

1. DEFINITION OF SOCIOLOGY

'Sociology' which had once been treated as social philosophy, or the philosophy of history, emerged as an independent social science in the 19th century. *Auguste Comte*, a Frenchman, is traditionally considered to be the father of sociology. Comte is accredited with the coining of the term *sociology* (in 1839). "Sociology" is composed of two words : *socius*, meaning companion or associate; and '*logos*', meaning science or study. The etymological meaning of "sociology" is thus the *science of society*. *John Stuart Mill*, another social thinker and philosopher of the 19th century, proposed the word *ethology* for this new science. *Herbert Spencer* developed his systematic study of society and adopted the word "sociology" in his works. With the contributions of Spencer and others it (sociology) became the permanent name of the new science.

The question '*what is sociology*' is, indeed, a question pertaining to the definition of sociology. No student can rightfully be expected to enter on a field of study which is totally undefined or unbounded. At the same time, it is not an easy task to set some fixed limits to a field of study. It is true in the case of sociology. Hence it is difficult to give a brief and a comprehensive definition of sociology.

Sociology has been defined in a number of ways by different sociologists. No single definition has yet been accepted as completely satisfactory. In fact, there are as many definitions of sociology as there are sociologists. For our purpose of study a few definitions may be cited here.

1. *Auguste Comte*, the founding father of sociology, defines sociology as the science of social phenomena "subject to natural and invariable laws, the discovery of which is the object of investigation".

2. *Kingsley Davis* says that "Sociology is a general science of society".

3. *Harry M. Johnson* opines that "sociology is the science that deals with social groups".

4. *Emile Durkheim* defines sociology as the "science of social institutions".

5. *Park* regards sociology as "the science of collective behaviour".

6. *Small* defines sociology as "the science of social relations".

7. *Marshal Jones* defines sociology as "the study of man-in-relationship-to-men".

8. *Ogburn and Nimkoff* define sociology as "the scientific study of social life".

9. *Franklin Henry Giddings* defines sociology as "the science of social phenomena".

10. *Henry Fairchild* defines sociology as "the study of man and his human environment in their relations to each other".

11. *Max Weber* defines sociology as "the science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a casual explanation of its course and effects".

12. *Alex Inkeles* says, "Sociology is the study of systems of social action and of their inter-relations".

13. *Kimball Young and Raymond W. Mack* define sociology as "the scientific study of the social aspects of human life".

14. *Morris Ginsberg*: Of the various definitions of sociology the one given by Morris Ginsberg seems to be more satisfactory and comprehensive. He defines sociology in the following way: "*In the broadest sense, sociology is the study of human interactions and inter-relations, their conditions and consequences*".

A careful examination of various definitions cited above, makes it evident that sociologists differ in their opinion about the definition of sociology. Their divergent views about the definition of sociology only reveal their distinct approaches to its study. However, the common idea underlying all the definitions mentioned above is that sociology is concerned with man, his social relations and his society.

4. USES OF SOCIOLOGY

Of the various social sciences, sociology seems to be the youngest. It is gradually developing. Still it has made remarkable progress. Its uses are recognised widely today. In modern times, there is a growing realisation of the importance of the scientific study of social phenomena and the means of promoting what *Prof. Giddings* calls *human adequacy* (human welfare).

The study of sociology has a great value especially in modern complex society. Some of the uses of sociology are as follows:

(i) *Sociology studies society in a scientific way.* Before the emergence of sociology, there was no systematic and scientific attempt to study human society with all its complexities. Sociology has made it possible to study society in a scientific manner. This scientific knowledge about human society is needed in order to achieve progress in various fields.

(ii) *Sociology throws more light on the social nature of man.* Sociology delves deep into the social nature of man. It tells us why man is a social animal, why he lives in groups, communities and societies. It examines the relationship between individual and society, the impact of society on man and other matters.

(iii) *Sociology improves our understanding of society and increases the power of social action.* The science of society assists an individual to understand himself, his capacities, talents and limitations. It enables him to adjust himself to the environment. Knowledge of society, social groups, social institutions, associations, their functions etc., helps us to lead an effective social life.

(iv) *The study of sociology helps us to know not only our society and men but also others, their motives, aspirations, status, occupations, traditions, customs, institutions, culture etc.* In a huge industrialised society our experience is comparatively limited. We can hardly have a comprehensive knowledge of our society and rarely have an idea regarding other societies. But we must have some insight into an appreciation of the motives by which others live and the conditions under which they exist. Such an insight we derive from the study of sociology.

(v) *The contribution of sociology is not less significant in enriching culture.* Sociology has given training to us to have rational approach to questions concerning ourselves, our religion, customs, mores, institutions, values, ideologies, etc. It has made us to become more objective, rational, critical and dispassionate. The study of societies has made people to become more broad minded. It has impressed upon its students to overcome their prejudices, misconceptions, egoistic ambitions, and class and religious hatreds. It has made our life richer, fuller and meaningful.

(vi) *Another aspect of the practical side of sociology is the study of great social institutions and the relations of individuals of each one of them.* The home and family, the school and education, the state and government, industry and work, religion and morality, marriage and family, law and legislation, property and government, etc. are some of the main institutions, through which our society functions. More than that, they condition our life in countless ways. Knowledge of sociology may help to strengthen them to serve man better.

(vii) *Sociology is useful as a teaching subject too.* Sociology is a profession in which technical competence brings its own rewards. Sociologists, especially those trained in research procedures, are in increasing demand in business, government, industry, city planning, race relations, social work, social welfare, supervision, advertising, communications, administration, and many other areas of community life. A few years ago, sociologists could only teach sociology in schools and colleges. But *sociology has now become practical enough to be practised outside of academic halls.* Careers apart from teaching are now possible in sociology. The various areas of applied sociology are coming more and more into prominence in local, state, national and international levels.

(viii) *The need for the study of sociology is greater especially in underdeveloped countries.* Sociologists have now drawn the attention of economists regarding the social factors that have contributed to the economic backwardness of a few countries. Economists have now realised the impor-

tance of sociological knowledge in analysing the economic affairs of a country.

(ix) *The study of society is of paramount importance in solving social problems.* The present world is beset with several social problems of great magnitude like poverty, beggary, unemployment, prostitution, over-population, family disorganisation, community disorganisation, racial problems, crime, juvenile delinquency, gambling, alcoholism, youth unrest, untouchability etc. A careful analysis of these problems is necessary in order to solve them. Sociology provides such an analysis.

(x) *Sociological knowledge is necessary for understanding and planning of society.* Social planning has been made easier by sociology. Sociology is often considered a vehicle of social reform and social reorganisation. It plays an important role in the reconstruction of society.

(xi) *The practical utility of sociological techniques:* The techniques developed by the sociologists and other social scientists are adopted by others. Let us think the example of social survey. Developed and used mainly by sociologists and statisticians, it has become an essential tool of market research and political polling. In the same way, sociologists provide a great deal of information that is helpful in making decisions on social policy.

(xii) *Study of society has helped several governments to promote the welfare of the tribal people.* Not only the civilised societies, but even the tribal societies are faced with several socio-economic and cultural problems. Studies conducted by sociologists and anthropologists regarding tribal societies and problems have helped many governments in undertaking various social welfare measures to promote the welfare of the tribal people. Efforts are now being made to treat the tribals on par with the rest of the civilised people.

(xiii) *Sociology has drawn our attention to the intrinsic worth and dignity of man.* Sociology has been greatly responsible in changing our attitudes towards fellow human beings. It has helped people to become catholic in outlook and broadminded in spirit. It has made people to become tolerant and patient towards others. It has minimised the mental distance and reduced the gap between different peoples and communities.

(xiv) *Sociology is of great practical help in the sense, it keeps us up-to-date on modern social situations and developments.* Sociology makes us to become more alert towards the changes and developments that take place around us. As a result, we come to know about our changed roles and expectations and responsibilities.

(xv) Finally, as Prof. Giddings has pointed out "*Sociology tells us how to become what we want to be*".

In conclusion, it can be said that the question of '*value of sociology*' is not a question whether or not we should study a subject. But it is a simple question of how it is actually to be used. Sociology, in short, has both individual and social advantages.

5. THE THREE MAJOR THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIOLOGY

The Concept of "Theoretical Perspective"

Sociologists view society differently. They have their own way of understanding society and its dynamics in a theoretical manner. For example:

- (i) Some see the social world basically as a stable and an ongoing unity. They are impressed with the endurance of the family, organized religion and other social institutions. [This represents the "*functionalist perspective*"]
- (ii) Some other sociologists see society as composed of many groups in conflict, competing for scarce resources. [This denotes the "*conflict perspective*".]
- (iii) To other sociologists, the most interesting aspects of the social world are the everyday life, routine interactions among individuals that we sometimes take for granted. [This signifies the "*interactionist perspective*".]

It is clear from the above, that the same society or social phenomenon can be approached or

viewed or studied from different theoretical perspectives". The theoretical perspectives refer to "*broad assumptions about society and social behaviour that provide a point of view for the study of specific problems*". [Ian Robertson - Page: 16.]

Types of Major Perspective in Sociology

Our sociological imagination may help us to employ any of a number of theoretical perspectives or approaches in order to study human behaviour. From these approaches sociologists develop theories to explain specific types of behaviour. There are three of these general perspectives in modern sociology. They are (i) *the functionalist*, (ii) *the conflict*, and (iii) *the inter-actionist perspectives*. Let us look at each in turn.

(i) The Functionalist Perspective

The functionalist perspective draws its original inspiration from the work of Herbert Spencer and Durkheim. In the view of functionalists, society is like living organism in which each part of the organism contributes to its survival. Therefore, the functionalist perspective emphasises the way that parts of a society are structured to maintain its stability.

Spencer compared societies to living organisms. Any organism has a structure, that is, it consists of number of interrelated parts, such as a head, limbs, heart, blood veins, nervous system, and so on. Each of these parts has a *function* to play in the life of the total organism. Spencer further argued that in the same way, a society has a structure - it also further argued that in the same way, a society has a structure, it also consists of interrelated parts, such as the family, religion, state, education, economy, and so on. Each of these components also has a function that contributes to the overall stability of the social system. Modern structural-functionalism [which is usually referred to as *functionalism*] does not insist much on the analogy between a society and an organism. However, the general idea of society as a system of interrelated parts, persists even now.

Emile Durkheim's analysis of religion represented a critical contribution to the development of functionalism. Durkheim focused on the role of religion in reinforcing feelings of solidarity and unity within group life.

The work of Durkheim, Max Weber and other European sociologists greatly influenced Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), a Harvard University sociologist. For over four decades, Parsons dominated American sociology with his advocacy of functionalism. He saw society as a network of connected parts, each of which contributes to the maintenance of the system as a whole. "*Under the functionalist approach, if an aspect of social life does not serve some identifiable useful function or promote value consensus among members of a society - it will not be passed on from one generation to the next.*"

The functionalist theory assumes that society tends to be an organized, stable, well-integrated system, in which most members agree on basic values.

In the functionalist view, a society has an underlying tendency to be in equilibrium or balance. Social change is therefore, believed to be disruptive unless it takes place in a slow and gradual manner. Because changes in one part of the system normally brings about changes elsewhere in the system.

Functionalism presumes that a given element in the social system may have its own functions or dysfunctions. The proper '*functions*' add to the stability of the order, whereas the *dysfunctions* may disrupt the social equilibrium.

Functionalism makes a distinction between '*manifest functions*', that is, those that are obvious and intended, and '*latent functions*', that is, those that are unrecognized unintended.

An important criticism of the functional perspective is that it tends to be inherently conservative. This theory, it is said, fails to pay sufficient importance to the changes that take place in the system. Further, it is commented that this perspective ignores the element of conflict and its role in the social system.

(ii) The Conflict Perspective

The conflict perspective derives its strength and support from the work of Karl Marx, who saw the struggle between the social classes as the major fact of history. In contrast to functionalists' emphasis on stability and consensus, conflict sociologists see the social world in continual struggle.

The conflict theorists assume that societies are in a constant state of change, in which conflict is a permanent feature. Conflict does not necessarily imply outright violence. It includes tension, hostility, severe competition, and disagreement over goals and values. Conflict is not deemed here as an occasional event that disturbs the smooth functioning of the system. It is regarded as *a constant process and an inevitable part of social life*.

Karl Marx viewed struggle between social classes as inevitable because of the exploitation of workers under capitalism. Expanding on Marx's work sociologists and other social scientists have come to see conflict not merely as a class phenomenon but as a part of everyday life in all societies. Thus in studying any culture, organisation, or social group, sociologists want to know "*who benefits, who suffers, and who dominates at the expense of others*". They are concerned with conflicts between women and men, parents and children, cities and villages, rich and the poor, upper castes and the lower castes and so on. In studying such questions conflict theorists are interested in how society's institutions - including the family, government, religion, education, and the media, may help to maintain the privileges of some groups and keep others in a subservient position.

The conflict perspective dominated the Western European sociology and was largely neglected in American sociology until the sixties. Modern conflict theory, which is associated with such sociologists as C. Wright Mills (1956) and Lewis Coser (1956), does not focus, as Marx did, on class conflict. It sees conflict between many other groups such as the Whites and Negroes, Asians and the Europeans, and so on.

Conflict theorists are primarily concerned with the kinds of changes that conflict can bring about, whereas functionalists look for stability and consensus.

The conflict perspective is viewed as more "*radical*" and "*activist*". This is because of its emphasis on social change and redistribution of resources. The functionalist perspective, on the other hand, because of its focus on the stability of society, is generally seen as more "*conservative*". At present, the conflict perspective is accepted within the discipline of sociology as one valid way to gain insight into a society.

One important contribution of conflict theory is that it has encouraged sociologists to view society through the eyes of those people who rarely influence decision-making. Example, the Blacks in America and South Africa, the untouchables in India, the Hindu minorities in Pakistan, and so on. Similarly, feminist scholarship in sociology has helped us to have a better understanding of social behaviour. Thus a family's social standing is also now considered from the woman's point of view and not solely from the husband's position or income. Feminist scholars have also argued for a gender-balanced study of society in which women's experiences and contributions are visible as those of men.

The conflict perspective has its own limitations. It is also criticized. "*By focussing so narrowly on issues of competition and change, it fails to come to grips with the more orderly, stable, and less politically controversial aspects of social reality*". (Ian Robertson. Page 19)

(iii) The Interactionist Perspective

The functionalist and conflict perspectives both analyse society at the macro-level. These approaches attempt to explain society — wide patterns of behaviour. However, many contemporary sociologists are more interested in understanding society as a whole through an examination of social interactions at the micro-level small groups, two friends casually talking with one another, a family, and so forth. This is the interactionist perspective. This perspective generalizes about fundamental or everyday forms of social interaction. From these generalizations, interactionists seek to

explain both micro and macro-level behaviour.

The interactionist perspective in sociology was initially influenced by Max Weber. He had emphasized the importance of understanding the social world from the viewpoint of the individuals who act within it. Later developments in this theory have been strongly influenced by social psychology and by the work of early leaders in the Chicago School of Sociology, particularly George Herbert Mead.

"The interactionist perspective focuses on social behaviour in everyday life. It tries to understand how people create and interpret the situations they experience, and it emphasizes how countless instances of social interaction produce the larger structure of society - government, the economy and other institutions". This perspective presumes that it is only through these social behaviour of the people that society can come into being. Society is ultimately created, maintained, and changed by the social interaction of its members.

The interactionist perspective has a number of loosely linked approaches.

(i) Erving Goffman (1959), for example, takes a "dramaturgical" approach to social interaction. He sees social life as a form of theatre, in which people play different parts/roles and "stage-manage" their lives and the impressions they create on others.

(ii) George Homans (1961) prefers to have an "exchange" approach. He stresses on the way people control one another's behaviour by exchanging various forms of rewards and punishments for approved or disapproved behaviour.

(iii) Harold Garfinkel (1967) adopts what he calls an "ethno methodological" approach. This is only an attempt to find out how people themselves understand the routines of daily life. This approach focuses on how people view, describe, and explain shared meanings underlying everyday social life and social routines.

(iv) Blumer and his Symbolic Interaction (1969). Blumer preferred to stress on the symbolic interaction approach laid down by G.H. Mead in the thirties. *Symbolic interaction is the interaction that takes place between people through symbols - such as signs, gestures, shared rules, and most important, written and spoken language.* Much of this interaction takes place on a face-to-face basis, but it can also occur in other forms. For example, symbolic interaction is taking place between the author of this book and the readers who read the sentences here. Interaction occurs whenever we obey [or even disobey] a traffic signal, or a "Stick no Bills" notice. The essential point is that people do not respond to that meaning. For example, the words or sentences of this book, the red light of a traffic signal have no meaning in themselves. People learn to attach symbolic meaning to these things, and they order their lives on the basis of these meanings. We live in a symbolic as well as in a physical world. Our social life involves a constant process of interpreting the meanings of our own acts and those of others.

The interactionist perspective, in general, invites the sociologist to ask specific kinds of question: *What kinds of interaction are taking place between people, how do they understand and interpret what is happening to them, and why do they act toward others as they do?* Those who follow this perspective usually focus on the more minute, personal aspects of everyday life. For example, by what process an individual becomes a beggar or a prostitute or a criminal? How does someone learn to experience cigarette smoking as pleasurable? What tactics are used by a college lecturer to have class control? What strategies are resorted to by a political leader to convince the angry mob about a political decision taken by his party on an issue that would affect their interests? What happens, and why, if we stand too close to someone during a conversation? and so on.

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This perspective is also open to criticism. It neglects larger social institutions and societal processes, which have powerful effects on social interaction and on our personal experience.

An Evaluation of these Three Perspectives

These three perspectives - *functionalist*, *conflict* and the *interactionist* - represent three different ways of understanding the same reality, that is social phenomenon. Each of these perspectives starts from different assumptions, each leads the investigator to ask different kinds of questions, and each viewpoint is therefore likely to produce different types of conclusions. These perspectives seem to be contradictory also. But we cannot say that one is "*better*" than the other two, or even that they are always incompatible.

Each of these perspectives focuses on a different aspect of reality: (i) *functionalism*, primarily on social order and stability, (ii) *conflict theory*, primarily on tension and change, and (iii) *interactionism*, primarily on ordinary experiences of everyday life. Each of the perspectives has a part to play in the analysis of society.

All these three perspectives could be applied, for example, to the study of education, although each would focus on a different aspect of the institution. A *functionalist approach* would emphasise the functions that education plays in maintaining the social system as a whole. A *conflict approach* would emphasise that education is believed to be an important avenue to social and financial success in life. It stresses on the social class background of the pupil affecting his academic achievement. An *interactionist approach* would emphasise the daily activities within school. It would point to the forms of interaction between teachers and pupils, the influence of the student peer group over its individual members. None of these approaches can claim itself to be the only "*true*" one. Because, taken together they provide a broader and deeper understanding of the entire institution of education.

Sociology makes use of all the three perspectives since each offers unique insights into the same problem being studied. These perspectives overlap as their interests overlap.