

The needs of the economy are again determined by the economic and political policies pursued by the government. The chances of the individual student are affected both by these broader political and economic measures as well as by the social background of her/his family. This gives us a preliminary sense of how sociology studies human society as an interconnected whole. And how society and the individual interact with each other. The problem of choosing subjects in the senior secondary school is a source of personal worry for the individual student. That this is a broader public issue, affecting students as a collective entity is self evident. One of the tasks of sociology is to unravel the connection between a personal problem and a public issue. This is the first theme of this chapter.

We have already seen that a 'good job' means different things to different societies. The social esteem that a particular kind of job has or does not have for an individual depends on the culture of his/her 'relevant society'. What do we mean by 'relevant society'? Does it mean the 'society' the individual belongs to? Which society does the individual belong to? Is it the neighbourhood? Is it the community? Is it the caste or tribe? Is it the professional circle of the parents? Is it the nation? Second, this chapter therefore looks at how the individual in modern times belongs to more than one society. And how societies are unequal.

Third, this chapter introduces sociology as a systematic study of society, distinct from philosophical and religious reflections, as well as our everyday common sense observation about society. Fourth, this distinct way of studying society can be better understood if we look back historically at the intellectual ideas and material contexts within which sociology was born and later grew. These ideas and material developments were mainly western but with global consequences. Fifth, we look at this global aspect and the manner in which sociology emerged in India. It is important to remember that just as each of us have a biography, so does a discipline. Understanding the history of a discipline helps understand the discipline. Finally the scope of sociology and its relationship to other disciplines is discussed.

II

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: THE PERSONAL PROBLEM AND THE PUBLIC ISSUE

We began with a set of suggestions that drew our attention to how the individual and society are dialectically linked. This is a point that sociologists over several generations have been concerned with. C. Wright Mills rests his vision of the sociological imagination precisely in the unravelling of how the personal and public are related.

Activity 1

Read the text from Mills carefully. Then examine the visual and report below. Do you notice how the visual is of a poor and homeless couple? The sociological imagination helps to understand and explain homelessness as a public issue. Can you identify what could be the causes for homelessness? Different groups in your class can collect information on possible causes for example, employment possibilities, rural to urban migration, etc. Discuss these. Do you notice how the state considers homelessness as a public issue that requires concrete measures to be taken, for instance, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna–Gramin?

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and promise... Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between 'the personal troubles of the milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'... Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware... Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life.

The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialised, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both... (Mills 1959).



A homeless couple

The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna–Gramin, operationalised from 2016 is a major scheme by the Ministry of Rural Development (MORD) provides financial and labour support to houseless families and those living in dilapidated kutchha houses to build pucca houses. Can you think of other issues that show the connection between personal problems and public issues?

In any political or military conflict it is of advantage to capture the information used by the intelligence organs of the opposing side. But this is so only because good intelligence consists of information free of bias. If a spy does his/her reporting in terms of the ideology and ambitions of his/her superiors, his/her reports are useless not only to the enemy, if the latter should capture them, but also to the spy's own side... The sociologist is a spy in very much the same way. His/her job is to report as accurately as he/she can about a certain terrain (Berger 1963:16-17).

Does this mean that the sociologist has no social responsibility to ask about the goals of his/her study or the work to which the sociological findings will be applied. He/she has such a responsibility, just like any other citizen of society. But this asking is not sociological asking. This is like the biologist whose biological knowledge can be employed to heal or kill. This does not mean the biologist is free of responsibility as to which use s/he serves. But this is not a biological question.

Sociology has from its beginnings understood itself as a science. Unlike commonsensical observations or philosophical reflections or theological commentaries, sociology is bound by scientific canons of procedure. It means that the statements that the sociologist arrives at must be arrived at through the observations of certain rules of

evidence that allow others to check on or to repeat to develop his/her findings further. There has been considerable debate within sociology about the differences between natural science and human science, between quantitative and qualitative research. We need not enter this here. But what is relevant here is that sociology in its observation and analysis has to follow certain rules that can be checked upon by others. In the next section, **we compare sociological knowledge to common sense knowledge which will once again emphasise the role of methods, procedures and rules in the manner in which sociology conducts its observation of society.** Chapter 5 of this book will provide you with a sense of what sociologists do and how they go about studying society. An elaboration of **the differences between sociology and common sense knowledge** will help towards a clearer idea of the sociological approach and method.

V

SOCIOLOGY AND COMMON SENSE KNOWLEDGE

We have seen how sociological knowledge is different from theological and philosophical observations. Likewise sociology is different from common sense observations. **The common sense explanations are generally based on what may be called 'naturalistic' and/or individualistic explanation. A naturalistic explanation for behaviour rests on the assumption that one can really identify 'natural' reasons for behaviour.**

Activity 3

An example of poverty has been given below and we also touched upon it in our discussion on the homeless. Think of other issues and how they could be explained in a naturalistic and sociological way.

Sociology thus breaks away from both common sense observations and ideas as well as from philosophical thought. It does not always or even generally lead to spectacular results. But meaningful and unsuspected connections can be reached only by sifting through masses of connections. Great advances in sociological

knowledge have been made, generally incrementally and only rarely by a dramatic breakthrough.

Sociology has a body of concepts, methods and data, no matter how loosely coordinated. This cannot be substituted by common sense. Common sense is unreflective since it does not question its own origins. Or in other words it does not ask itself: "Why do I hold this view?" The sociologist must be ready to ask of any of our beliefs, about ourselves — no matter how cherished — "is this really so?" Both the systematic and questioning approach of sociology is derived from a broader tradition of scientific investigation. This emphasis on

Explanation of	Naturalistic	Sociological
Poverty	People are poor because they are afraid of work, come from 'problem families', are unable to budget properly, suffer from low intelligence and shiftlessness.	Contemporary poverty is caused by the structure of inequality in class society and is experienced by those who suffer from chronic irregularity of work and low wages (Jayaram 1987:3).

Unsuspected Connections?

In many societies, including in many parts of India, the line of descent and inheritance passes from father to son. This is understood as a patrilineal system. Keeping in mind that women tend not to get property rights, the Government of India in the aftermath of the Kargil War decided that financial compensation for the death of Indian soldiers should go to their widows so that they were provided for.

The government had certainly not anticipated the unintended consequence of this decision. It led to many forced marriages of the widows with their brother-in-law (husband's brother or *dewar*). In some cases the brother-in-law (then husband) was a young child and the sister-in-law (then wife) a young woman. This was to ensure that the compensation remained with the deceased man's patrilineal family. Can you think of other such unintended consequences of a social action or a state measure?

scientific procedures can be understood only if we go back in time and understand the context or social situation within which the sociological perspective emerged as sociology was greatly influenced by the great developments in modern science. Let us have a very brief look at what intellectual ideas went into the making of sociology.

VI

THE INTELLECTUAL IDEAS THAT WENT INTO THE MAKING OF SOCIOLOGY

Influenced by scientific theories of natural evolution and findings about pre-modern societies made by early travellers, colonial administrators, sociologists and social anthropologists sought to categorise societies into types and to distinguish stages in social development. These features reappear in the 19th century in works of early sociologists, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer. Efforts were therefore made to classify different types of societies on that basis, for instance:

- Types of pre-modern societies such as hunters and gatherers, pastoral and agrarian, agrarian and non-industrial civilisations.
- Types of modern societies such as the industrialised societies.

Such an evolutionary vision assumed that the west was necessarily the most advanced and civilised. Non-western societies were often seen as barbaric and less

developed. The Indian colonial experience has to be seen in this light. Indian sociology reflects this tension which “go far back to the history of British colonialism and the intellectual and ideological response to it...” (Singh 2004:19). Perhaps because of this backdrop, Indian sociology has been particularly thoughtful and reflexive of its practice (Chaudhuri 2003). You will be engaging with Indian sociological thought, its concerns and practice in greater detail in the book, *Understanding Society*.

Darwin’s ideas about organic evolution were a dominant influence on early sociological thought. Society was often compared with living organisms and efforts were made to trace its growth through stages comparable to those of organic life. This way of looking at society as a system of parts, each part playing a given function influenced the study of social institutions like the family or the school and structures such as stratification. We mention this here because the intellectual ideas that went into the making of sociology have a direct bearing on how sociology studies empirical reality.

The Enlightenment, an European intellectual movement of the late 17th and 18th centuries, emphasised reason and individualism. There was also great advancement of scientific knowledge and a growing conviction that the methods of the natural sciences should and could be extended to the study of human affairs. For example poverty, so