# UNIT 9 DIALECTICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

#### **Structure**

- 9.0 Objectives
- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 The Concept of Dialectics
- 9.3 Laws of Dialectics
  - 9.3.1 The Law of the Unity and Conflict of Opposites
  - 9.3.2 The Law of Negation of the Negation
  - 9.3.3 The Law of Transition of Quantity into Quality
- 9.4 Application of the Laws of Dialectical Materialism
  - 9.4.1 Primitive-Communal Form of Society
  - 9.4.2 Slave-Owning Society
  - 9.4.3 Feudal Society
  - 9.4.4 Capitalist Society
- 9.5 Social Change and Revolution
- 9.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 9.7 Keywords
- 9.8 Further Reading
- 9.9 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

# 9.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with **dialectics** and social change. After studying it you should be able to

- discuss the Marxian concepts of dialectics and social change
- describe the laws of dialectics
- show the application of the laws of dialectics to understand social change
- outline Marx's ideas on social change and revolution.

## 9.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units of this block, you learnt the fundamental conceptual and theoretical structure of Marxian thought on the history of development of society. After having read his specific contributions to the materialistic and scientific interpretations of human history in terms of forces of production, relations of production and modes of production one required an understanding of his ideas on class and class conflict. This understanding was rendered to you through Unit 8 on class and class conflict.

Unit 9 undertakes two major tasks: (i) to introduce the significant Marxian concept of dialectics and change and (ii) to summarise the entire conceptual and theoretical structure relating to dynamic and social change as envisaged by Karl Marx. Hence, this unit is divided in four major sections.

The first two sections (9.2 & 9.3) introduce the concept of dialectics and then discuss the laws of **dialectical materialism** and social change in a theoretical perspective.

The third section (9.4) is related to the second task of this unit, i.e., summarising the Marxian structure of thought on social change, with a major difference. This section deals with successive forms and modes of production and social change. This has been dealt in earlier units also, but here the emphasis would be on highlighting the dialectical aspect of the historical course of development of society.

The fourth section (9.5) deals briefly with Marx's ideas on social change and revolution.

# 9.2 THE CONCEPT OF DIALECTICS

The word 'dialectics' refers to a method of intellectual discussion by dialogue. It is a term of logic. According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), it referred to the art of deputation by question and answer. Before Aristotle, another Greek philosopher Plato (427-397 B.C.) developed this term in relation with his doctrine of ideas. He evolved it as the art of analysing ideas in themselves and in relation to the idea of ultimate good. Even before Plato, yet another Greek philosopher Socrates (470-390 B.C.) used this term to examine the presuppositions at the back of all sciences. Until the end of the middle ages, this term remained a part of logic. Carrying the same tradition of treating this term as reason, in modern philosophy of Europe, the word was used by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) to discuss the impossibility of applying to objects of a nonsensuous understanding the principles which are found to govern phenomena of sense-experience.

There is one more strand in the meaning of the term dialectics. It is the idea of dialectics as a process. This means the dialectics is a process of reason in ascending and descending forms. In ascending form of dialectics, one is able to demonstrate the existence of a higher reality, e.g., the forms of God. In descending form of dialectics, one is able to explain the manifestation of a higher reality in the phenomenal world of sense-experience.

In order to understand how Karl Marx made use of the term 'dialectics', we need to remember that Marx evolved his concept of dialectical materialism on the basis of his critique of the German philosopher Hegel's theories of idealism. Hopefully you remember that Hegel was introduced to you in Box 6.1 of Unit 6 as an idealist philosopher who saw reality as consisting in minds or ideas. You may once again read about him in Boxes 6.1 and 6.2.

Dialectics and Social Change

Hegel combined the two strands of dialectic, i.e., the idea of dialectic as reason and as process. In broad sense, he used the notion of dialectics as a logical process and more narrowly he traced it as the generator or motor of the logical process. Hegel maintained that God or the Absolute comes to self-knowledge through human knowledge. In other words, the categories of human thought are equal to objective forms of being and logic is at the same time the theory about the nature of being. Further, Hegel proposed that dialectics can be conceived more narrowly as grasping of opposites in their unity. Hegel saw it as a process which brings out what is implicit. In this way, each development is a product of a previous less developed phase. In a way new development is a fulfilment of the previous state. Thus there is always a hidden tension between a form and its process of becoming a new form. Hegel interpreted history as progress in the consciousness of freedom (See Box 6.2).

Marx was initially influenced by Hegel's philosophy but later on he criticised it due to its idealist nature and propounded his own dialectical materialism. Marx criticised Hegel for deducing the laws of dialectics from consciousness instead of material existence. On this point Marx said that to get a scientifically sound dialectical method one will have to totally invert the logic of Hegelian dialectics. This is what Marx did in his dialectical materialism, where in contradistinction to Hegel, he said it is the matter which is supreme and determinant of consciousness and idea and not vice-versa.

Let us now discuss Marxian concepts and laws of dialectical materialism. But before you go on to the next section, complete Activity 1.

### **Activity 1**

Compile a bibliography of books by Marx on the basis of references to them in this block. Compare it with the list of references under Marx, given at the end of this block. Remember that while making a bibliography, you need to state (i) name of the author of the book, (ii) year of publication of the book, (iii) full title of the book, (iv) place of publication of the book and (v) name of the publisher of the book. Without any one of these details, a reference is considered incomplete.

### 9.3 LAWS OF DIALECTICS

Dialectical materialism evolved by Marx is diametrically opposite to Hegelian dialectics. It seeks to explain everything in terms of contradictions of matter. Dialectical materialism provides abstract laws for natural and social change. Contrary to metaphysics, it believes that in Nature, things are interconnected, interrelated and determined by each other. It considers Nature as an integral whole. Dialectical materialism declares that the law of reality is the law of change. There is constant transformation in inorganic nature and human world. There is nothing eternally static. These transformations are not gradual but there is a violent, revolutionary shift. Marx's colleague Friedrich Engels put forward the following three major laws of dialectical materialism.

# 9.3.1 The Law of the Unity and Conflict of Opposites

We have studied that everything changes, we have also learnt about the nature and direction of change, but what remains to be seen is the cause behind change. What leads to change? The law of the unity and conflict of opposites is the core of dialectics. This law reveals the sources, the real causes of the eternal motion and development of the material world.

It states that there are internal sides, tendencies, forces of an object or phenomena, which are mutually exclusive but at the same time presuppose each other. The inseparable interconnections of these opposite tendencies or contradictions is responsible for the unity of opposites. This contradictoriness of objects and phenomena of the world is of a general, universal nature. There is no object or phenomenon in the world which could not be divided into opposites. These opposites coexist and one is inconceivable without the other. However, these opposites cannot coexist peacefully in one object: the contradictory, mutually exclusive character of opposites necessarily causes a struggle between them. The old and the new, the emergent and the obsolete must come into conflict. Here it is important to note that the unity of opposites is a necessary condition of the conflict, because it takes place only where opposite sides exist in one object or phenomenon. It is the contradiction, the conflict of opposites that is the main source of development of matter and consciousness. Development is the struggle of these opposites. Here, more often than not one opposite or tendency of the two tries to maintain the status quo and the other counterpart tries to radically change the status quo. This conflict leads to a new situation, object, phenomenon or stage or development, when the mature conditions come into existence after several quantitative changes. This radical change is the qualitative change. This is how one can find the logical interconnections between these three laws of dialectical materialism.

It would be erroneous to ignore the role of external influences which may help or hinder one form of movement or another. Nevertheless, each movement takes its source from internal contradictions, so that the emergence of new contradictions gives rise to a new form of movement, while their disappearance gives place to another form of movement for which other contradictions are responsible. The opposites can never become balanced completely. The unity, the equal effect of opposites, is temporary and relative, whereas their conflict is eternal.

Both the laws of transition from quantitative changes to qualitative changes and that of **negation** of the negation may be regarded as particular instances of the law of unity and conflict of opposites, which reveals the sources of all development and change.

This abstract law of the unity and conflict of opposites can be explained and understood if applied to successive modes of production in the history of development of society.

# 9.3.2 The Law of Negation of the Negation

The term 'negation' was introduced in philosophy by Hegel but with an idealist meaning. Hegel believed that the negation was present in the development of the idea, of thought. Marx criticised Hegel and gave a

Dialectics and Social Change

meterialistic interpretation of negation. He showed that negation is an integral part of development of reality itself. Marx wrote, "In no sphere can one undergo a development without negating one's previous mode of existence."

Let us explain it. For example, the development of the earth's crust has undergone a number of geological eras, each new era, arising on the basis of the preceding one, represents a certain negation of the old. In animal world also, each new species of animal, arising on the basis of the old, at the same time represents its negation. The history of society also consists of a chain of negations of the old social order by the new: as Raymond Aron (1965) puts it, capitalism is the negation of feudal society, and socialism would be the negation of capitalism i.e. **negation of negation.** In the realm of knowledge and science also, each new scientific theory negates the old theories, for example, Bohn's theory of atom negated Dalton's molecular theory or Darwin's theory negated earlier speculations about human evolution.

Here one thing should be kept in mind. Negation is not something introduced into an object or phenomenon from outside, but is the result of the object's or phenomenon's own, internal development. Objects and phenomena develop on the basis of their own inherent, internal contradictions: they themselves create the conditions for their destruction, for the change into a new, higher quality. Negation is the overcoming of the old through internal contradictions, a result of self-development, self-movement of objects and phenomena. Thus, socialism comes to take the place of capitalism because it resolves the internal contradictions of the capitalist system.

Dialectical negation, therefore, consists of the fact that something of a stage which is negated is lost, something becomes part of the new, negating stages (although in a modified form), and something entirely new is added. Thus, recognition of continuity, the connection of the new and the old in development is a feature of the Marxist understanding of negation. But we must bear in mind that the new never takes over the old completely, as it is. It takes from the old only certain elements or aspects. This too, it does not absorb mechanically, but assimilates and transforms them in conformity with its own nature.

For example, after throwing off the colonial yoke, in India we started building a new nation. In this process, we tried to do away with all the vestiges of oppression and the institutions that blocked national development. However, we did retain the educational, legal and bureaucratic structures along with the modern infrastructure of transportation and telecommunication.

Due to these reasons, the succession of developmental stages is progressive. Although no stage is ever completely repeated, some features of earlier stages necessarily recur, although in a different form, at later stages. In this way, the old is destroyed and the new arises. This is only one of the stages of development, not to end, because development does not stop here. Anything new does not remain new forever. While developing, it prepares the prerequisites for the rise of something newer and more progressive.

When these prerequisites and conditions ripen, negation again occurs. This is a negation of the negation, that is the negation of that which itself previously overcame the old: this is replacement of the new by something newer. The result of this second negation is again negated, overcome, and so on till infinity. Development thus appears as a countless number of successive negations, as an endless replacement or overcoming of old by the new.

# 9.3.3 The Law of Transition of Quantity into Quality

In nature, everything is in a state of continuous movement and change. Certain things are arising or coming into existence whereas certain things are developing, and/or decaying and certain things are dying or going out of existence at a given time. This means a state of continuous flux. As said earlier, Marx believed that law of reality is the law of change. Now the question arises regarding the nature of change. What kind of change is this? This law responds to this particular question. According to this law, process of change is not simple or gradual but it is a product of quantitative advances which result in abstract qualitative changes at a particular moment when mature conditions are present. There is never repetition of occurrences. This change is always from lower to higher, simpler to complex, homogeneous to heterogeneous levels of reality.

Let us elaborate this point of quantitative and qualitative changes. The appearance or the birth of the new and the death or disappearance of the old can be considered as qualitative changes, philosophically as well as logically. Whereas all other changes, whereby different parts or aspects of an object become rearranged increase or diminish (while the object retains its identity) could be considered as quantitative changes. To explain and simplify it further, one could say that the qualitative changes may be of two forms: (i) something did not exist, but now it does, and (ii) something existed but now it does not. Quantitative changes, on the other hand, are infinitely diverse, e.g., larger-smaller, more/less, more often more seldom, faster-slower, warmer-colder, lighter-heavier, worse-better, poorer-richer, and so on.

In fact these quantitative changes occur continuously in every object of Nature and they reach to a limit determined by the nature of each process, after which a leap inevitably occurs. The limit beyond which continuous change is interrupted is described as measure philosophy. This leap is the qualitative change. To give a concrete example, Indian national movement for freedom was continuing for more than a century leading to continuous quantitative changes and when it reached its limit there was a leap at the midnight stroke of the clock on 15th August 1947. India was a free country. Independence from colonialism was the qualitative change. Similarly, the process of ageing in human being does not stop even for a fraction of a second. We keep getting older or in other words we keep undergoing quantitative changes and when we reach the limit prescribed by nature, we meet the qualitative change i.e. death. This example could also be applied to birth of an infant. Quantitative changes keep going on during gestation period right from the day of conception but the qualitative change occurs when the baby breaths air in this world i.e. when it is born.

Dialectics and Social Change

Hence the dialectical level or law of transition from quantity to quality and vice-versa is that continuous quantitative changes, upon attaining measure, cause abrupt qualitative changes, which in their turn determine the character of the further continuous quantitative changes.

From this law, we move on the other very significant law of dialectical materialism known as the law of negation of the negation.

#### **Check Your Progress 1**

1)	Name the laws of the dialectical materialism.
ii)	Define quantitative change, in two lines.
iii)	Define qualitative change, in three lines.

# 9.4 APPLICATION OF THE LAWS OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

The principles or laws of dialectical materialism hold good for nature, world and society alike. When these laws are applied to the history of society they take the shape of historical materialism. (We have already studied in the previous units that human society according to Marx has gone through four major modes of production viz., Asiatic, Ancient, Feudal and Capitalist. Finally these successive forms of society would reach the stage of communism, as per the predictions of Marxian theory.)

Here we shall see how the laws of dialectical materialism are applied to understand the successive forms and modes of production and hence social change.

# 9.4.1 Primitive-Communal Form of Society

This was the first, the simplest and the lowest form of mode of production. During the period of this form of mode of production, appearance of improved and also new implements, such as bows and arrows and learning to make a fire were examples of quantitative changes in terms of the laws of dialectical materialism. Even beginning of cultivation and herding were examples of similar type of changes. The extremely low level relations of production were based on cooperation and mutual help due to common,

communal ownership of means of production. These relations were conditioned by the fact that people with their primitive tools could only collectively withstand the mighty forces of nature.

Even in primitive society the productive forces developed steadily. The tools were improved and skills were gradually accumulated. The most significant development was the transition to metal tools. With the growth of productivity the communal structure of society started breaking into families. Private property arose and the family started becoming the owner of the means of production. Here the contradiction between the communal relations of production and the potential forms of exploiting classes led to the qualitative change i.e. transition into ancient mode of production. There was conflict of opposites within the system which led to the negation of primitive-communal system. Consequently, a new stage of slavery appeared. The slavery system can be described as the negation of primitive communal system.

## 9.4.2 Slave-Owning Society

In this form of society the primitive equality gave way to social inequality and emergence of slave-owning classes and slaves. The forces of production underwent further quantitative changes. In the slave-owning society, the relations of production were based on the slave-owner's absolute ownership of both the means of production and the slaves themselves and their produce.

In this society, there existed the contradictions between slave-owners and slaves. When the mature conditions were reached the struggle of these contradictions led to the qualitative change i.e. the negation of slave-owning society by way of its transition into feudal society. The conflict of the opposites i.e. the slave-owners and slave culminated into violent slave revolts ultimately effecting the negation. We can say that the feudal system stands as an example of negation of negation. It means that feudal society can be seen as an example of negation of slave-owning society which itself is a negation of primitive-communal society.

# 9.4.3 Feudal Society

Slavery system was the first stage where relations of production were based on domination and exploitation by the slave-owner class of the slave class. This was the stage, where the relations of production saw qualitatively fundamental differences compared to previous stage. In feudal stage, the forces of production saw rapid quantitative change where for the first time inanimate sources of energy such as water and wind were tapped. The development of these productive forces was facilitated by the feudal relations of production. The feudal lords oppressed and exploited their serfs. However, towns began to emerge at this time. Trade, commerce and manufacture began to flourish. Many serfs ran away from the feudal estates to pursue a trade in the growing towns. The conflict of opposites within the feudal system namely, that of landless serfs against feudal lords, reached its maturity. The feudal system declined and its negation was the capitalist system.

# 9.4.4 Capitalist Society

Based on private capitalist ownership the capitalist relations of production facilitated tremendous growth of the productive forces. With this growth of productive forces, capitalist relations of production ceased to correspond to forces of production in feudal system. The most significant contradiction of the capitalist mode of production is the contradiction between the social character of production and the private capitalist form of appropriation. Production in capitalist society bears a strikingly pronounced social character. Many millions of workers are concentrated at large plants and take part in social production, while the fruits of their labour are appropriated by a small group of owners of the means of production. This is the basic economic contradiction of capitalism. This contradiction or conflict of opposites gives rise to economic crisis and unemployment, causes fierce class battles between the bourgeoisie (the capitalists) and the proletariat (the working class), in other words, quantitative changes. The working class would help bring about a socialist revolution. This revolution would, according to Marx abolish the capitalist production relations and usher in the new qualitative change i.e. the communist socio-economic formation.

The new communist socio-economic formation, as we have seen earlier, passes in its development through two phases, socialism and communism. Socialism does away with private ownership of the means of production. It establishes public ownership of means of production. In such a society the proletariat will jointly own means of production and distribute the produce according to the needs of people. This is the stage of dictatorship of proletariat, which will later on also, do away with the state apparatus leading to a stateless society. This stage of the stateless society will be possible in communism, where the dialectic finally unfolds itself, ushering in a social system which would be free of any contradictions within classes. According to the laws of dialectics contradictions will remain as this is the basis of development. Under communism there will be contradiction between Human Being and Nature, as in Primitive-Communism. The basic difference now is that the level of technology will be higher and Nature will be exploited more efficiently. Thus we see how the three laws of dialectics operate in Marx's interpretation of the history of society.

#### **Check Your Progress 2**

i)	Name	the	four	modes	of	production.

(i) (ii)

(iii) (iv)

ii) Class antagonism reaches its climax and it leads to which of the following formations?

(a) Revolution

(b) Slavery

(c) Bourgeoisie

(d) Proletariat

iii) Name the stage marked by classless society and mention its main characteristics.

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iv)	Which stage follows socialism and what is its characteristic feature?

# 9.5 SOCIAL CHANGE AND REVOLUTION

Let us now discuss the ideas of Marx on social change and revolution. In the German Ideology (1845-6), both Marx and Engels outlined their scheme of history. Here, the main idea was that based on a mode of production there was a succession of historical phases. Change from one phase to the next was viewed by them as a state of revolution brought about by conflicts between old institutions and new productive forces. It was only later on that both Marx and Engels devoted more time and studied English, French and American revolutions. They named them as bourgeois revolutions. Marx's hypothesis of bourgeois revolution has given us a perspective to look at social changes in Europe and America. But more than this, it has stimulated further research by scholars on this subject. Secondly, Marx spoke of another kind of revolution. It pertained to communism. Marx viewed communism as a sequel to capitalism. Communism, according to Marx, would wipe out all class divisions and therefore would allow for a fresh start with moral and social transformation. This was the vision both Marx and Engels carried in their minds for future society. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we find that their vision has not come true and communism has not had its sway around the world. All the same Marx's ideas have influenced the nature of growth of capitalism. Tempered with socialist ideas it is now beginning to acquire a human face.

Marx's concept of socialist revolution presupposes an era of shift from capitalism to socialism. He explained bourgeois revolution as a defeat of the aristocracy. This defeat came at the end of a long period of growth of capitalism. The overthrow of the bourgeoisie is, on the other hand, only the first phase of the revolutionary change from capitalism to socialism. According to Marx the socialistic phase of revolution would not be without classes, occupational division of labour and market economy etc. It is only in the higher phase of revolution there would be distribution of goods to each according to his needs. This would be the phase of communism. Thus, change to communism was perceived by Marx as a series of steps to completely revolutionise the entire mode of production.

In fact, Marx conceived intensification of class antagonism in capitalism, because the new forces of production do not correspond to the relations of production. There will be increasing gap between the levels of distribution of gains between the two classes. This shall leave the have-nots extremely alienated and conscious of their class interests. The new forces of production in capitalism are capable of mass production and will dump heaps of prosperity at the feet of bourgeoisie without helping the lot of proletariat, who would continue to suffer from misery and poverty. This shall accentuate the class consciousness and hasten the maturation of the

conditions for socialist revolution. The socialist revolution according to Marx would be qualitatively different from all the revolutions of the past as it would for the first time, after the beginning of history of inequality and exploitation, usher in a stage of classless society with a hope for all members of society.

#### **Activity 2**

It is well known that Marxist thought has influenced many Indian scholars, politicians, litterateurs and other thinkers, try to identify them by answering the following questions.

- i) Who am I? I wrote a novel which gave a critical description of the evolution of Hinduism. One of my novels was also serialised on Doordarshan in 1990.
- ii) Who am I? I was inspired by Marx's theory of historical materialism while writing in 1966 'Light on Early Indian Society and Economy'.
- iii) Who am I? I am known as 'the Indian theoretician of the British Communist Party.
- iv) Who am I? I am a communist party leader and a historian of Kerala.
- v) Who am I? I wrote a book on materialism and criticised Marxist historical theory. In 1920 I was sent to Tashkent to organise a training centre for Indian revolutionaries. I attended the second congress of the Communist International and drafted the colonial thesis adopted by the congress. My draft was modified by Lenin.

#### 9.6 LET US SUM UP

In this concluding unit of the block, we studied Marx's most philosophically profound contribution of dialectics and social change. There was an introduction to the concept of dialectics followed by the fundamental laws of dialectics and change. This was followed by a discussion of the application of the laws of dialectical materialism in the successive modes of production and consequent social change in society. In this unit, we have therefore studied these successive forms of mode of production in the context of dialectical principles of Karl Marx. Finally, we discussed Marx's views on revolution and social change.

#### 9.7 KEY WORDS

**Dialectics** The conflict between two mutually opposite

forces or tendencies.

> everything in terms of change which is caused due to constant contradiction of mutually

opposite forces found in matter.

Quantitative Change All the changes, whereby different parts or

aspects of an object become rearranged, increase or decrease while the object

undergoing change retains its identity.

**Qualitative** Appearance of new or disappearance of old is

a qualitative change.

**Negation** A new stage which is a product of a qualitative

change and it is a progressive change to replace

the old.

**Negation of Negation** When something that came into existence as

negation of the old, is in turn replaced by the

new. It is a qualitative change.

#### 9.8 FURTHER READING

Marx, Karl and Engels, F., ....... *Collected Works*. Vol. 6, Progress Publishers: Moscow

# 9.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

#### **Check Your Progress 1**

- i) It is the Marxian theory that seeks to explain everything in terms of change, which is caused due to constant contradiction of mutually opposite forces found in matter.
- ii) Law of transition of quantity to quality; law of negation of negation; law of unity and conflict of opposites.
- iii) Minor or major changes in any object whereby the object does not loose its identity.
- iv) Appearance of new or disappearance of old is a qualitative change.

#### **Check Your Progress 2**

- i) (i) Asiatic mode of production (ii) Ancient mode of production (iii) Feudal mode of production (iv) Capitalist mode of production.
- ii) (a)
- iii) Socialism. Two of its characteristics are (i) public ownership of means of production, (ii) the proletariat jointly own the means of production
- iv) Communism. It is characterised by a stateless society.

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(These references are given for those students who wish to follow certain points in detail.)

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