UNIT 4: HERBERT SPENCER

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to–

- identify the contributions of Herbert Spencer towards Sociology
- discuss Spencer's Theory of Evolution
- explain Spencer's concept of social organism.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier Unit we have discussed on Auguste Comte, the father of Sociology and his ideas which include Positivism and the Law of three stages. In this unit we will discuss about Herbert Spencer who is also an important figure in the history of Sociology. Spencer is influential particularly to American and British Sociology. He is also from the same tradition as Auguste Comte in preserving the structure of the post war society that developed in the industrial capital in the modern era.

4.3 HERBERT SPENCER: AN INTRODUCTION

Herbert Spencer was born in Darby, England, on April 27, 1820. He was a civil engineer by profession. Till 1837 Spencer did not have any formal education in the usual sense of the term. In fact, he was taught at home by his father and uncle. But in spite of not getting a systematic training, he had a strong background in mathematics and natural science. In 1837, he began to work as a civil engineer for the London and Birmingham railway. In 1848, he was appointed as a sub-editor of the "The Economist" and his intellectual practise started to shape in a specific way. By 1850, he completed his first major work "Social Statics". In 1854 he published *The Principles of Psychology*. Soon after Spencer suffered from nervous breakdown which left him unable to concentrate for any length of time on reading or writing or to tolerate social contracts. He became obsessive about his health. After his partial recovery from the first breakdown, Spencer continued to write and became a well known and successful author.

Significantly, from 1860 he wrote several books on concept, theories, and all-encompassing universal laws. Major contribution of Spencer to sociological discourse are i) social static (1850), First Principles (1862), The Study of Sociology (1873), and iv) Descriptive Sociology (1890). Herbert Spencer died on , at December 8, 1903, at the age of eighty three.

4.3.1 Spencer and Comte: Intellectual Comparison

In the development of Sociology, Comte and Spencer had the same impact on the emergence of Sociological theory. Herbert Spencer is considered the second founding father of Sociology. Although Comte and Spencer both were evolutionists and both stressed the interrelationship among the parts of the society yet these two thinkers differed from each other. Comte focuses on the progress of human ideas while Spencer's concern was on social structure . Spencer was not much interested in the social reform as Comte. Spencer wanted a social life which is out of external control. He was influenced by other natural sciences and more by Biology. So he

compared Society with organism .He went one step further than Comte in his analysis of evolutionism. He considered evolution as the central force of the universe, and gave a detailed explanation of the process of evolution in general and of social evolution in particular. He believed that the world was growing progressively better and it should be left alone from outside interference. His ideas of evolutionism inspired several other sociologists in the later period. Two of Spencer's important contribution to Sociology had been Social Organism or Organic Analogy and Social Evolutionism. In course of time these two ideas culminated into the development of functional perspective in sociology.

4.4 EVOLUTIONISM

Evolution is a process of differentiation and integration. The word 'evolution' comes from the word 'evolve' which means to develop or to unfold gradually from a simple to a more complicated form. Evolution involves changes not only in terms of size but also in structure. For example, when we speak of biological evolution, we refer to the emergence of certain organisms from others in a kind of succession. Evolution describes a series of related changes of a thing. It is an order of change which unfolds variety of aspects belonging to the nature of the changing object. Evolution also involves a changing adaptation of the object to its environment. According to Herbert Spencer, all transformations either physical or social manifest a similar pattern and all such patterns rest on the principles of 'evolution'. Spencer expressed in his "First Principles" that evolution is a change from a state of relatively indefinite, incoherent, homogeneity to a state of relatively definite, coherent, heterogeneity.

Evolutionism is the oldest part of Sociology. Throughout the late nineteenth century, evolutionism has ruled in Sociology by its leading figures. The concept of evolutionism as a process of diffrentiation-cum- integration, was first developed by the German Sociologist Von Baer and subsequently by Darwin, Spencer and others.

Herbert Spencer developed the concept of evolution as the progressive development of the physical world, biological organisms, the human mind, human culture and societies. In short, it is a process of differentiation and integration. It involves changes related to both size and structure. According to Spencer, the social process is unique and Sociology as a science must explain the present state of society by explaining the initial stages of evolution by applying them to the universal evolutionary doctrine. It explains the earlier changes which the society had undergone and the new changes which are in turn the product of social life. Spencer's first and foremost concern was on the evolutionary changes of social structures and social institutions. He applied the evolutionary theory to the social world and rejected the religious explanations about its origins and structures.

The basic principles of Social Evolutions are:

- Society is a superorganic whole. By superorganic, Spencer meant that although human society consists of individuals, yet the society is external to individuals. By 'whole' he meant that society is a system of interrelated parts. These interrelated systems interact with the physical environment.
- Society changes naturally over time and gradually becomes perfect in itself.
- Phases of growth of society are simple and homogeneous. An example is the kinship system in those societies at the early stages of evolution where there was lack of division of labour.
- With the continuous process of differentiation ,the entire social structure becomes complex and integrated. The more the society becomes socially differentiated, the more the parts and the institutions become dependent upon each other.
- Once differentiation occurred there takes place a segregation of groups, classes and associations. Thus, differentiation and segregation in social growth follow a definite principle.
- As a whole, society responds to the changes that occur within it. When certain changes occurr that begin to threaten the existing

environment, the social structure also undergoes changes accordingly to balance the situation.

4.4.1 Social Types

While attempting to classify the types of society in terms of the evolutionary stages, Spencer arranged them in a series like simple, compound, doubly compound, and trebly compound. He stratified these stages according to the degrees of structural complexity.

- **Simple Societies** are characterized as headless and the parts co-operate with or without a regulating centre for public ends.
- **Compound Societies** are usually like settled agricultural societies with some basic division of labour and permanent residences. This is a kind of two or more simple societies under regulation of supreme chief.
- **Doubly Compound Societies** have more complex political structures and a formal legal system which shows divisions as well as integration.
- **Trebly Compound Societies** are the great civilized nations of the past and the present. These are the societies where complexity of structures and the increased mutual dependence are most apparent.

In addition to this classification of societies by their degree of complexity, Spencer proposed another basis for distinguishing internal regulation within societies. These are industrial and militant societies. In Industrial society, the whole society exists for the benefits of its member parts. Consequently, industrial societies are based on the principle of voluntary co-operation.

In the militant societies, the member parts are subordinate to the wishes of the commanding Centre. Militant societies are based on the principle of compulsory co-operation.

The militant and industrial societies are represented as the ideal types. They are the representations of the basic components of societies and not a description of any particular society.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: Find out whether the following statements are True or False:

a) Spencer was much interested in social reform like Comte.

b) Spencer was highly influenced by biological science in furnishing his sociological theory.

c) Compound societies exist without a regulating centre.

d) Process of natural selection occurred in the social world.

4.5 SPENCER'S SOCIOLOGY

Spencer was concerned with the acceptance of Sociology as a science and criticizes those who donot consider it as science. But he also believed that so long as the social order was not confirmed by natural laws it cannot be completely accepted as science. Therefore, he propounded the law of evolution and social organism to view the social world.Spencer argued that if sociolgy is not regarded as science then sciences like Biology and Geology also should not be regarded as science because they express relations qualitatively like Sociology. In this respect he pointed out that only Mathematics and Physics could be called proper science, because they express relationship quantitatively. But, although the generalizations offered by Sociology are not quantifiable, they have a scientific basis and Sociology itself is not too removed from science.

Spencer's Sociology focused on explaining what was empirically knowable, but he was aware of the fact that sociological phenomena are not directly perceptible and also that the sociological observer may have some pre conceived opinion about the phenomena under investigation. Thus, Spencer was the first to recognize the nature and sources of the bias in Sociological investigation.

Spencer also characterized Sociology as both a deductive and an inductive process. Sociology deductively applies general principles to

particular cases and inductively uses particular cases to construct general rules. Using the general law of evolution, Spencer deduced the nature of social evolution; he then supported this deduction with inductive evidence from ethnographic observations and historical data. This method gave him the basis to establish the sequence of cause and effect.

4.6 SOCIAL ORGANISM

Social organanism is a biological analogy of society where Spencer compared society to an organism. The biologists are concerned with the organic evolution of the body while the sociologists are concerned with the evolution of social structure, institutions and organizations. Spencer regarded Sociology as similar to a science like Biology and he tries to explain it better by using an organic analogy. This biological analogy compares the social process to that of biological organism. In his comparison he says that for the benefit of this society as a whole the parts of the society work in unison just as the parts of the human body do. The way any dysfunction of a body part creates problems for the healthy functioning of the individual body, the dysfunctions of any societal part threaten the whole social structure. By this Spencer emphasized the necessity of analyzing society in terms of structure and functional interdependence in the social system as a whole. Spencer emphasised the necessity of analysing society in terms structure and function and functional interdependence in the social system as a whole. In an effort to explain society, he gave the analogy between an organism and a society. The analogy is better explained by highlighting some similarities between organism and society. These are as follows:

- Both grow in size.
- As society grows, the internal elements of structure diffrentiate in the same way the biological parts become complicated with growth.
- Both the systems interact with environment and make adjustment with the environmental factors.
- Every part of the system is interrelated with each other.

Biological analysis occupies a privileged position in all of Spencer's sociological reasoning although he was moved to draw attention to the limitation of such analogies. Though the society is comparable to an organic system, yet there are some differences between biological organisms and a society. These differences are mentioned below:

- The parts of a biological entity are physically tied to one another, but the parts of a society are free, they are not in a direct organic contact.
- In society all the parts possess consciousness but in biological entities consciousness is concentrated in one small part.
- The parts or individuals in society can move from one place to another. But biological entities can not move around.

These similarities and differences between biological and social organisms are only a body of data about real societies which outline an empirical sociology. By providing the analogy between organism and society, Spencer maintains that being elements of nature all are subjected to the forces of evolution and as such follow the principles of evolution.

4.7 FUNCTIONALISM

The evolutionary perspective in Spencer's work relates primarily to the increasing size of the society. This increasing size of the society brings larger and more differentiated social structures, as well as the increasing differentiation of the functions they perform. Spencer's discussion of social institutions and their changes can be expressed in functional terms.

In sum, the evolution of societies is accompanied by a growth in size and complexity that results in specialization, differentiation and a corresponding need for integration of the parts. And this integration needs a functional interdependence so that it can fit into the whole structure whether compound and doubly compound. Thus, it indirectly suggests functionalist perspective too.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.2: Find out whether the following statements are True or False:

a) Spencer's concern was on evolutionary changes of social structure and social institutions.

b) Spencer's theory of evolution propounds religious explanation about its origin and structures.

c) According to Spencer society is not external to individual.

d) Integration needs functional interdependence.

e) As the organizational structure increases differentiation arises.

f) The generalization offered by sociology is quantifiable.



4.8 LET US SUM UP

- Herbert Spencer is considered the second founding father of Sociology after Auguste Comte and he was regarded as the father of British Sociology.
- Spencer considered evolution as the central force of the universe.
- His ideas of evolution inspired several others in the later period.
- Evolution for Spencer is a universal process which explains the earlier changes the society has undergone.
- Spencer's concern was on evolutionary changes of the social structures and social institutions.
- Spencer arranged societies in terms of evolutionary stages. They are simple, compound, and doubly compound and trebly compound. These stages are stratified according to the degree of structural complexity.
- In addition to this classification of societies by their degree of complexity, Spencer proposed another basis for distinguishing internal regulation within a society. They are industrial and militant.

- Spencer believes that Sociology can be studied like other sciences. Although sociology explaines all relations qualitatively, it is scientific as most of other sciences like Biology and Geology explain things qualitatively.
- The increasing size of society brings with it larger and more differentiated social structure, as well the increasing differentiation of the function they perform. Spencer's discussion on the increasing differentiation has led the way towards the functional perspective.



4.9 FURTHER READING

1) Adams, Bert N. and Sydie, R. A. (2002); *Sociological Theory*; New Delhi: Vistaar Publication.
2) Coser, Lewis A. (2010); *Masters of Sociological Thought*; New Delhi: Rawat Publication.
3) Ritzar, George and Douglas, J. Godman (2003); *Sociological Theory*; McGraw Hill.



4.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1: a) False, b) True, c) False, d) True

Ans. to Q. No. 2: a) True, b) False, c) False, d) True, e) True, e) False



4.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short Questions: (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q.1: What are the similarities between structure of the society and that of biological organism?

Q.2: What is Industrial society?

Q.3: What is inductive and deductive Sociology?

B) Long Questions: (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q.1: Discuss social organism of Spencer.

Q.2: Discuss the types of society in terms of evolutionary changes.

Q.3: Discuss Spencer's contibution to Sociology.

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