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AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY

Society is created by people, and it also provides space to those who create it. In day-to-day life, people think about human society in general and of a society in which they live in particular. Renaissance and industrial revolution in Europe questioned the traditional basis of construction of human society and re-structured it by focusing upon a new value system. What binds the people together? what are the processes, which keep people a social entity? How does society survive? These are matters of the construction of society, which is, in fact, a web of social relations. This motivated the sociologists to think in a disciplined way about the structure and process of society.

In this lesson, we will discuss the meaning of sociology i.e., definitional aspects, the nature of sociology, i.e., its character emerging out of the characteristics of social relatives, and subject matter of sociology, i.e., the topics, which we study in sociology.



OBJECTIVES

After studying this lesson you will be able to:

- explain the meaning of sociology;
- deliberate upon the nature of sociology;
- discuss the sociological perspective;
- describe the scope and subject matter of sociology; and
- state the relevance of sociology in our day to day life.



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1.1 WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

Auguste Comte was the first scholar to use the word 'sociology' in order to refer to the science of human association. The word 'sociology' was derived from the Latin word socius (association, and the Greek word 'logus' (theory) denoted, the theory or science of human association society. Comte wished to establish a science of society that would help to reveal social laws, which he believed controlled development and change. Herbert Spencer developed his systematic study of society and frankly adopted the word 'sociology'.

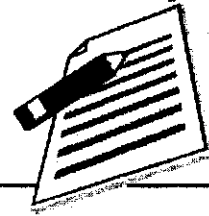
Sociology is, quite simply, a way of studying people. Sociologists want to know why people behave the way they do, why they form groups, why they go to war, why they worship, marry, vote, all such things that happen when people interact with one another. **Thus, sociology can be defined as the scientific study of social relations, institutions and society.** Various definitions of sociology have been offered by sociologists. Auguste Comte dealt with the problem of defining sociology as a discipline and delineating its nature. The later sociologists focused elaborately on the meaning of sociology. Hobhouse explained how sociology studied the 'interaction of human minds'. Park and Burgess believed that 'sociology is the science of collective behaviour'. However, Emile Durkheim was more precise, and he said that 'sociology is a study of social phenomena'.

Max Weber defined sociology in a different way. He says that human activities are oriented to some action. Actions aim at that which fulfills objectives. Individuals in the society engage in actions for realization of given goals/interests. Actions, according to Max Weber, constitute the subject matter of sociology. Right from the origin of sociology to the present day, social actions have been considered as the law of sociology.

In brief, it may be viewed that sociology is the scientific study of the social aspects of human life. Moreover, sociology is the body of knowledge, compiled by the scientific method, about human interaction. I "interaction" we mean reciprocal contact between two or more persons, inter-stimulation and response. **Sociologists, therefore, are concerned with man in society, with the human group. From these definitions, we gather that sociology is the study of human society and social behaviour as well as a study of social relationships and its forms.**

1.2 NATURE OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is scientific discipline. It is a science in the sense that it involves objective and systematic methods of investigation and evaluation of social reality in the light of empirical evidence and interpretation. But, it can not be directly modelled on



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the patterns of natural sciences, because human behaviour is different from the world of nature. Among other differences, the subject matter of natural sciences is relatively static and unchanging whereas human behaviour as the subject matter of sociology is flexible and dynamic.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.1

Write True or false against each statement:

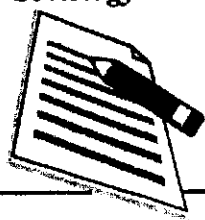
1. Industrial revolution took place in U.S.A.
2. Auguste Comte is called father of sociology.
3. Sociology is the scientific study of social relations.
4. Sociology is not the study of human society.
5. Human behaviour is flexible and dynamic.

1.3 WHAT IS SCIENCE?

Science refers to the application of objective methods of investigation, reasoning and logic to develop a body of knowledge about given phenomena. There are three goals of science. The first is to explain why something happens. The second is to make generalizations, that is, to go beyond the individual cases and make statements that apply to a collectivity. The third is to predict, to specify, what will happen in future, in the light of the available stock of knowledge.

The idea of scientific research is to acquire objective knowledge, free of bias and prejudice. This is why insistence in sociology is to achieve natural sciences. The proper method of science is to have constant test of explanatory propositions by matching them against facts – whether obtained experimentally or empirically. In this context, sociology is a science because it fulfills the basic requirements of objective and rational knowledge of social reality and applies scientific method. Johnson viewed that sociology to some extent has the following characteristics of science:

- (a) It is theoretical: It attempts to summarize complex observations in abstract logically related propositions, which purport to explain causal relationships in the subject matter. Its main aim is to interpret and to inter-relate sociological data in order to explain the nature of social phenomena and to produce hypotheses whose final validity can be checked by further empirical research.



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- (b) It is empirical: It is based on observation and reasoning, not on supernatural/speculative revelations, and its results are not speculative. In the early stages of their creative work, all scientists speculate, of course, but ideally at least, they submit their speculations to the test of fact before announcing them as scientific discoveries. All aspects of sociological knowledge are subject to evaluation made about social behaviour or can be put to test for empirical evidence.
- (c) It is cumulative: sociological theories are built upon one another, extending and refining the older ones and producing the new ones. As such theoretical integration becomes a goal in the construction of sociological formulations. Thus, sociology is cumulative.
- (d) It is non-ethical: Sociologists do not ask whether particular social actions are good or bad; they seek merely to explain them. It addresses issues. Study of human relations is the prime consideration in sociology. In the context, Morris Ginsberg observes that ethical problems should be dealt with neutrality. Objectivity and rationality based on a thorough knowledge of a situation alone can ensure scientific status to the discipline of sociology.

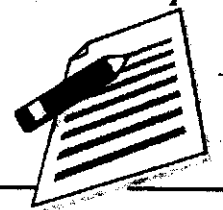
In all these respects, sociology is far from having reached perfection; but is being steadily made.

1.4 SOCIOLOGY OF PERSPECTIVES

Sociological perspectives are broad assumptions about society and social behaviour that provide a viewpoint for the study of specific problems. There are two main descriptive perspectives in sociology. These are Positivist (the traditional scientific perspective) and Phenomenology, which can be described as 'less scientific' in that some researchers reject the idea of building theories by the application of the scientific method preferring to use more interpretative methods. In sociology, as in other disciplines, there are different ways of interpreting events. We do not ordinarily stop to think that one or the other of the above sociological perspectives operates all through in our day-to-day life and behaviour.

1.4.1 Positivism

Positivism is the traditional method of sociology, which is generally associated with Auguste Comte. Comte's emphasis on reporting of social facts is like what we find in natural sciences where accuracy and objectivity in understanding and analysis are core characteristics. Logic in recording of facts is an added element in scientific method. Comte has thus contributed to knowledge based on scientific



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research. Verification and validation of collected facts, including opinions, attitudes and faiths are the basis of understanding and analysis. Such a method is universal in its application and execution.

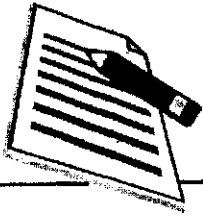
Positivism stresses the need for neutrality and objectivity in research. It is based on the attempt to emulate the methods of natural science:

1. Identification of a problem,
2. Collection of data,
3. Explanatory hypothesis,
4. Method to test hypothesis,
5. Analysis of results,
6. Re-test if necessary,
7. Interpreting results: report.

Implications: The overall implication of positivism is that there is an objective world which is capable of being understood in objective and scientific terms.

Within the Positivism school of sociology, there are two dominant theoretical perspectives, which tend to produce their findings from scientific techniques. They are:

1. **The Functionalist Perspective:** Functional analysis also known as functionalism and structural functionalism is rooted in the origin of sociology. The founders of the functionalist perspective were Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim. They viewed society as a 'self-regulating and self-maintaining social system' with certain basic needs such as preserving social order, providing for the supply of goods and services and protecting the young ones. If these needs are met, they believed that society would remain in balance or equilibrium. In essence, the functionalist perspective focuses on the process of order and stability in the social system.
2. **The conflict Perspective:** The conflict theorists stress inequalities and regard society as a system made of individual and groups which are competing for scarce resources. These groups may form alliances or co-operate with one another, but underneath the surface harmony lies a basic competitive struggle to gain control over scarce resources. Conflict theorists also focus on macro level. In modern society, Karl Marx focused on struggle between the bourgeoisie (owners of production) and proletariat (those who worked for the owners), but today's conflict theorists have expanded this perspective to include smaller groups and even basic relationships.



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1.4.2 Phenomenology (Interpretive Perspective)

The second theoretical perspective is called Phenomenological. It stems most prominently from Max Weber. The phenomenologist is concerned with understanding of human behaviour from the actor's own frame of reference. The phenomenologist thus examines how the world is experienced. For him or her, the important reality is what people imagine to be. Thus, in this perspective less emphasis is placed on the need to develop objective methods of study and more on the value of seeing the world through the eyes of those being studied. Therefore, it stresses the need to understand the subjective interpretations of actors.

Implications: The overall implication of this method is that society is constructed through the view point and observations of the actors. There is no social world in the objective sense of the term.

Each of the sociological perspectives described focuses on the different aspects of social reality: functionalism on social order and stability; and theory of conflict on social tension and changes and phenomenological perspective on the subjective interpretations of actors of the social reality. Each of these perspectives has a significant role to play in understanding and analyzing the nature of society.

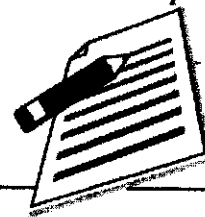
INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.2

Fill in the blanks with correct words:

1. Application of objective methods of investigation is called _____.
2. Traditional method of sociology is _____.
3. Functionalism focuses on _____ and _____.
4. Sociological perspectives are broad _____ about society and social behaviour.

1.5 SCOPE OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is systematic and objective study of human society. Sociologists study individual's social actions. Social relationships such as between husbands and wife, teacher and student, buyer and seller, and social processes, namely, co-operation, competition, conflict and organizations, communities and nations, and social structures (family, class and state), are the basis of sociological enquiry. Interpretations guided by norms and values give rise to social institutions. Sociology,



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therefore, is the study of social life as a whole. Sociology has a wide range of concerns and interests. It seeks to provide classifications and forms of social relationships, institutions and associations, relating to economic, political, moral, religious and social aspects of human life.

Though there is no consensus about the subject matter of sociology, yet it is agreed that sociology studies the interaction systems, which shape social institutions, the state and the normative order. Therefore, we study in sociology about social organization, social structure, institutions and culture.

1.5.1 Social Organization

The terms 'social organization', refers to inter-dependence of different aspects of society, and this is an essential characteristic of all enduring social entities, such as groups, communities and collectivities. Herbert Spencer has used the term 'social organization' to refer to the inter-relations (integration and differentiation) of the economic, political, and other divisions of society. Emile Durkheim implies by social organization almost exclusively, social integration and regulation through consensus about moral and values. Currently, social organization is used to refer to the inter-dependence of parts of in-groups of all sizes, from a clique of workers in hospitals and factories to large-scale societies and organizations.

1.5.2 Social Structure

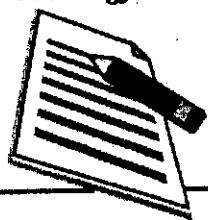
Social structure refers to the pattern of interrelations between individuals. Every society has a social structure, a complex of major institutions, groups, and arrangements, relating to status and power. It is said that the study of social structure is comparable to the study of human anatomy, and that of social organization that of physiology.

1.5.3 Social Institution

A social institution is a procedure, practice, and an instrument, hence a semblance of a variety of customs and habits accumulated over a period of time. In every society, people create social institutions to meet their basic needs of survival. Institutions are instruments and tools of human transactions. An institution is thus a stable cluster of norms, values, and roles.

1.5.4 Culture

Culture refers to symbols, signs and language, besides religion, rituals, beliefs and artifacts. In fact, culture is a guiding force in everyday life. As such culture is social. It is an instrument of shaping and reshaping human life and its ramifications. Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next through the process of socialization.



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1.6 RELEVANCY OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is a subject with important practical relevance in our life. It can contribute to social criticism and practical social reform in several ways. These are mainly:

1. The improved understanding of a given set of social circumstances often gives us all a better chance of controlling them.
2. Sociology provides the means of increasing our cultural sensitivities, allowing policies to be based on an awareness of divergent cultural values.
3. We can investigate the consequences of the adoption of particular policy programmes.
4. Finally and perhaps most important, sociology provides self-enlightenment, offering groups and individuals an increased opportunity to alter the conditions of their own lives.

INTENT QUESTIONS 1.3

Answer in 8 to 1 lines:

1. What is the scope of sociology?
2. What is the relevance of sociology in day to day life?
3. What are the four characteristics of science.



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- Sociology emerged as an intellectual endeavour with the early development of modern industrialized societies and the study of such societies remained its principal concern.
- Sociology as a discipline enjoys a distinct scientific status based on its basic concepts, approaches and classifications relating to the study of society and its variants.
- This is evident from the views and formulation of Comte, Spencer, Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Besides being a scientific discipline, sociology has concern for understanding of human problems.
- The gamut of sociology is vast enough to encompass study of social relationships from the perspectives of individual and society in general and specific individual, groups and institutions in particular.



TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. What is meant by Sociology?
2. What is the distinctiveness of sociological perspective?
3. Why is Auguste Comte called the father of Sociology?
4. What was Emile Durkheim's concern in Sociology?
5. What is sociology? Discuss scientific nature of sociology.
6. Explain various perspectives in sociology.
7. Discuss the nature and scope of sociology.



ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

1.1

1. False
2. True
3. True
4. False
5. True

1.2

1. Science
2. Positivism
3. Social order and stability
4. Assumptions

1.3

3. Theoretical; empirical; cumulative; non-ethical.

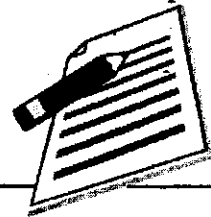


SUGGESTED READINGS

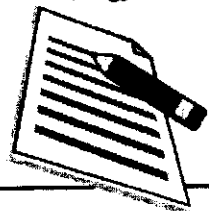
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MODULE - I

Sociology-Basic Concepts



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