the pre-Aryan age.
- **Sir Syed Ahmed Khan:** Worked to reform Muslim society, advocating for women's education and free enquiry (ijtihad) while trying to reconcile Koranic revelations with modern science.

- **Pandita Ramabai:** A prominent woman reformer who travelled across the country to fight for women's rights.

2. Features of 19th Century Reform

- **Mix of Ideas:** These movements represented a creative combination of modern western liberalism and traditional literature.
- **New Technologies:** The printing press, telegraph, and railways speeded up the movement of new ideas and allowed reformers from different regions to exchange views.

III. Social Reform Movements and Laws

- **Organisation:** Modern social organisations like the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj were established to debate and implement change.
- **Decentralisation:** The 73rd Amendment empowered rural populations by giving them a voice through the Panchayati Raj system.



- **Labour Laws:** Acts like the Mines Act of 1952 (now part of the 2020 Code) specify maximum working hours and safety rules, though these are often bypassed by sub-contractors in smaller quarries.

3. The Role of Law and the Constitution

Legislation has been a primary vehicle for social change, though sociologists note that law alone cannot transform society without constant social campaigns.

- **Colonial Beginnings:** The British government drew up "Schedules" in 1935 to recognise castes and tribes deserving of special treatment due to massive discrimination.
- **The Constitution:** Post-Independence, the Constitution became a major force for change. It includes Fundamental Rights to Equality (Article 14) and Freedom of Speech.
- **Supreme Court Interpretations:** The Court has expanded rights, such as reading the Right to Information into the Right to Freedom of Speech and incorporating "Equal Pay for Equal Work" into the Right to Equality.