

Social Problems: Concept and Approaches

Today, ‘Social Problems’ is considered a sub-discipline of Sociology. Sociology is a very vast field, encompassing such sub-disciplines as the sociology of family, sociology of crime and delinquency, sociology of education, sociology of environment, etc.

Drug abuse, alcoholism, ageing, population explosion, corruption, AIDS, inequality, child abuse, terrorism, pollution, poverty, environmental degradation, unemployment and crime against women are not individual problems but affect the society at large. An individual problem is one which affects one individual or one group. Its resolution lies within the immediate milieu of the individual/group. Against this, a societal issue is one which affects the society as a whole, or the larger part of society. The sociologist’s job is to understand the complexity of these problems and their relatedness to social structure, to study the operation of varied patterns of interrelationships in the society and how people are affected by them, and observe how social systems need to be reorganized and restructured in dealing with them.

The Concept of Social Problem

A social problem is a condition or set of events that some people in society view as being undesirable. A social problem has been defined as “a situation confronting a group or a section of society which inflicts injurious consequences that can be handled only collectively” (Reinhardt, 1952: 14). Thus, no one individual or a few individuals are responsible for the appearance of a socially problematic situation, and the control of this situation is also beyond

the ability of one person or a few persons. This responsibility is placed upon society at large. Walsh and Fursey (1961: 1) have defined a social problem as a "deviation from the social ideal remediable by group effort". Two elements are important in this definition: (i) a situation which is less than ideal, that is, which is undesirable or abnormal; and (ii) one which is remediable by collective effort. Though it is not easy to determine which situation is ideal and which is not, and there is no definite standard which could be used to judge it, yet it is clear that a social ideal is not something arbitrary and the term 'social problem' is applied only to that 'issue' which social ethics (which describes human conduct as right and wrong in group relations), and society (which is concerned with the promotion of the common good or the welfare of its members and the preservation of public order) consider as unfavourable. The 'issue' should also be such as is beyond an individual to handle it by himself. If an individual wants a job and has to compete with others for getting it, then it is merely an individual problem. Likewise, if an individual has become addicted to drugs and has to seek admission to a psychiatric institute or a community centre for deaddiction, that is his/her personal problem. On the other hand, if 35 million persons are unemployed in villages and cities in a country, and no single individual can do anything effective about it, what is needed to solve the problem is an organized group or social effort. Thus, a problem may be an individual problem under one set of circumstances and a social problem under another.

But social problems change with the passage of time. What was not considered a social problem a few decades ago may become a crucial social problem today or two decades later. For example, the population explosion in our country was not viewed as a social problem up to the late 40s of the 20th century but from the early 1950s it has come to be perceived as a very crucial socio-economic problem. Social change creates new conditions in which an issue comes to be identified as a social problem. Similarly, youth unrest in India was not a problem upto the 1940s but in the 1950s and the 1960s it became a problem and in the 1970s and the 1980s it became a very serious one and continues to be so even today.

Let us examine a few more viewpoints on the concept of 'social problem'. Fuller and Myers (1941: 320) have defined a social problem as "a condition which is defined by a considerable number of persons as a deviation from some social norms which they cherish". Merton and Nisbet (1971: 184) hold that a social problem is "a way of behaviour that is regarded by a substantial part of a social order as being in violation of one or more generally accepted or approved norms". This definition may apply to some problems like alcoholism, corruption and communalism, but not to problems like

population explosion. Some problems are created not by the abnormal and deviant behaviour of the individuals but by the normal and accepted behaviour. Raab and Selznick (1959: 32) maintain that a social problem is "a problem in human relationships which seriously threatens society or impedes the important aspirations of many people". According to Carr (1955: 306), "a social problem exists whenever we become conscious of a difficulty, a gap between our preferences and reality". Blumer (1971: 19) writes that "social problems involve actions or patterns of behaviour that are viewed by a substantial number of persons in the society as being deleterious to the society or in violation of societal norms, and about which ameliorative action is seen as both possible and desirable". Landis (1959) is of the opinion that "social problems are men's unfulfilled aspirations for welfare". Case (1976: 310) has said that "a social problem refers to any situation which attracts the attention of a considerable number of competent observers within a society and appeals to them as calling for readjustment or remedy by social (that is, collective) action of some kind or other".

Horton and Leslie (1970: 4) write that a social problem is "a condition affecting a significant number of people in ways considered undesirable, about which it is felt that something can be done through collective social action". Though this definition emphasizes that a social problem is a condition "affecting a significant number of people" it does not give the exact number of people who must be affected. It only points out that 'enough people' should be affected so that notice is taken of it and people begin to talk and write about it. One way of 'measuring public concern' about a condition is to assess the number of articles devoted to it in popular magazines. Thus, the problem of 'environmental pollution' in India was not taken up earnestly till the beginning of the 1980s, manifested by the fact that not many articles appeared on this issue in newspapers and magazines. The appearance of numerous articles in the last twenty years or so indicates that the condition has attracted widespread consideration, and has become a social problem.

Another element in the definition which needs attention is "in ways considered undesirable". The custom of *sati* in India was not a social problem as long as most people thought it was desirable. When Raja Ram Mohan Roy took initiative and a considerable number of people came to support him and started criticizing the practice as harmful and awful, only then did the custom turn into a social problem. In recent times, it was only after the incident of Roop Kanwar, a 21-year-old Rajput girl, who committed *sati* on the funeral pyre of her husband in Deorala in Sikar district in Rajasthan in September 1987 that this practice came to be condemned, and an Act was passed in February 1988 in the state of Rajasthan prescribing serious penalty for persons forcing a woman to commit *sati*.

A social problem, thus, involves a value judgement, a feeling that a condition is detrimental and requires change. Political corruption came to be viewed as a social problem only after the 1970s, though it was prevalent in our country earlier too. Issues like wife battering and child abuse are yet to be accepted as serious social problems.

Conditions that cannot be changed or evaded are also not accepted as social problems. Thus, famine was not considered a social problem until recently because of the widespread belief that the scantiness of rains was the result of the wrath of the rain-god. Today, famine in states like Rajasthan is viewed as a social problem and is seen to be the result of the failure on the part of government to complete the Rajasthan Canal because of the scarcity of economic resources and such similar reasons. The scarcity of drinking water became a social problem only when it was realized that it was not a misfortune to be endured but "something could be done" to remove this scarcity. Thus, it is the belief and hope in the possibility of prevention and treatment that causes people to consider situation as a social problem.

The last portion in the definition of Horton and Leslie is 'collective action'. A social problem cannot be solved by an individual or a few individuals. All social problems are social in treatment, that is, it is believed that they can be tackled only by public concern, discussion, opinion formation and pressure.

According to Weinberg (1960: 4), social problems are "behaviour patterns or conditions which arise from social processes and are considered so objectionable or undesirable by many members of a society that they recognize that corrective policies, programmes and services are necessary to cope with them". Weinberg gives six characteristics of social problems as under:

1. Social problems arise by being collectively defined as objectionable by many members of the community. Thus, adverse conditions not defined by the community as reprehensible are not considered as social problems. For example, if taking alcohol is not regarded as objectionable by society, it is not considered a social problem. But as society recognizes and discusses the problems inherent in alcohol consumption, studies its consequences and devises a plan of corrective action to control it, it comes to be defined as a social problem even though the original situation may not have changed.
2. Social problems change when the concerned behavioural patterns are interpreted differently. For example, till a few decades ago, mental illness was viewed as insanity and it was considered so disgraceful that the families kept the member's mental illness a secret. Now, the behaviour of a mentally-ill person is seen only as one type of 'deviant behaviour'

which requires psychiatric and social treatment. Thus, the problem of mental illness today is met more realistically and effectively.

3. Mass media (newspapers, internet, television, radio, movies) play an important role in creating awareness about the scope and urgency of social problems.
4. Social problems have to be viewed in the context of society's values and institutions; for example, the problem of racial conflict in the United States is different from the problem of untouchability in India.
5. Social problems need to be analysed in terms of the influences upon them by group processes and social relationships.
6. Since social problems vary historically, contemporary social problems are the society's concern, that is, the problem of refugee settlement in India in 1947–48 was different from the problem of settling refugees from Assam in 1968, or the Tamils from Sri Lanka in 1988–89, or the Indians from Kuwait and Iraq in September 1990. Similarly, the problem of immigrants in the United Kingdom in 1988 was different than it was in 1967 or 1947.

Characteristics of Social Problems

On the basis of the above definitions, we can identify the following characteristics of social problems:

- All social problems are situations which have injurious consequences for society.
- All social problems are deviations from the 'ideal' situation.
- All social problems have some common basis of origin.
- All social problems are social in origin.
- All social problems are caused by pathological social conditions.
- All social problems are interconnected.
- All social problems are social in their results, that is, they affect all sections of society.
- The responsibility for social problems is *social*, that is, they require a collective approach for their solution.
- All social problems occur in all societies.

Reactions to Social Problems

Different people react differently to social problems. The differences may be explained in terms of the following four factors:

- (i) *An attitude of unconcern*: Many people remain indifferent to a problem thinking that it does not affect them. Sometimes their own individual problems like family tensions and job pressures keep them so

engaged that they do not find time to be interested in what affects others. It is only when their own interests are involved that they become agitated and start taking interest in the problem.

(ii) *Fatalism*: Some people are so fatalistic that they attribute everything to destiny. Issues like poverty and unemployment are explained in terms of misfortunes and past *karma*. They, therefore, suffer the misfortune quietly and wait for some miracle to happen.

(iii) *Vested interest*: Some people take no interest in the existing problems because they stand to gain so long as the problem exists. Motivated by self-interest, they describe the problem as insoluble and talk about its eradication as a waste of time.

(iv) *Absence of expert knowledge*: Some people, though deeply concerned about the problem, do not take much interest in it believing that its solution is impossible unless people change their attitudes and values. As the changes must be initiated by a change in outlook, they remain unconcerned about finding alternative possibilities of treatment. Dowry is one such problem in our society.

Some people have incorrect, unreliable and superficial knowledge or fallacies about social problems. We can point out eight such feelings.

One, it is wrong to believe that there is agreement among all people on the nature of the social problems. For example, some people think that drug abuse is a social problem in India while others are convinced on the basis of the empirical studies conducted in different parts of the country pointing out to the low magnitude of drug abuse, that it cannot be perceived as a social problem. Similarly, for some people in India, untouchability is no longer a social problem after the measures adopted since independence to emancipate the Harijans, whereas for others, it is still a social problem. They even refer to the harassment and beating up of the Harijans who were prevented from entering the Nathdwara temple in Rajasthan in September 1988 which provoked the then President of India Shri R. Venkataraman to declare that he was willing to lead a procession of Harijans to enter the Nathdwara temple. Thus, on some problems there may be complete agreement and on others there may be little agreement as to their existence.

Two, it is fallacious to believe that social problems are caused by nature and are, therefore, inevitable. In fact, no social problem is beyond human control if certain social arrangements are changed.

Three, it is a misnomer to believe that social problems are caused by selfish, brutal, exploitative and indifferent people or by the wilful wickedness of a few. In fact, many problems are caused by the good people because they either mind their own business or they remain indifferent and callous to certain issues. For example, the growth of slums which promotes family

disorganization and increases certain kinds of crime is the result of the callousness of rich persons and politicians. However, these people do not have any 'evil motive' in their indifference or thinking and behaviour. It may, therefore, be said that a social problem is the product of certain social practices and not of wilful wickedness of certain individuals.

Four, it is wrong to believe that social problems are created by talking about them. The problems are caused not because people irresponsibly talk about them and thus incite others or stir up trouble or evoke hatred and so on. In fact, people are often mobilized to solve problems and initiate action against the factors that perpetuate the problem.

Five, it is incorrect to assume that all people like to see the social problems solved, for example, the conservative Brahmins may not be interested in taking up the issue of untouchability for discussion; or many Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other backward castes/classes people may prefer to remain 'backward' for fear of losing out on the reservation benefits; or many capitalists may not be in favour of full employment for fear of not getting adequate workers at low wages; or many landlords may not be interested in constructing more houses and reducing the problem of housing shortage for fear of getting low rents; or owners of one-room tenements in slum areas may not be interested in slum clearance because of their vested interests. Thus, a sizeable number of people can be found to be disinterested in solving social problems because of vested interests.

Six, it is not correct to believe that social problems if left on their own will solve themselves. The feeling that time will solve all problems is unsound and unrealistic in this age. It is only a rationalization for inactivity. It may, in fact, aggravate the problems, especially problems like poverty, pollution and population.

Seven, the feeling that unravelling facts will solve the problem is not correct. Though it is true that no problem can be intelligently understood without collecting complete facts about it, it is also true that without scientifically interpreting the gathered data, measures cannot be taken to solve a problem. For example, the mere collection of the facts on the magnitude of the problem of drug abuse among youth, the nature of drugs used by them, the methods of using drugs, the sources of getting drugs and the withdrawal syndromes will not help much in suggesting measures to control the drug misuse unless we analyse and interpret facts like the reasons for taking drugs, the role of peer group and the role of family in controlling drug abuse. Thus, data in itself is nothing; it is the objective interpretation of the data which is meaningful.

Eight, it is untrue to think that problems can be solved without institutional changes. In a way, it is impossible to solve problems without planning,

without structural changes, without adjustments and adaptations, or without altering the existing institutions and practices. For example, we cannot eradicate corruption unless people change their values and beliefs, the laws are enacted, the courts set examples by giving retributive and deterrent punishment to corrupt people in high positions, including corrupt politicians, and so on. Many a time, a solution to one of the problems creates many new problems to be solved. Since change in institutions and values comes slowly, solving a problem is not easy and quick and takes considerable time. Sometimes we succeed in changing some conditions and thus in partly reducing the magnitude or the frequency of the problem. We may not be able to eliminate crime completely but we can surely reduce the rate of crime in society by checking the frustrations of people and providing them with alternatives to compensate failure in one field with success in another. It may not be possible to eliminate family disorganization but it is surely possible to find means to reduce tensions in family. Thus, it may not be possible to locate solutions to all problems, but there are prospects of achieving some success in reducing the personal suffering due to social problems.

Causes of Social Problems

Social problems arise out of pathological social conditions. They occur in all societies—simple (that is, small, isolated and homogeneous with a strong sense of group solidarity, and which change slowly) as well as complex (which are characterized by impersonal secondary relations, anonymity, loneliness, high mobility and extreme specialization, and where change is faster). What it means is that wherever and whenever a relationship is affected between a group of individuals, it leads to maladjustments and conflicts.

Three factors are important in the understanding of the causal factors in social problems:

- (1) The causal conditions are numerous. Broadly, the potential causes of social problems found in social environment are: (a) contradictions in social systems, (b) malfunctioning of economic systems, (c) lack of change in religious systems, and (d) defective functioning of political systems.
- (2) Social problems provide a strong basis of common causal factors.
- (3) Social problems are interrelated and interdependent in the sense that they are cumulatively promotive and provocative, that is, they foster and encourage one another.

Reinhardt (1952: 7-12) has referred to three factors in the development of social problems:

(i) Differentiation and multiplication of interests and functions

The principle that the greater the number of parts in a machine or an organism, the greater will be the probability of maladjustment among the parts, holds good for human societies too, where there is increased opportunity for the collision of interests of various individuals, groups, institutions and systems. Untouchability, communal riots and political crimes are the social problems which are the result of the clash of interests of different castes and classes.

(ii) Accelerating frequency of social change or growth of civilization

This has been made possible due to the multiplication of scientific and mechanical innovations. For example, the invention of machines has destroyed many old forms of employment resulting in the migration of millions of people, and has given rise to class conflicts. It is, thus, the structural and functional maladjustments arising from revolutionary inventions which create many social problems.

(iii) Man's developed insight to make a scientific analysis

Ever since man has developed his social insight of looking into the working of nature, issues which were formerly regarded as simple are now perceived as the result of various kinds of natural conditions which influence man and society.

Theoretical Approaches to Social Problems

Social problems have been analysed scientifically. Below we examine some of the theoretical approaches which present universal explanations for all types of social problems:

Social Disorganization Approach

Social disorganization is a condition of a society, community or group in which there is a breakdown of social control, or of a social order, or of formal and informal norms that define permissible behaviour. It is characterized by the lack of co-operation, common values, unity, discipline and predictability. Warren (1949: 83-87) has described it as a condition involving (a) lack of consensus (disagreement about group purposes), (b) lack of integration of institutions (often working at cross purposes), and (c) inadequate means of social control (preventing individuals from playing their individual roles due to confusion). Elliott and Merrill (1950: 20) have defined it as a process by which relationships between members of a group are broken or dissolved.

Social disorganization occurs when there is a change in the equilibrium of forces, a breakdown of the social structure so that the former patterns no

longer apply, and the accepted forms of social control no longer function effectively. This disruptive condition of society, which is evidenced by normlessness, role conflict, social conflicts, and demoralization, increases social problems. For example, increasing industrialization, spread of education, and women taking up paid work have affected the relations between husband and wife, and between parents and children. Many of the old norms which governed the intra-family and inter-family relations seem to have broken down. Many people feel frustrated and unhappy. This is the condition of social disorganization, in which changes in the basic conditions of life, causing breakdown of traditional norms, have resulted in widespread discontentment and disillusionment. In other words, change has disrupted the organization of the formal system of behaviour. Talking of social disorganization in slum life, Whyte (1955: 268) has referred to deviant or non-approved group organization in slums.

However, according to one school of thought, the state of social disorganization does not always create social problems. For example, during Hitler's regime, Germany was not a disorganized society nor during Stalin's regime was the Soviet Union in a state of disorganization; yet many conditions in these countries were shocking "deviations from the social ideal, demanding social action", that is, there were social problems. Reacting to this view, some scholars say that even if the social disorganization theory may not explain all social problems, it does explain some of the social problems, for example, mental illness may not be a symptom of a disorganized society but corruption in the society does lead to the malfunctioning of institutions, lack of perfect consensus and the evasion of social control by some citizens.

In employing the social disorganization approach to social problems (Horton and Leslie, 1970: 33), one looks to factors like: What were the traditional norms and practices? What were the major changes that made them ineffective? What are the old rules which have broken down partially or completely? What is the nature and direction of social change? Who are the disgruntled groups and what solutions do they propose? How do various proposed solutions fit in with the trend of social change? What may become the accepted rules in the future?

Cultural Lag Approach

Culture lag is a situation in which some parts of a culture change at a faster rate than other related parts resulting in the disruption of integration and equilibrium of the culture; for example, the material culture changes more rapidly than the non-material culture in industrial societies through rapid advances in science and technology (Ogburn, 1966). The theory of culture lag, in particular, holds that in modern societies there has been a tendency for change in the political,

educational, family and religious institutions to fall behind technological changes. It is thus easy to see how culture lag can create social problems. Even after rapid industrialization in the last quarter of the 19th century and in the first quarter of the 20th century, some people were so influenced by the rigid restrictions of the caste system that they refused to work with members of other castes in the industries and preferred to remain unemployed and poor. The first quarter of the 20th century, thus, remained a period of culture lag. It took more than a generation to adapt ourselves to technological development in agriculture and industry. Our social institutions, thus, retained the traditional flavour whereas technology advanced in the world.

Though the culture lag theory explains some of the social problems (like AIDS, population explosion, etc.), it does not explain all social problems. It, therefore, cannot be accepted as a universal explanation of all social problems.

Value Conflict Approach

A value is a generalized principle of behaviour to which the members of a group feel a strong, emotionally-toned positive commitment and which provides a standard for judging specific acts and goals. Each member of the group is expected to remain committed to the values accepted by the group. Values, thus, provide the generalized standards of behaviour. Examples of values are equality, justice, communal harmony, patriotism, mobility, collectivism, compromise, sacrifice, adjustment and so forth. Because of the strong emotional feeling attached to values and because they serve as standards for judging concrete goals or actions, they are often regarded as absolute (Theodorson, 1969: 456).

Different groups have different systems of values. Incompatibility between the values of two or more groups to the extent that the role performance of individuals is interfered with is called 'value conflict'. This state of conflict may last only a short while or it may be a persistent problem. For example, conflict in values of workers and employers leads to industrial unrest, strikes and lockouts; or conflict in values between land owners and landless labourers leads to agrarian unrest or agricultural labourers' movements; or the liberal businessmen may believe in encouraging hard work, thrift, honesty and ambition and may reward these virtues financially, but on the other hand, the conservatives may differ profoundly with this view and may believe in the profit motive and individual initiative. Liberals and conservatives thus differ not only on matters of policies but more profoundly on those of values.

The value conflict theorists like Waller, Fuller, Cuber and Harper hold that clashes in value system are of basic importance in the origin and

development of social problems. Waller (1936: 924) has referred to the conflict between 'organizational' and 'humanitarian' values. The former favour private property and individualism, while the latter are votaries of remedying the misfortunes of others.

But this theoretical approach is too vague. The propounders have not explained their views in concrete details. It is true that our current values overemphasize money and material possessions and this attitude encourages corruption, smuggling, drug trafficking, black marketing and taking of bribes but problems like white-collar crime cannot be reduced to a conflict of values. The problem of divorce may be the result of value conflict but all family problems cannot be explained merely in terms of disagreements between husband and wife or parents and children. Agreement on common values helps in maintaining harmonious interpersonal relations in family or outside it but it is not the only thing needed for family stability or group success. Thus, the value conflict theory may be useful in some areas like economics, and in the analysis of social problems, but it certainly cannot be accepted as a universal explanation.

On applying the value conflict approach, questions which are generally asked (Horton and Leslie, 1970: 40) are: What are the values that are in conflict? How deep is the value conflict? What groups in the society hold to each of the competing values? How powerful are they? Which values are more consistent with other larger values such as democracy and freedom? What value sacrifices would each solution require? Are some problems insoluble at present because of certain irreconcilable value conflicts?

Personal Deviation Approach

Deviation is non-conformity to social norms. It is different from abnormal behaviour because the latter connotes psychological illness rather than social maladjustment or conflict. Thus, people who deviate from social norms are not necessarily mentally ill.

In the social disorganization approach to social problems, one looks to the rules that have broken down and the changes that have taken place because of the breaking of the rules. In personal deviation approach, one looks to the motivation and behaviour of the deviants who are instrumental in causing the problems. Two factors that need explanation in the personal deviation approach are: (i) How does personal deviancy develop? (ii) What types of personal deviation are frequently involved in social problems? Personal deviancy develops because of either (a) an individual's inability to follow generally accepted norms, or (b) an individual's failure to accept generally accepted norms. The first is caused because of a person's emotional,

social or biological deficiency, that is, some persons are so constituted biologically, emotionally, or socially that they are incapable of adhering consistently to generally accepted standards. The socially deficient do not truly violate norms; rather they manifest an inability to learn and follow the norms. The cause of emotional deficiency is bio-psychological. These deviants that constitute social problems and also contribute to problems often require medical, psychiatric and environmental or social therapies. On the other hand, an individual's failure to accept social norms has something to do with deficiency in socialization. These individuals, though have learnt the norms and values like honesty, truthfulness, integrity, justice and cooperation, they cannot put them into practice. They remain disposed to telling lies, cheating, exploiting, defaming others when it suits their purposes. Their deviance does not produce any guilt feeling or shame in them. They may change sides abruptly and completely on a social issue if it serves their purpose. They care little whether social problems exist and whether they are solved or not so long the situation can be used for their vested interest.

Horton and Leslie (1970: 35–36) have referred to three types of personal deviations: (i) Deviation that results from conformity to norms of diverse reference groups. Because of cultural variability, most people are exposed to different sets of norms that may be in conflict with one another. For example, a person may belong to one religion or caste but his professional role may literally force him to deviate from the norms of his religion/caste. Similarly, a clerk as well as an officer may accept bribe because it serves economic interests. (ii) Deviation that results from the existence of deviant sub-cultures, for example, the criminal norms in slum areas of large cities. (iii) Outright deviation from generally accepted norms. Deliberately hiding one's income while filling income tax returns provides a good example of this type of deviation.

In applying the personal deviation approach to social problems, the questions asked (Horton and Leslie, 1970: 37) are: What deviant persons/groups are involved? Are deviants themselves the problem or they help create the problem? What deviant sub-cultures are involved? What alternatives are there for dealing with the deviants?

Anomie Approach

This approach was propounded by Merton. Anomie is a condition characterized by the relative absence or weakening or confusion of norms and values in a society or a group. The concept of anomie was originally developed by Durkheim to explain division of labour and suicide but it was Merton who used this concept 41 years after the publication of Durkheim's book *Suicide* to explain deviant behaviour in terms of functioning of social and cultural structures in the society (Merton, 1938: 672–73). Anomie involves a breakdown in

the cultural structure, occurring particularly when there is disjunction between cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accordance with them.

Anomie is the counterpart of the idea of social solidarity. Just as social solidarity is a state of collective ideological integration, anomie is a state of confusion, insecurity and normlessness. According to Merton, the disjunction between goals and means and the consequent strain leads to the weakening of men's commitment to the culturally prescribed goals or institutionalized means, that is, to a state of anomie. Merton maintains that people adapt themselves to this disjunction either by rejecting the cultural goals or the institutionalized means or both. He gives four varieties of deviant behaviour. Merton, thus, locates the sources of strain not in the characteristics of individuals but in the culture and/or social structure. He says, "the social problem arises not from people failing to live upto the requirements of their social statuses but from the faulty organization of these statuses into a reasonably coherent social system" (Merton and Nisbet, 1971: 823).

However, Merton's theory is incomplete and inadequate. All social problems cannot be perceived as the result of the responses to strains or mode of adaptation and adjustment.

Types of Social Problems

Social problems encountered in a society are usually diverse in nature. The factors responsible can be categorized as follows: (i) *economic*, usually in the form of poverty, unemployment, etc., (ii) *cultural*, usually in the form of divorce, juvenile delinquency, etc., (iii) *biological*, usually in the form of infectious diseases, food poisoning, etc., and (iv) *psychological*, usually in the form of neurological disease, a cult, etc.

Case (1964: 34) has described four types of social problems on the basis of their origin: (i) which are rooted in some aspect of the physical environment; (ii) which are inherent in the nature or distribution of the population involved; (iii) which result from poor social organization; and (iv) which evolve from a conflict of cultural values within the society.

According to Fuller and Myers (1941: 367), there are three types of problems: (i) *physical problems*: though these are problems for the society but their causes are not based on value conflicts, for example, floods and famines; (ii) *ameliorative problems*: there is consensus about the effects of these problems but there are differences pertaining to their solutions, for example, crime, poverty, and AIDS; and (iii) *moral problems*: there is no consensus pertaining to the nature or causes of these problems, for example, gambling, alcoholism, drug abuse and divorce.

Methods of Studying Social Problems

While scientific methods are basically similar for all sciences, scientific techniques differ, for techniques are the particular ways in which scientific methods are applied to a particular problem. Each science, therefore, develops a series of techniques which fit the body of material it studies. What are the techniques of sociological research in studying social problems? Three methods have mainly been used in studying social problems, namely, (i) case study method, (ii) social survey method, and (iii) multiple factor method. Each method has certain advantages as well as limitations.

Case Study Method

The case study is a complete, detailed account of an event, situation, or development. This method is qualitative instead of quantitative. It analyses the social process involved in the development of a social problem as well as in the causal analysis. It focuses on the sequence of events, motivations of persons, social influences affecting persons and events, social relations, sub-cultures and so forth (Bettelheim, 1955: 318). For collecting information, it depends on both primary and secondary sources like documents, letters and newspapers (Gordon, 1942). Depending on the nature of the social problem, the case study can be used to study a sub-culture of deviants such as that of organized criminals, black marketeers, smugglers, drug addicts, etc.

Perhaps, the greatest value of the case study is in the suggestion of hypotheses, which can then be tested by other methods. For instance, much of our reliable knowledge about adult crime, female crime, juvenile delinquency and crime against women has developed through the testing of hypotheses which were suggested by early case studies of criminals, delinquents, victims of violence, etc. These hypotheses are not often tested by the case study method but by other methods. A generalization cannot be based on a single case, for a case can be found to 'prove' almost anything (Horton, 1984: 34). Generalizations are based on a large mass of carefully processed data and the collection of a great many case studies is expensive. Also, it is difficult to 'add up' a number of case studies or compute averages or other statistical computations. Therefore, case studies are seldom used when seeking to test a hypothesis.

In analysing the causes of a social problem, the case study method is a qualitative procedure which seeks to formulate generalizations about the development of subject's behaviour. One example of this is the analysis of causes of drug addiction. By exhaustive probing of case after case and the comparing of crucial cases, Lindesmith (1948: 13-15) compared addicts with non-addicts who received drugs for a long time without becoming addicted. This enabled him to isolate the causal processes of addiction that were absent in cases of non-addiction.