

SOME REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL PROGRESS

That the society is undergoing extensive change and massive modifications, both structurally and functionally in multidimensional directions is a phenomenon hardly disputed by anybody engaged in sociological studies. Change or mutation is a cosmic phenomenon and society being a part of the cosmos does not enjoy immunity from this cosmic law. Evidently the manner in which changes sweep the physical world are characteristically different from the social change. Man is not the handmaid of the blind forces and circumstances, but the maker of his own destiny. So social changes to a great extent bear the imprint of human urges and initiative. Social change takes place in various intensities in different localities at different points of time. In view of the pervasive nature of social change and its tremendous implications, the social scientists and philosophers make persistent effort to identify the nature and pattern of social change. The concepts of 'Social Evolution' (SE), 'Social Development' (SD) and 'Social Progress' (SP) are employed often as interchangeable terms to explain the changing pattern of society. Although all the scholars are not equally guilty of committing such a confusion, some of them are inclined to treat them as 'logically related terms'. This has, however, been contested by others. The main objective of this paper is to take a fresh look at the concept of *SP vis-a-vis SE*.

Since the days of Darwin and Huxley, the notion of 'evolution' exerted some sort of magical charm and the scientists hailed it as the most intelligible scientific concept, "the grand

key to the comprehension of change". Evolutionary approach to social change is a remarkable feature of the sociological thoughts of a galaxy of social scientists like Comte, Spencer, Tylor, Marx, Max Weber, Ward, Giddings, Hobhouse, Westermarck, Ginsberg, Melver and others. Of these thinkers, Spencer, Ward and R. T. Lapiere in particular not only extended the notion of evolution to characterise social change, but also identified *SE* with the organic evolution. For Spencer, *SE* is a super-organic evolution, for according to him, the similarities between the two are glaring and significant. As he observes "A social organism is like an individual organism in three essential traits: that it grows, that while growing it becomes more complex, its parts acquire increasing mutual dependence, that its life is immense in length compared with the lives of its component units... that in both cases there is increasing heterogeneity".¹ Furthermore, Spencer identified *SE* with *SP*, every change found in society is invariably evolutionary and this evolutionary change is necessarily progressive. As social organisation evolves, there is progress towards greater size, coherence, multiformity and definiteness'. In every stage of *SE*, Society, he argues, advances towards the ideal of perfection and happiness. Like Spencer, R. T. Lapiere also holds *SE* to be analogous to biological evolution. In his view, new modes of human behaviour develop in course of *SE* which are oriented towards effective adjustment to environmental condition. It leads to the state approximating to social equilibrium.² Among the other eminent sociologists, Ward and Giddings by and large lent support to Spencerian line of thought. Giddings traces the process of historical evolution through following stages: zoogenic, anthropogenic, enthogenic and demogenic.

In modern times, R. M. Melver is a vocal exponent of *SE*. In his language "Whenever in the history of society we find an

increasing specialisation of organs or units within the system or serving the life of the whole, we can speak of SE".³ The essence of evolution, he further explains, consists in the process of differentiation which manifests itself by (a) a greater division of labour to greater co-operation and also "a more intricate nexus of functional relationship among the individuals of the group (b) an increase of the number and variety of functional association and institutions" (c) a "greater diversity and refinement in the instruments of social communication".⁴ Undoubtedly, the principle of evolution is an important clue to the understanding of social change, but how far it can adequately explain the ongoing of society in its widespread ramifications is a question which deserves close scrutiny.

Unlike the physical world, plant kingdom and infra-rational beings, society is a complex web of myriad social relationships of rational, value-seeking beings, whose activities when rightly comprehended seem to be predominantly goal-oriented. And for this, social change does not fit well in the framework of the organic evolution. The latter is a part of the cosmic evolution guided rather deterministically by the inherent potencies leaving no room for personal initiative, motivated action and self-directed endeavours. As social beings, men in addition to certain inherited dispositions and tendencies employ different cultural aids, which they have come to acquire from outside, i.e., from social and cultural environment and not evolved from within to satisfy their numerous needs, desires and aspirations. V. Gordon Childe rightly observes "It is essential not to lose sight of the significant distinctions between historical process and organic evolution, between human culture and the animal's bodily equipment, between social heritage and the biological inheritance".⁵ This apart, Spencer is guilty of confusing *SE* with *SP*. Obviously society does not necessarily progress in every

turn of evolution, which, as we know, results from the collective effort of the people. L. T. Hobhouse along with some other social scientists have not, therefore, overlooked the distinction between the *SE* and *SP*. In his language, "By evolution, I mean any sort of growth; by *SP*, the growth of social life in respect of those qualities to which human beings attach, or can rationally attach value".⁶ Maintaining distinction between *SE* and *SP*, Hobhouse introduces the notion of 'development' in order to afford a better account of the process of historical change. Social Development (*SD*) by which he understands, 'development of man in their mutual relations' indicates advancement of the community in scale, efficiency and mutuality of service. Hobhouse makes a thorough investigation into the factors of *SD* and rightly emphasizes that development of human mind is a vital factor of *SD*. His keenly-argued thesis is supported and strengthened by his prudent use of historical and anthropological data and psychological analysis of natural impulses and desires of man. On final analysis, Hobhouse's exposition of *SD* stands in between the notions of 'evolution' and 'progress', for he maintains that society is progressively advancing towards such desirable ends as scale, efficiency, freedom and mutuality. Admittedly Hobhouse highlights certain significant factors and aspects of social evolutionism hitherto not adequately investigated into by others. Nevertheless, in recent years his explanation of social change failed to evoke wide recognition on account of its strong teleological flavour.

SP is another significant expression employed to describe social transformation. While considering *SP*, it should be borne in mind that we cannot speak of progress in any ultimate sense ignoring the time and place qualifications, for we cannot visualise what changes will sweep society, say, a five thousand years hence. So in our discourse on *SP*, we wish to formulate

an idea of progress taking into account the past history of human civilization, the present concern and commitments of mankind, the psychical constitution of man, his beliefs, aspirations and value-conceptions. Since the beginning of the present century, the majority of the social scientists deliberately avoided all reference to the idea of progress in their discourses on social change. Their main contention is that 'progress' has an ethical implication and while ascertaining whether any particular social change indicates progression or not, valuational judgment can not be avoided. Again value-judgment presupposes certain norms or standards, but universal agreement, it is argued, can never be achieved in this matter. Extremely relative and variable character of the norms renders the valuational activity problematic. In their earnest effort to make sociology a value-neutral positive science, the 20th century social scientists are unwilling to consider *SP* an appropriate subject which merits serious sociological study.

To many, 'progress' is an ethical concept, but we think that the concept 'progress' by itself is not so, unless it is preceded by an adjective 'moral'. Progress implies a forward movement – an advancement from a lower strata to a higher one having a retrospective and a prospective reference. In our common parlance and also in intellectual discourse the expression 'scientific progress' for example, carries definite meaning and no ethical implication is attached to it. In this case determination of progress in scientific sphere by using proper objective measuring stick presents no difficulty. In other words, if we endeavour to determine the state of society in terms of material conditions – agricultural, economic, industrial, technological, scientific achievements we encounter no serious difficulty, for there is nothing subjective about our valuation. But as soon as we try to characterise social change as progressive, certain difficulties seem to manifest themselves.

Some social scientists argue that ethical relativism vitiates value judgment. In view of the relative and variable character of values, all attempts to arrive at any definite idea about what progress is—invite intricate complexities. McIver and Page do not feel inclined to accept 'Progress' to be a scientific concept.⁷ To decide how far McIver is acceptable, we should seek answers to the following issues : (a) signficatory implication of 'scientific concept' (b) subjectivity of values. Some sort of intellectual detachment or non-committal attitude is an essential pre-condition for developing any scientific concept, which however is not always easy to achieve. In the process of socialization, man comes to inherit certain ideas, beliefs and attitudes which shape his mode of viewing things and events and this accounts for the difficulty in achieving intellectual detachment. This difficulty is more seriously felt in studying social phenomena. It goes without saying that a scientific concept must be precise, objective and universal. Objectivity is said to be an antithesis of subjectivity—having existence outside the mind uninfluenced by personal feelings and opinions, likes and dislikes. In case positive physical objects and events, no difficulty is experienced in ascertaining their objectivity and for that matter, their universality. But when we are called upon to identify an objective social condition or phenomenon, the exercise does not always appear to be very smooth, as for example in the case of *SP*. However, this difficulty can be overcome to a great extent if it can be shown that there had been a marked improvement in the ways of life and thought, beliefs and behaviour and also in respect of social structure group-attitude and mental qualities of the members of the society. In other words, for ascertaining the objectivity of *SP* we must show that at least there exists a general agreement about the fact of *SP*. In case of 'physical facts' objectivity indicates their universality, whereas in case of 'social facts', universality of a greement suggests their objectivity.

Evidently it is not at all difficult to discern at least general agreement as regards the fact that society has moved forward both structurally and functionally and also in respect of material and mental attainments. Many scholars are tempted to call the process evolutionary, instead of calling it progressive. But we feel that 'progression' is a better concept because social change signifies, besides social mobility, the goal-oriented activities of the creative-appreciative beings. Dissension voiced here and there, then and now can be ignored being distorted view of the myopic vision or a partial account based on inadequate perception of the total perspective of the historical movement. Progressive movement, therefore, seems to be a well-founded fact and if this is so, should we not accept the concept of *SP* a scientific one being sufficiently precise and also on account of general agreement?

The problem of value is supposed to have direct bearing on the question of *SP*. It is contended that we cannot speak of progress without inference to values or standards. And values are said to be eminently subjective and without resorting to value-judgment, we cannot determine *SP*. Values, it should be noted at the outset, are not fictitious or mysterious concepts. On the contrary, these are the best possible ideas conceived by the creative persons. Values are unique and living in the sense of their novelty and originality. Subjectivity of the values, it is alleged, subverts any attempt at arriving any definite idea about what progress is. But is this difficulty so insurmountable as has been made out to be? A close study of the histories and the ethnological monographs in search of values affords convincing proofs that there are certain fundamental principles of morality acknowledged by mankind inspite of the fluctuations of time and place, though the evolutionists controvert it by arguing that people of the earlier strata of the evolutionary movement had a 'mental or moral configuration' much different from and even

inferior to that of a modern man. In modern times, a fairly exhaustive and objective investigations conducted by the eminent anthropologists and sociologists like Lowie, Goldenwisher, Paul Rodin, W. Schmit, Westermarck, Boas, Evan Pritchard, Molnowski and others have discerned the existence of a "body of basic rules of morality" in all societies irrespective of racial difference and cultural variations. In the language of Prof. Ginsberg, "Indeed recent ethnological work has shown that the most primitive peoples, those who live by gathering and hunting, have codes of morals which in some respects compare favourably with those found among otherwise more advanced peoples".⁸ 'No man is wholly destitute of moral feeling' and it is his commitment to certain values that distinguishes a man from other infra-rational beings. Now the values about which people of different stages of *SE* agreed upon should be identified and for this, a consensus of opinion might be of great help. But it might be objected that consensus of opinion is also likely to be inconsistent for it is also open to subjective influences. But for having a consensus of opinion we need not arrange some sort of opinion poll, even if this is at all feasible. All that is needed is to closely survey the recorded cultural histories of human races so as to identify those common values which were considered valuable by them. This will enable us to have an idea of the essential core of the concept of 'progress'.

The extent and significance of *SP* can only be fully comprehended keeping in view the ontological nature of man. Man is not the disease of life as preached in the panromantic teachings or a whole of libido (Freud) or an economic being (Marx) or a complex whole of reflexes (Behaviourism), but a value-seeking being having a definite tendency towards transcending his present existence. As Heidegger holds "A man is a possibility, he has power to be,"⁹ or in Sri Aurobindo's vision "It is in his

human nature, in all human, nature to exceed itself by conscious evolution, to climb beyond what he is"¹⁰ Man's capacity of self-transcending suggests that he is not simply a food-procuring and pleasure-seeking being and therefore while considering *SP* we must take into consideration both objective and subjective conditions, i.e., both material prosperity and mental and moral attainments and excellence.

Material prosperity in terms of abundant supply of food, drink, health and shelter which are essential for the preservation of physical existence of man are the important objective conditions of *SP*. However, availability of food, drink and shelter in abundance i.e., economic prosperity is not all; there must be appropriate machinery for the equitable distribution of economic benefits among the members of the society irrespective of caste, creed and status. Modern socio-economic changes involving social organisations and institutions, along with scientific and technological achievements bear definite marks of advancement with reference to stone age or iron age. In a progressive society there must not be any economic exploitation and obnoxious political regimentation which subvert and impede the spontaneous growth of human personality.

Through an exclusively economic interpretation of human history, the Marxian theory of social change argues that economic factors, the mode of production of the material objects in general dominates the development of social, political, intellectual, moral, aesthetic life. Marxism exhorts man to recast the economic structure of society in order that social life may move forward in the right direction. Certain theoretical assumptions, such as dialectical movement of society, materialistic conception of history, the concept of class struggle are basal to the Marxian explanatory model of social change. Admittedly these basic principles of Marxian theory of social change have been subjected

to close scrutiny both by the adherents and the opponents. Few observations only in outlines, even at the risk of treading the oft-beaten track, seem quite relevant here. The dialectical movement of the society as envisaged by Hegel and Marx in terms of triad of thesis, antithesis and synthesis is an account which, we think, seeks to interpret the dynamics of social change rather dogmatically and mechanically. Social change, whether evolutionary or progressive cannot adhere mechanically to this triadic formula. In the intellectual sphere, reason might exhibit dialectic movement, but can it be shown that social change being a very pervasive phenomenon encompassing within itself structural, functional, relational aspects of the society respond exactly in a point to point manner to Marxian dialectics? It might be held that an element of subjectism cannot be avoided in conceiving a particular social system as the antithesis of another and their real synthesis in a higher state. Dr. B. N. Seal's comment on Hegelian dialectics, which is equally relevant in respect of Marxian dialectics, runs as follows, "The triadic rhythm makes a fine musical appeal, no doubt, but ours is a hard world, too hard to be put under musical scheme".¹¹ Moreover, Marxist theory maintains enigmatic silence as to why the force of dialectics becomes inoperative when the society steps in the stage of communism. Communism is supposed to usher in an era of liberty – a society free from all sorts of exploitation and oppression as a result of the abolition of classes and class struggle. The 'material forces' which so long exercised complete control over social transformation appear to become ineffective and human beings become "the masters of themselves". But no cogent reason has been put forward in support this shifting of locus of the prime mover of social transformation. If man is the maker of his social destiny, then the importance attached to 'economic factors' as the principal agents of social transformation becomes absolutely pointless. In this connection, we must seek

answers to the following questions. Will social evolution reach its zenith with the emergence of communism? In that case, will it not be tantamount to the falsification of cardinal principle of evolution? Does it not amount to mystification of the notion of *SP*? Has Marx not become a perfectionist in his delineation of *SP*?

The all-too-famous Marxian proposition that 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle' has proved to be a debatable one and its plausibility is challenged excluding those who feel emotionally committed to it, on the ground that the formulation is based on defective psychology and this also suffers from the fallacy of oversimplification of the complex class-structure of the society and social relationships. A non-committal view of human history testified that both conflict and co-operation, contradiction and cohesion constitute a single stream of social relationship. In other words, in normal conditions, a well-demarkated fissure between two conflicting classes engaged in acrimonious class struggle is not what history teaches. Moreover, in recent years, some tangible reforms introduced by the welfare states, which coupled with massive scientific, industrial and technological developments have further complicated the already complex class structure. In industrially advanced countries, the industrial labourers have turned into a privileged class and have become conformists, supporters of establishment and not the vanguards of Revolution. Never in history of mankind, human race was divided into two distinct classes, i.e., proletariat and bourgeoisie. This apart, historical reconstruction of pre-historic and primitive stages of human society is the product of creative imagination and constructive interpretation which is supposed to be supported by evidences, though such evidences are not always plenty and forthright. And in the matter of interpretation, an element of subjectivity might

unconsciously infiltrate. Individual proclivities might induce an individual to ignore the significant and magnify the insignificant.

Our primary concern here of course is not to undertake a full-length critique of Marxian theory of social explanation. All that we wish to suggest is that any theory of *SP* nourished by over-materialism, economism and class-conflict is neither theoretically convincing nor ethically satisfying.

As man is neither wholly a biological being nor an economic being, the desirable level of his progress must be traced much above the plane of animality. And as a matter of fact, a great part of the progress of humanity has definitely been due to psychical factors rather than merely biological ones. In other words, material progress can never be an end in itself. Material progress and social progress are not synonymous. We feel that with material progress, there must be corresponding mental and moral progress so that material progress can be meaningful. In modern times, there had been considerable progress in the spheres of industry, science and technology which has considerably changed almost every aspect of life such as farming and manufacturing, communication and transportation, health and hygiene. The technological revolution has pervaded the whole world. Space travel and man's voyage to moon has been possible and this has considerably enhanced the prestige of scientific knowledge. It seems that modern age has reached a material zenith. But this has not been simultaneously reciprocated by a mental zenith. Depression, tension, frustration and fear-psychosis are the common experiences of our life. Inter-personal relationships are vitiated by mutual distrust, hatred, ill-will, group rivalry. Clashes of interest, ugly rivalry among the nations for political supremacy, tendency towards domination of one nation by another through economic and military assistance (a newtype of exploitation in a subtle manner employed by the developed

countries including the states wedded to Socialism), ever-preparedness for embarking upon warfare are some of unique features of present-day international relations. All this shows that mere economic prosperity, industrial and technological advancements are not the indicatives of *SP*. To achieve *SP* what is needed is an inner change and enrichment along with external adjustment, an 'equilibrium between the inside and the outside'.

Evidently, for the proper development of mental qualities and moral excellence, a social environment is an essential precondition, for this will facilitate flowering of the latent capacities and potentialities of man. A man can exert his creative faculties for the enrichment of culture and accelerating progress only in a social environment where there exists freedom of thought and action. Admittedly creative freedom is the highest freedom of all the different types of freedom and the entire human race down the ages has been persistently aspiring after creative freedom. So for the progress of entire humanity, freedom of thought, life and action is the pre-requisite. If man's freedom of action is subverted by compulsory State programme or compulsorily enforced manual labour, he finds no time or urge for any creative or innovative enterprise. Similarly if man is forced to think in the same and similar fashion according to particular dogma or doctrine and if there is systematic political indoctrination or brain washing through State Machinery or party organ, intellectual - artistic creativity becomes the first casualty. What we need is creativity and not cultural slavery and political hegemony. Often some political fanatics resent de-politicalisation of social relationships and every value - based understanding of social phenomena, as 'liberal bourgeois deception and diversion'. Obviously to characterise a point of view in the above manner is no logic, nothing more than an emotional outpouring of an agitated mind.

Now, let us endeavour to identify workable specifications of the positive content of progress on the basis of which we can decide, though not as accurately as in mathematical measurement, at which level a particular society stands in the scale of progression. In a progressive society certain social ideals find actualisation in the intellectual, emotional and volitional life of the majority members of a community. It cannot be expected that all the members of a community will be inspired by these social ideals and will be tempted to emulate them. Nevertheless, if a conscious recognition of these ideals is perceived in the ways of life, belief and conduct of the members of the society, its claim as a progressive one with reference to another where this is absent, is found to be quite legitimate and warranted. The art, creative literature, the socio-political system, intersubjective relationships, group attitude etc., will reflect the extent of the commitment to these ideals. Admittedly the task of evaluation will be a delicate one and the results thereof cannot be expressed in sufficiently accurate manner as we can do in case of other positive sciences. And perhaps we shall have to remain contented with this type of results expressed in abstract terms in our studies of most of the social sciences. But this does not in any way render the entire exercise futile and unproductive.

Let us now proceed to enumerate some of the social ideals which, we think, are the subjective factors of *SP* signifying the height of the mental development of the social beings.

(1) Development of social consciousness is the cementing force of the social life—the basis of social co-operation and social relationships characterised by reciprocity, mutual understanding and co-operation. Man has learnt to live, not in isolation and conflict, but in mutual trust and co-operation. Admittedly, pursuit and promotion of self-interest is natural to man's biological existence, but man's developed consciousness has made him to

believe that he lives more meaningfully through expansion—through extending the area of love, sympathy and sacrifice. To make them the permanent traits of man's personality, constructive educational programme might play a significant role. A progressive society must testify that its members are inspired by true social consciousness.

(2) Recognition of other people's right to live and enjoy those material and social benefits as are available to him. By implication none should be permitted to enjoy special privileges on account of birth and/or social status. 'Live and let others live with equal rights and opprotunities' should be the cardinal maxim.

(3) Psychical refinement on the basis of truth, love, justice, equality indicates the level of progression. Modern world history confirms that many well thought-out socio-political reforms and developmental programmes failed to produce desired results because people were not sufficiently mentally equipped and enlightened. Psychical refinement embraces both mental and moral enrichment in fairly well-recognised values. Value-consciousness and value-based conduct are what make life more meaningful. A proper utilisation of the material resources of the society depends to a great extent on the mental and moral qualities of the people. Some people imagine that political revolution having no corresponding psychological revolution is the sine qua non of the social progress. But events of history have belied their hope. Hence a radical transformation in the deepest levels of mind—a new and fresh turn of mind—and heart by which we can control and humanise our conduct is of supreme importance.

(4) Sanity and mental health of the members of the society indicate that it is better one in comparison to the primitive and

medieval. The sanity of the progressive society is revealed in the sustained efforts on the parts of the individuals to adjust themselves to one another which spontaneously generate mutual trust, goodwill and loving relations with all members of the society. In a healthy society an individual enjoys adequate opportunity for working creatively. An individual be treated not as a means to an end, he enjoys dignity of personality, he can hold his head high. Development of social character and a sane and sober attitude to life and its affairs are undoubtedly the marks of *SP*.

(5) Man in his civilized existence attaches great importance to the development of intelligence and rational conduct. Intelligence and rational conduct are complementary and not antagonistic. It might be that intelligence is the fountainhead of rational conduct. To live intelligently in a social world and to deal effectively the pressing problems which a social being encounters all through his social existence is certainly a sign of progress, having both individual and social significance. Individually, an intelligent being is more inclined to social adjustment and therefore less likely to be a victim of mental imbalance or disorder. And his balanced conduct is unlikely to produce much complications for the society. Most of our social ills and evils which endanger social security and social solidarity, such as communal riots, civil wars, racial and caste prejudices are the products of irrationality and under-developed mentality. In a progressive society, superstitions and prejudices, whims and caprices do not find a fertile ground. So a progressive society is one "where the clear steam of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert of dead habit" (Tagore).¹²

SP is multinational. It is not always steady and continuous; there may be occasional setbacks or ups and downs, "a rythm of alternate darkness and light", "but both day and night help to foster progress". The Marxian principle of linear progress

seems to be untenable. Again *SP* is a dynamic concept. Society can never fully appropriate the ideal of progress it cherishes. After some definite and significant steps towards the approximation of progress, society perceives that something more is left unrealised and in this way the idea of progress recedes back to an untrodden horizon inviting and alluring people to move farther for greater and fuller realisation. And perhaps this is how civilization moves. Some people, though not quite unreasonably, often voice scepticism about *SP* in view of their experiences of two world wars and recent piling up of sophisticated war materials and also their unpleasant experiences of the functionings of totalitarian regimes in certain parts of the globe. Evidently, these distressing phenomena indicate retrogression. But the picture is not so gloomy all around. The inauguration of various international movements and emergence of several international forums for putting an end to strife and tension and for fostering peace, understanding and co-operation go to show that man has not taken those phenomena to be the ultimate destiny of mankind. Attempts to overcome these tragedies and to make the world a better place for human habitation bear testimony of man's sincere and deep-rooted commitment to *SP*. McIver admitted that man could not "get rid of the concept of progress" which is "ineradicable from the creative strivings of life" but his conclusion that it is a vital myth and "we are of course entitled to deny the reality of progress"¹³ does not sound quite convincing. It is often contended that we cannot scientifically demonstrate the fact of *SP*. And perhaps this will not be feasible; because social causation seems to operate in such ways not always amenable to clear observation and examination. In conclusion, it needs to be reiterated that unlike evolutionary movement, *SP* is not automatic and mechanical. By the collective wisdom and efforts of the saner section of mankind

the stepping towards progress is destined to lead humanity to a brighter future.

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NOTES

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