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Stages in the process of assimilation:

Assimilation is slow and gradual process. It takes quite some time before individuals or groups once dissimilar become similar: that is, become identified in their interests and outlook. Acculturation is the name given to the stage when one cultural group which is in contact with another appropriates or borrows from it certain cultural elements and incorporates them into his own culture, thus modifying it.

As we have discussed earlier, contact between two groups inevitably affects both; though it is but natural that the culturally weaker group would do more of the borrowing from and would give very little to the culturally stronger group.

For instance, the American Indians adopted cultural elements of the Whites with whom they came in contact; but the whites also appropriated certain cultural traits from the Indians.

Thus assimilation has two parts or stages one is the suppression of the parent culture, the other is the acquisition of new ways, including new language. The two may overlap in point of time.

The adoption of some of the dominant culture by another cultural group paves the way for absorption of the new cultural group with the dominant culture. Some traits are readily adopted even if the two groups are only slightly in contact. From the whites the American Indians quickly learned to use intoxicants and fire arms.

On the other hand, the early American settlers did not hesitate before long in adopting the Indian uses of food stuffs like potatoes, maize, etc. Similarly, immigrants in America or Europe usually begin to wear American or European style clothes almost as soon as they land and so on.

The social contacts thus established finally result in assimilation. The speed of the process of assimilation naturally depends on the nature of the contacts. If the contacts are primary, assimilation occurs naturally and rapidly but if they are secondary, i.e., indirect and superficial the result is accommodation rather than assimilation.

Hindrances and Aids to Assimilation:

Assimilation is not a simple but a complex process. There are certain factors which facilitate assimilation and others which hinder or retard it. The rate of assimilation of a cultural minority depends upon whether the facilitating or retarding factors predominate.

According to Gillin and Gillin, factors favouring assimilation are toleration, equal economic opportunity, sympathetic attitude on the part of the dominating group towards the minority group, exposure to the dominant culture, similarity between the cultures of the minority and dominant groups and amalgamation or intermarriage.

On the other hand, factors hindering or retarding assimilation are isolating conditions of life, attitudes of superiority on the part of the dominant group, excessive physiological, cultural and social differences between the groups and persecution of the minority group by the majority group.

MacIver lists the following factors which may account for the ready acceptance of some groups and relative antagonism towards others:

1. The state of the development of the society entered:

The nature of the immigrant's reception in the new land is dependent to a very large extent on the conditions existing at the time he enters. For instance, immigrants were most acceptable in America before 1880 when strength and skill of every kind were needed in the development of new lands and growing industries but those coming in the year after 1880 have not been accepted with the same advantages—those entering after 1933 have been rather viewed as a threat to the economic well-being of native workers.

2. Background occupational skills:

The immigrant has a great advantage when he already possesses the skill and training in the work for which there is a need in the new country. For instance, immigrants skilled in industries have better chances of being readily accepted in industrially undeveloped countries and so have the people of rural background in countries of agrarian economy.

3. The numbers involved:

It has been observed that the attitude of a group towards the outsiders tends to be tolerant until the latter's numbers reach large proportion. A single Chinese or Japanese or Mexican family in a community may be highly esteemed if the individuals are personally acceptable. Should the number of such families increase, the situation may become radically different.

The larger the proportion of new comers, the greater is the resistance of the established group to their integration. It has been proved by Moreno in his book "Who Shall Survive" that the increase in resentment in some cases has been but of all proportions to the increase in numbers.

4. Physical differences:

Differences in features, complexion of skin and other physical traits may also help or hinder in assimilation. Racial barrier hinders assimilation because while one can set aside one's culture, one cannot set aside one's skin. We can see discrimination between the White and the Negro races almost everywhere in the world.

Generally the adjustment problems are the easiest for those immigrants who in appearance resemble supposedly most like the people of the new land. It may be pointed out that physical differences in themselves do not produce antagonisms or prejudice between people as is the case in South eastern Asia and Latin America, but when other factors operate to produce group frictions, physical differences give rise to inferiority and undesirability.

5. Cultural differences:

Language and religion are usually considered to be the main constituents of culture. Immigrants having same religion and language as the people of the country of their adoption can easily adjust themselves there. In America, for example, English speaking Protestants are assimilated with the greatest speed and ease whereas non-Christians who do not speak English, have the greatest difficulty in being assimilated there, customs and beliefs are other cultural characteristics which can aid or hinder assimilation.

6. The role of semi-community:

Sometimes immigrants who come in large numbers settle in compact colonies where they continue to practise their native folkways instead of participating in the life around them. Such semi-communities play an important double role in the assimilation process.

On the one hand, such a community by retaining many features of the traditional way of life enables the new comers to identify themselves with their fellowmen and adjust to the new conditions easily. On the other hand, the existence of such communities is viewed as alien and distasteful by the majority.

Besides the above factors listed by MacIver, prejudice may also impede assimilation. As long as the dominant group does not prejudge those who have been set apart, they as neither a group nor their individual members can easily become assimilated to the general culture.

Prejudice also impedes assimilation between constituent elements within a given society. Religious groups often allow the social distance created by prejudice to maintain their separateness. Prejudice may be the outcome of some unpleasant experiences, fear of losing a superior status, dread of economic competition or some form of a collective phobia.

Assimilation, it may be pointed out, is a matter of degree. In large society, complete assimilation is perhaps a hypothetical rather than a practically existing state of affairs. The alien group not only contributes to the host culture but retain many of their own ways. As a result thereof, there is cultural pluralism which may represent incomplete assimilation.

Should the minority group be forced to assimilate the culture of the majority group, is a controversial question. Some stress that it is very necessary for every individual to share the same ideals and participate in the sentiments common to the whole nation. There are others who maintain that the existence of various cultural minority groups produces a richer culture.

They believe in "cultural pluralism". They also hold that cultural pluralism can solve many problems of prejudice. India has a rich cultural heritage because of the long established tradition of cultural pluralism. But has it produced harmony in Indian society? The Ayodhya incident and the Punjab problem have again highlighted the question

