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# UNIT 28 FUNCTIONALISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE — PARSONS

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## 28.0 OBJECTIVES

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After studying this unit you will be able to

- explain Parsons concept of functionalism
- discuss the relationship between functionalism and social change
- describe the changes within social systems
- outline the changes of social systems or the evolutionary universals given by Parsons.

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## 28.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous unit (Unit 27) you have learnt about the concept of the social system, given by Talcott Parsons. In this unit we shall explain to you his concept of functionalism and social change. Parsons described two types of social change; one kind of social change is within the social system and the other kind is when social systems change as a whole. We shall describe both these varieties of social changes in the following pages.

Section 28.2 explains Parsons' concept of functionalism, and section 28.3 the relationship between functionalism and social change. In section 28.4 changes within social systems are discussed while section 28.5 describes the changes of whole social systems: Parsons' notion of **evolutionary universals**.

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## 28.2 PARSONS' CONCEPT OF FUNCTIONALISM

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In Parsons' view the stability of a social system is maintained not only through the rules and regulations that society imposed upon its members or through other measures of social control that state enforces upon its citizens but in a more enduring manner, by the internalisation of socially approved values, expected behaviour patterns and codes of social existence. This internalisation takes place in society through the process of socialisation of its members. Child learns from his/her environment in the family and neighbourhood both the expected and prohibited norms and values with respect to different social institutions and social roles. Later on as the person grows older, the school, the college and work-place make the person learn and imbibe other sets of social values and expected behaviour patterns.

Recall from the past exercise Parsons' concept of, the functional prerequisites of a social system. These functional prerequisites are adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency, which are all necessary responses, in Parsons' view for the existence and survival of any social system. The institutions and processes, which serve to maintain the existence of the system, are considered to be functional for the system by Talcott Parsons.

Functionalism represents the viewpoint that all social systems invariably possess the tendency to evolve and integrate such processes and institutions as elements (parts) of the system, which help in its own self-maintenance. Social systems are basically oriented to evolving such units as components of their form, be it in the shape of processes (such as, in Parsons' understanding, adaptation, goal-attainment, integration and latency) or as social institutions, such as government, economy, schools, courts, etc. all of which serve to maintain the system as if on purpose. The term **teleology** refers to this purposiveness of institutions. Teleology is thus an essential characteristic of functionalism. It is based on an analogy with the organic system, for instance the human body. In the human body, processes such as respiration, blood circulation, maintenance of a constant temperature, etc., are intended to maintain the health of the body. As such these processes are Ideological or purposive in nature. Simply stated, teleology is any explanation, which is in terms of the final cause or purpose. For example it would be teleological to argue that fruits and seeds exist so that animal and birds can eat them in order to live; or that the function of the long tail of monkeys is to help them jump easily from tree to tree. (See Box 28.1 for teleology as a criticism of functionalism.)

### **Box 28.1 Teleology**

Besides several criticisms of functionalism, its teleological nature is its logical criticism. As you know, teleology is the explanation for the existence of a process or institution or any object or idea in terms of the purpose it fulfils. Thus, according to this explanation the effect is treated as the cause. This is the principal objection to the functionalist theory. For example, according to this theory, religion exists in societies in order to uphold the moral order of societies. Here the effect of religion

has been used to explain the cause, i.e, the moral order (see Cohen, Percy 1968, Chapter 3 for detailed criticism of functionalism).

Why is the teleological nature of functionalism its logical criticism? It is a logical criticism because how can an effect which comes later explain the cause which precedes the effect. It defies the laws of logic. It is like saying that A factor produces B, therefore, the occurrence of B must explain A. However, sociologists belonging to the functionalist school of thought, such as Durkheim were aware of these flaws in functionalism and made attempts to overcome them.

The vital functions of the human body have the purpose of maintaining the survival of the body, and if any foreign infection threatens the body, its internal system reacts to save it from such invasions and continues to do so until the threat has been neutralised. There is a self-regulatory role that such processes play in human body. It is called **homeostasis**.

Functionalism implies that social systems bear resemblance to organic systems such as the human body. The processes and institutions in social systems and the human body possess self-regulatory mechanisms that keep them stable and save it from external threats. A stability of this sort is called homeostasis. But unlike the human body however, which has a universality for all species of human kind, the social systems are historical products. Parsons acknowledges the enormous variations in the forms and styles of social systems. This is ensured by the plasticity of human infant, which unlike other animal species does not grow up with a limited general traits of behaviour. The child learns different languages, conforms to different sets of cultural values and behaviour patterns of the group of society in which he/she is born. The child also has the unlimited capacity to learn new languages, cultural styles, etc; depending on what it is exposed to. Human beings are not born with pre-determinate instinctive traits like other animals are. The socialisation process of the human child and its personality system maintain the stability and integration of the social system through the internalisation of values and ways of social behaviour that the social system approves. In addition human beings not only learn from culture and society but also create new forms of culture and integrate them within pre-existing patterns.

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### 28.3 FUNCTIONALISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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The above characteristics of functionalism might give us an impression that it only has to do with continuity and self-maintenance of the social system, and that it does not have a view of social change. In fact, there are many sociologists who have criticised functionalism only for this reason and argued that functionalism over-emphasises only those features of a social system which bring about stability of continuity. They also accuse functionalism for assuming a large measure of agreement or consensus in a society on its core values, beliefs and behaviour patterns or opinions about social issues. This Criticism is based on the-functionalist position that members of a social system are socialised from childhood onwards to a common set of beliefs and values, which are specific to that society.

Talcott Parsons did not deny the element of value consensus and stability in a social system that results from the functional processes of the systems concerned. But he also visualised the possibilities of social change. This results from the specific nature of individual social systems as well as from the very nature of the motivational orientations, which organise action systems of members in a society. The first links social systems to its external boundary conditions, such as ecology, resources, physical and environmental conditions as well as to historical factors such as cultural contacts, **diffusion** of ideas and interests and to social strains arising out of these historical factors. The second relates it to motivational elements in action systems, which are essentially directional in nature. The direction of orientation of motives and values generates harmony as well as strain in the social system. The first leads to stability, the second to change. Parsons viewed social change at two levels, firstly, change which emerges from processes within the social system, and secondly, the processes of change of the social system itself.

According to Parsons social sciences have yet to formulate a general theory of social change which can take into account both these aspects of social change. But sociology can approach the problem of social change if it delimits its analysis in two respects, first, change must be studied with the help of a set of conceptual categories or paradigms. The conceptual categories that Parsons puts forward for such analyses of change are those of motivational and value orientation, as well as those that relate to the functional prerequisites of the system. (In section 27.6 of Unit 27 of this block, you had been introduced to them.) Second, social change, according to Parsons, must be studied at a specific historical level rather than in a general form applicable universally to all societies. Parsons, therefore, held the view that for sociologists it is relatively easier to study processes of change within the social system than processes of changes of the social system as a whole.

Parsons' main contributions relate to studies of changes within the social systems in varying specific situations, but he had also attempted to analyse changes of whole social systems with the help of the concept of "evolutionary universals" which he formulated later in his career. We shall be studying Parsons' contributions to processes of social change at both these levels.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- i) Define the concept of functionalism using about four lines.

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- ii) What is meant by teleology? Discuss using three lines.

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iii) Fill in the blanks

- a) Unlike the human body, which has universality for all species of human kind, the social systems are ..... products.
- b) The direction of orientation of motives and values generates ..... as well as ..... in the social system. The first leads to stability and the second to .....

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## 28.4 CHANGES WITHIN SOCIAL SYSTEMS

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Elements of functionalism are clearly evident in Parsons' explanation of social changes that takes place within social systems. He drew an analogy between the changes in biological life cycles and changes within social systems, although he qualified this analogy by saying that unlike the organic or biological systems, social systems are governed to a large extent by cultural factors which transcend biology. Nevertheless, the processes of growth, differentiation, the tendency towards self-maintenance that we witness operating in the processes of change within biological systems to a large extent also operate within the social system. In addition social systems also undergo changes from within due to cultural innovations within the system, contact with other cultures and diffusion of new values and styles of living.

A primary factor related to processes of change within the social system is increase in population, its density and aggregation. It has been observed historically that major social systems, such as large communities, cities and organised forms of polity emerged in the past near river valleys and fertile lands where production of food could be harnessed in larger quantities. This increase in food production contributed to a growth of population and for other major changes within the social system, such as the division of labour, emergence of urban centres, and more complex form of social organisations such as caste in India and guild in Europe. According to Parsons these changes did not come about smoothly but almost invariably through the need for re-establishing equilibrium in the system. This re-establishing of equilibrium was required due to strains in relationships between past and present patterns of relationship, values and interests. Parsons says, "change is never just alteration of pattern but alteration by the overcoming of resistance". By overcoming of resistance, Parsons meant the resolution of strain or conflict in the social system.

Each social system, according to Parsons, develops a vested interest or interests of different kinds over a period of time as it integrates itself in accordance with its functional prerequisites (adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency). But the demands of new ideas from within, need for changes in technology or the mere pressure of external factors on the system, such as changes in climate, ecology or pestilence, etc., force social systems to shed pre-existing vested interests and give way to accepting new modes of thinking; to new ideas, technology, patterns of work, division of labour, and so on. These contribute to disturbances in the older mode of equilibrium and to its replacement by a new equilibrium in the social system.

Between these two points of time a long drawn process of adaptation takes place in social systems by which new ideas, new ways of doing things are made acceptable to people. Parsons calls this process, the process of institutionalisation. New roles, new types of organisations, new “cultural configurations” such as the development of science or of religious ideas, impinge, or put strain, upon existent modes of equilibrium in the social system. The impingement of the new upon the old elements of the social organisation generates strains and conflicts with established vested interests. Parsons does not place the responsibility for causing social strain on any one factor; there is no ‘prime mover’ as such in the making of social change. The fact of social strain, however, represents a point of social development at which the older balance of interaction systems, institutions and structures of the system (roles, statuses, occupations etc.) is destabilised and the tendency towards a new equilibrium begins.

#### **28.4.0 Factors Causing Strain Towards Change**

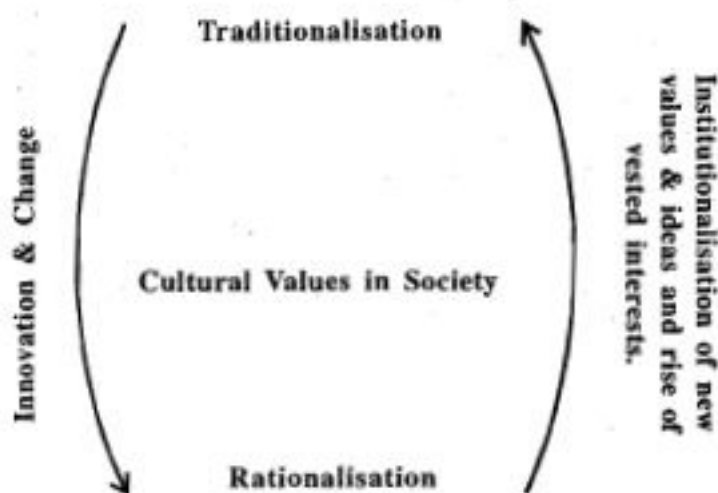
Parsons mentioned several factors, which contribute towards the building up of strain in social systems, which bring about the need to establish a new equilibrium. Some of these factors are

- i) Changes in the demographic character of population through migration, racial intermixture (intermarriages), as well as changes in the mortality and fertility rates of the population. All of these factors affect the nature of social configuration.
- ii) Changes in the physical environment, such as exhaustion of physical resources (soil, water, weather conditions etc.) may also contribute to strain and change in the social system.
- iii) Changes in population resulting from increased productivity of food and availability of resources for members within a social system.
- iv) Changes in technology and application of scientific knowledge for the advancement of society, and finally
- v) Development of new “cultural configuration” such as new religious ideas, or the integration of religious values with science and technology might also trigger changes in the social system. Parsons held the view that these factors are not exhaustive but merely illustrative in order to indicate that they do not act individually but in a state of “interdependent plurality”. Or, in other words many factors and some may have escaped mention above, act interdependently, to bring about changes within the social system.

Cultural factors bring about changes within the social system through a continuous process of “**rationalisation**” and “**traditionalisation**” of values and beliefs. Parsons used the concept of “rationalisation” to mean, as it did for Weber, a process of progressive growth of rational, individualistic and innovative attitudes towards work, personal commitments and social institutions in general. It also includes an increase in legal and formal methods of allocation of responsibilities in place of custom or tradition or personal whims of people in authority such as the king, the priest or the potentate. But while the rationalisation process works there is also a

tendency in social systems to render its values stable, and thus institutionalise them over a period of time. This gives birth to the rise of vested interests. These vested interests emphasise preservation of these values irrespective of changing situations. When this happens the rational values tend to become traditionalised. Cultural values in society or in social systems continually undergo these processes of rationalisation and traditionalisation and again further rationalisation leading to traditionalisation, and so on in a cyclical process.

**Cultural factors which bring about change within social systems**



**Figure 28.1 Changes within Social Systems: An Example**

Parsons illustrated the processes of social change within the social system by drawing examples from the family system. The family undergoes changes inherently through the life cycle of the persons who are its members. The processes of birth, maturation, adulthood, old age and death are internal to the family system, each giving rise to social consequences which call for change and new adjustment in family roles, occupation, authority, status, as well as values and beliefs of its members. The mechanism by which the child is socialised is crucial to this process of continuity and change in the family. It engrains values of the system in the personality of the child, but as the child grows older other values are imbibed from the larger systems of society. The new roles and expectations in adult life may not always harmonise with those of the child, and family system has thus an inbuilt process of both stability and change.

**Activity 1**

Think carefully about the social roles you perform in your family. Now compare these roles with the ones you performed in your family when you were a child.

Write a note of one page on the changes in your roles and role expectations (i.e. what you think the others in your family expected from you) as a member of your family. Compare, if possible, your note with the notes of other students at your Study Centre

These changes are best illustrated through the study of the family cycle. One aspect of this cycle relates to changes in the role of the child in the process of biological growth. This puts strain on his or her personality for at each stage in the changing biological cycle of the person (for example, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age) the role expectations also change. New educational and cultural values need to be imbibed in place of the older ones. The biological process of socialisation is however not without strain because change from one phase of life of a person to another involves resistance and anxiety. It gives expression to new defense mechanisms to preserve the old in place of learning new roles and new values. The process of socialisation and education therefore always involves manipulation of role expectations through rewards and punishments. In early childhood parents perform this role and in later life social system offers its own structure of social sanctions to bring about conformity with expected roles.

The second aspect of the family cycle is structural in nature. It is determined by changes in the size of the family. Families, which were nuclear become joint with the increase in membership. The size of family may be governed by factors both internal and external to the system. The external factors may have to do with economic resources, wealth and property or mode of occupation. The internal factors are governed by the reproduction rate and sex ratio. These two factors are interrelated.

#### **28.4.1 Social Movement and Social Change**

Parsons discussed social change within the social system at two levels

- i) At the first level Parsons analysed social change as it occurs through role differentiation, socialisation and institutionalisation processes and their attendant strains (recall our earlier illustrations from the family system). Changes of this type are slow, continual and inherently adaptive in nature. The chain of processes involved in this type of social change are, innovation or rationalisation, institutionalisation of innovation, development of vested interest around new institutional adaptations, and finally, traditionalisation of innovation. This is an ongoing process of adaptive social change.
- ii) The second level is social change through “revolutionary” movements. This type of social change results from “revolutionary” movements which brings about a sudden alteration or change in the balance or equilibrium of the social system. He gave the examples of Communist and Nazi movements to illustrate this kind of change. Parsons held that broadly four types of conditions must prevail before such movements could spread widely and gain supremacy in the social system.

These conditions are,

- 1) The presence of widely spread and distributed alienative motivations among the people. In other words, a large section of population must feel disenchanting with the existing system.



- 2) The emergence of the organisation of a deviant (or alternative counter) subculture. In other words, the presence of a counter ideology which departs radically from the existing one. This helps a large population of members of the social system to evade the sanctions of the existing social system or even to challenge it openly.
- 3) This results into the third condition of success of a revolutionary social movement, that is, the development of an ideology, a set of beliefs, which could be successfully put forward and claim legitimacy for its values, symbols and institutional structures.
- 4) Finally, the fourth condition for such social movement is the organisation of a power system with particular reference to the state to support and legitimise the ideology of the new movement and give it an operative shape. The success of the Communist Movement both in Soviet Russia and China illustrates historically the existence and validity of the above four conditions.

A major consequence of revolutionary social movements in terms of social change is that it sets in motion adaptive transformations in the social system. This is because most revolutionary ideologies according to Talcott Parsons have good deal of the Utopian (idealistic) element in them. When these values are subjected to implementation there follows “a process of concession” to development of adaptive structures. The more radical the ideology the more difficult is the evolution of such adaptive structures. Instead there is a compulsive tendency towards orthodoxy. For instance, in the Communist movement, the institution of the family was characterised as a “bourgeois prejudice”, or property system, in terms of private ownership was declared as evil. But to do away with both these institutions in actual practice proved impracticable. There is thus a tension in revolutionary ideology between belief and practicality.

Secondly, all revolutionary movements, according to Parsons, involve a degree of ambivalence in structures, such as between class and egalitarianism in Communist movement. Moreover, in most such movements there is a tendency among the followers to gratify or satisfy their own repressed need-dispositions as the system is no longer “theirs”, but “ours”. A sense of command over the system contributes to the tendency towards personal or collective self-gratification among the leadership. This in course of time mitigates the radical nature of the revolutionary social movement. Finally, as time moves on a movement which began on a revolutionary plank slowly moves towards “orthodoxy”. There is a tendency thus to socialise members into patterns of conformity in the same manner as the pre-revolutionary society did. This contributes to the system’s stability and is no different from any other normal stable social system. Thus, Parsons believed that even revolutionary social movements which claim radical social transformation in the social system ultimately undergo the process of adaptive change consistent with the needs of system stability. Such revolutionary movements begin with heterodoxy and end up in orthodoxy.

## Check Your Progress 2

- i) In what way is population a primary factor in bringing about change within a social system? Discuss using about six lines.

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- ii) List the factors, which contribute towards building up of strain in social systems leading to a new equilibrium. Use about eleven lines.

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- iii) Tick (✓) the correct statement.

- a) Rationalisation is the process in which new values, beliefs, attitudes, etc. get institutionalised.
- h) Rationalisation is the process of progressive growth of rational, individualistic and innovative attitude towards work, personal commitments and social institutions
- c) Rationalisation is the process whereby individuals internalise the values, beliefs and customs of their society

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## 28.5 CHANGES OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS: EVOLUTIONARY UNIVERSALS

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You have so far learned about Parsons's views on social change as enunciated mainly in his early work *The Social System* (1951). In his later

writings particularly. *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (1966), *The Sociological Theory and Modern Sociology* (1967), *The System of Modern Societies* (1971) and *The Evolution of Societies* (1977), Talcott Parsons contributed substantially to an evolutionary theory of social change. His approach to social change, however, remained primarily functional, that is, he still considered all processes of change emanating from strains towards differentiation and adaptation to be system maintaining in the longer time scale. But he introduced two new factors.

- i) First, he postulated the concept of “evolutionary universals”. By this he meant to say that despite the specific historical particularities of each social system or society (because of its boundedness in its own culture and material environment), if one looked at societies in a longer time scale there were some general directions of evolution through which societies tend to evolve. Parsons called the direction and nature of this historical process of social evolution of all societies “evolutionary universals”.
- ii) The second main departure in Parsons’ views on social change during this period can be noticed in his emphasis on historical and comparative analysis of major types of evolutionary stages of social systems at a global level. Through this exercise he offered a comparative treatment of societies ranging from the primitive to the modern industrial society.

The evolutionary typologies of societies are described by Parsons in the following terms.

### **28.5.0 Primitive or Archaic Societies**

These societies are the most elementary in terms of social organisation. According to Parsons in order that any human society may exist they must have

- i) elementary forms of economy taking care of procurement for the survival of human beings (main forms being food gathering, hunting, animal husbandry and cultivation)
- ii) they must also possess elementary technology through which production of food, shelter, protection from environment and other dangers could be ensured
- iii) they should also have some means of speech or mechanism of communication through which social solidarity from the family to the community level could be established and social organisations could be managed and
- iv) some form of belief system (animism, animalism or magic and religion etc.) through which cultural and expressive motivations of people could be socially galvanised and integrated must also be present. Finally,
- v) an elementary form of political organisation is also necessary for the functioning of these types of societies. The political system may be very simple, such as that of tribal chiefdoms or control by community’s collective rules, but its presence is necessary for the integrative existence of the society.

The process of social evolution could proceed forward through either collective movement in the direction of growth in the above five factors or it could emanate primarily from any one of these social institutions. For instance, it could well be that in a particular primitive society the innovations in technology revolutionises the economy or the food production capacity of the community. Thus it could be possible for this society to sustain a much larger population. The increase in population triggers the process of social differentiation and brings into existence new strains or tensions for adaptation and integration. In yet another society, the primary impulse for change might come from the belief system, where the magical or religious outlook of the people may inspire them to explore new opportunities for economic and technological advancement. Parsons related the process of social change to two main sources of adaptive tensions existent in human societies, firstly, the existential or the material, and, secondly, the symbolic or the cultural. His own emphasis was on the primary causative impulse of symbolic or cultural institutions in societies. This is in line with Max Weber's work on the role of the Protestant Ethic in the rise of capitalism. But in general terms, both these factors, i.e., the existential and symbolic, mutually reinforce one another in most social systems undergoing social change.

### **28.5.1 Intermediate Societies**

Following the primitive stage, the second evolutionary universal stage according to Parsons is that of the intermediate type of society. This type of society results from the pressure for social differentiation. One most common form of such pressure for differentiation in social systems, according to Parsons, is that of population increase. This changes the size and composition of society. The nature of differentiation in societies like those in the organic system such as the cellular structure within the body is that of binary division that is, in which units divide into two. Following this analogy with the organic system. Parsons argued that with the pressure of population growth there is division of human settlements on binary lines between town and village. This division further brings about occupational differentiations and many types of occupations not related to agriculture emerge. This is because the growth of towns and cities also brings into existence new classes of people who control surpluses of wealth, have more power and social status, and also those who are artisans, craftsmen, people in literary and priestly professions, businessmen, warriors, etc. The primitive or tribal society is generally a society without division between classes or castes. The leaders in this society might enjoy some prerogatives, which are mainly honorific and entail no major differences in consumption pattern or life style.

In the second phase of evolution social differentiation on class lines or as in India, on caste lines, evolves. This type of growth in the nature of the social system also necessitates new rules for the administration of society. As in the past merely customs are not sufficient for the management of societies at this stage. So, more generalised rules and legal norms are codified, often in written form, for the governance of society. In this phase the political system takes on a more systematised form, such as those of feudalism and monarchy. But the two basic new institutions which constitute

the distinctive character of societies in the intermediate stage of evolution, according to Parsons are (i) emergence of an elaborate and complex system of social stratification and (ii) the emergence of generalised norms for the social control of society.

The examples of these types of societies according to Parsons are China, India, the Islamic empires and the Roman empire. But apart from these historical examples, most social systems undergo this process of evolution due to their need to be adaptive, and because of social differentiation. In the primitive society the examples of adaptive change can be drawn from several specific instances. The cultural or symbolic source of initiation of processes of change has been reported among many Indian tribal societies such as the Mundas and Birhors of Bihar through the emergence of messianic movement or *Devi* movement. The goddess appears in the dream of some tribal leader(s) and requires of him or her to implement many social reforms in the conduct of people. Often such reforms are necessary even otherwise to combat the forces threatening the vital interests of the tribal community. May be these reforms emanate from hostile nature or from the presence of other hostile communities or classes outside. Illustrations of innovative new technologies to improve the productive capacity of society are indeed numerous in many simpler societies. As a matter of fact the technology of seeding and ploughing were very novel when they were first introduced many thousand years ago.

### 28.5.2 Modern Societies

The third stage in the process of evolution of societies according to Parsons, was that of the modern social systems. These types of societies evolved from the intermediate stage of evolution (which could also be called the pre-industrial stage of societies) through the development of a number of social institutions. Technology, of course, played an important role in this process. But all this was possible because of three types of revolutions that the Western (European) society went through. These revolutions according to Parsons, were uniquely Western contribution to humanity. That is why he also held the view that the development of the modern stage of society is an entirely Western contribution, and no other civilisation, such as India or China, from the Eastern hemisphere took a lead in this direction.

This scale of change was possible in the West (Europe) because of three revolutions, (i) industrial revolution (ii) democratic revolution led by the French Revolution and (iii) educational revolution. The industrial revolution in Europe which you have already learnt about in Unit 1, Block 1 of this course (ESO-13) was caused by technological revolutions through invention of steam and electrical sources of energy. This brought about radical changes in transport, navigation, commerce, the production system and its market. Factories emerged where instead of animal power, which was the main source of energy during the intermediate stage of societal evolution, steam and electrical energy sources were used on a large scale.

The factory mode of production contributed to urban and industrial growth and increased the role of science and technology in economic and social affairs of society, providing thus a continuing element of development.

This industrial revolution both coincided with and contributed to the strengthening of the democratic revolution in Europe. The French Revolution particularly ushered in the values of equality, universal brotherhood, liberty and set the pace for the abolition of kingship and replaced it by the democratic process of elected government. In England also the reformation and political movement took away the authoritarian powers of the king and transferred it to the people's elected representative.

The democratic movement had a revolutionary consequence for the emergence of a new system of society in which not birth related status and power but acquired individual merit governed the place of individual in the power and prestige scale of society. Together with industrial revolution it set in motion a process of social mobility which ensured greater participation and egalitarianism in matters of access to opportunities. But this was largely possible through the third revolutionary development, in European society, that of education.

The educational revolution in Europe resulted primarily from the separation of education from the Church and its progressive secularisation and universalisation. The emergence of university systems of education where both teaching and research could be conducted allowed the pursuit of knowledge to take place free from any religious or sectarian presumptions. This was a great social and cultural movement in the life of the European society. It liberated the production and communication of knowledge from sectarian control and made it available to the entire society, or humanity, without any favour or prejudice. Similarly, the universalisation of elementary education strengthened the foundations of higher education in Western society. This reinforced the democratic and industrial institutions of those societies. The industrial, the democratic, and the educational revolutions were thus, according to Parsons, a unique contribution of the West to humanity.

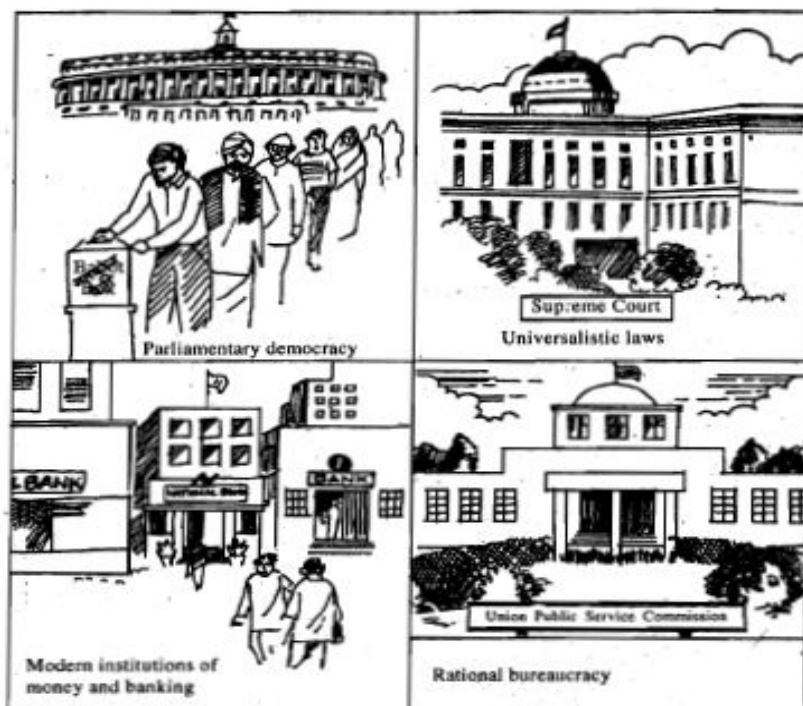
### **Activity 2**

Read the section on Changes of social systems: Evolutionary universals carefully. Now keeping the different characteristics of the three types of evolutionary universals described by Parsons in mind, write a note of one page on the stage of evolutionary development you find in society in India at present. State the type in which you will place Indian society.

Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

Following the impact of these three types of revolutions the modern system of society emerged. Its main features in Parsons views are:

- i) the growth of universalistic laws
- ii) the evolution of modern institutions of money and banking
- iii) the institution of rational bureaucracy and
- iv) the growth of democratic society.



**Figure 28.2: Features of a Modern Society**

According to Parsons, for a society to qualify as a modern society these institutional prerequisites or pre-conditions have to be met. The universalistic laws are based on universal brotherhood and freedom of human kind. It makes for the rational and uniform application of law to all human beings without favour or prejudice based on faith, colour, birth, etc. A major feature of these universalistic legal norms is the emergence of the concept of “fundamental rights” or civic rights, available to all human beings in the society. This protects an individual from the arbitrary application of state power. Similarly, the invention of money and banking rationalises the scope of trade and commerce and makes it truly global in character. One can talk about the world market rather than a city or town market. These also intensify and widen the scope of industrial and economic activities of society. The role of a rational bureaucracy is most crucial in this process. Rational bureaucracy is a concept, which was first introduced by Max Weber. It means among other things, the selection of executive or government officials on the basis of merit through examination, and the precise allocation of responsibilities and legal accountability in the realms of official duty. It also safeguards the bureaucrat from the wielders of political or economic power in the event of the latter trying to misuse their authority. Rational bureaucracy thus, is an essential institutional requirement for the implementation of public policy, for it invokes the principles of equality, universality and justice.

But Parsons also held the view that even after a society has achieved great heights in the spheres of money and banking or bureaucratic rationality it cannot yet claim to be a modern society without the institution of democracy. By democracy he meant the freedom of participation in political processes of society by contending groups of political parties with multiple and contradictory ideologies. Without such a democracy the institutions of universalistic legal norms, or rational bureaucracy might exist only in form but not in substance. Parsons also felt that as soon as a society begins to develop other social attributes of modernisation a time comes when the

pressure for real democratic reform mounts. Therefore, modern social systems are ultimately democratic in nature.

It was assumed by Parsons that in spite of historical gaps and unevenness in the process of evolutionary social change all societies would achieve the level of a modern system of society. All of them would go through the institutionalisation of “evolutionary universals”, and in due course of time would establish universalistic legal norms, money and banking, rational bureaucracy, and finally, democracy.

### Check Your Progress 3

- i) Describe what is meant by Evolutionary Universals using about five lines
- ii) In the evolution of modern societies, three types of revolutions played a major role. Name them using about five lines.
- iii) List the major features of a modern system of society described by Parsons. Use about five lines.

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## 28.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit you have learnt about Talcott Parsons’ concept of functionalism. The relationship between functionalism and social change has been described in some detail. Then you learnt about the two main types of social change described by Parsons. First, were changes within social systems, and the second, of changes of social systems. He has described the latter through his concept of evolutionary universals. He has classified the evolution of societies into three categories, the primitive or **archaic**, the intermediate societies, and the modern.

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## 28.7 KEYWORDS

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<b>Archaic</b>	Any society which is antiquated or old fashioned
<b>Diffusion</b>	The spread of cultural items, objects and ideas through contact between different cultures.
<b>Evolutionary Universals</b>	When social systems are viewed in a longer time scale some general directions of evolutionary developments are observed. The direction and nature of this historical process of evolution is called Evolutionary Universal.
<b>Homeostasis</b>	The vital functions which the different organs, such as the respiratory, digestive, etc. perform in the human body leading to its survival and maintenance. This self-regulatory process of the body is called homeostasis.



<b>Rationalisation</b>	It is the process by which rational, individualistic and innovative attitude towards work, personal commitments and social institutions develop.
<b>Teleology</b>	It is the explanation for the existence of a process or institution or any object or ideas in terms of the purpose it fulfils, such as, to say that we eat to live, we are giving the purpose for eating.
<b>Traditionalisation</b>	It is the process by which the values, beliefs, ideas, attitudes, etc. became institutionalised in societies leading to the rise of vested interest(s) in maintaining them.

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## 28.8 FURTHER READING

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Hamilton, Peter, 1983. *Talcott Parsons*. Routledge: London and New York

Parsons, Talcott. 1966. *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*. Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Parsons, Talcott, 1977. *The Evolution of Societies*. (Ed. with an introduction, by Jackson Toby). Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs

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## 28.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Functionalism is an approach which views all social systems as having elements or parts such as processes and institutions which operate leading thereby to the maintenance and survival of the system. This approach is influenced deeply by the biological sciences and draws an analogy between organisms and society.
- ii) Teleology is the belief that the purpose of the existence of an institution or a process is that it fulfils a necessary function, which maintains the survival of the social system. This belief is central to the functionalist theory.
- iii) a) historical  
b) harmony, strain, change.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) Population is a primary factor in bringing about change within a social system because with the increase of population social differentiation, i.e., division of labour, occurs. People do different functions in order to produce more. Growing command over food resources and production technology leads to increasing complexity of the social

system. This is proved historically in the development of caste system in India or the guild system in Europe.

- ii) Factors, which contribute towards the increase of strain in a social system, are
  - a) When the demographic constitution of a population changes through migration, social intermixture, etc.
  - b) When the physical environment such as, the quality of soil, water, weather, etc. deteriorates, or changes.
  - c) When there is more production of food and more resources available to individuals in a social system.
  - d) When there is change in the technology used in a society and when scientific knowledge is applied for the advancement of society, and
  - e) When there is a change in “cultural configuration” which brings about new religious values, ideologies, science and technology, etc.
- iii) b)

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- i) Every social system has its own specific historical features. But in spite of this uniqueness when seen in a longer time span there are some general directions of evolution through which all social systems pass. It is the direction and nature of this historical process of evolution of societies which Parsons calls Evolutionary Universals.
- ii) In the evolution of modern societies, three types of revolutions which played a significant role are
  - a) the Industrial Revolution
  - b) the Democratic revolution lead by the French Revolution, and
  - c) the Educational revolution.
- iii) The major features of a modern social system are
  - a) growth of universalistic laws
  - b) evolution of modern institutions of money and banking
  - c) evolution of the institution of rational bureaucracy; and
  - d) the growth of a democratic society.