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# UNIT 4 SOCIAL CONFLICT AND ITS RESOLUTION

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## 4.0 INTRODUCTION

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Any society be it Indian, British, American or Japanese is composed of different institutions and groups of people. These groups constituting the society have their own distinct identity. Besides, these groups have their own agenda to pursue. Further no nation or society has resources to meet the demands of all groups and stay in harmony. Consequently these groups while pursuing their goals often find themselves at logger heads to exploit scarce resources and maximise their gains or outcomes. Thus a social situation develops where different groups constituting the society are opposing each other to promote their own interest at the cost of others. This social phenomenon is termed social conflict or group conflict by sociologists, Psychologist and Anthropologists. Social conflict is also evident when one social group compares its gains and feels that it is being marginalised by other groups or when it perceives that it is being deprived of what is duly available to other groups in the society. In this unit we will be dealing with nature and definition of social conflict, the types and forms of social conflict the methods of resolution of the conflicts and we will be presenting the group conflict in Indian society.

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## 4.1 OBJECTIVES

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On completing this unit you, will be able to:

- 1 Define and describe social conflict;
- 1 Explain in your own words different types of social conflict;
- 1 Analyse the implications of social conflict on the lives of people;

- 1 Describe the different methods of conflict resolution; and
- 1 Analyse the different types of social conflict affecting Indian society.

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## 4.2 NATURE OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

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Social conflict or group conflict occurs when two or more actors oppose each other in social interaction, reciprocally exerting social power in an effort to attain scarce or incompatible goals and prevent the opponent from attaining them.

Group conflict or social conflict is a social relationship wherein the action is oriented intentionally for carrying out the actor's own will against the resistance of other party or parties.

If we analyse the above definitions following conclusions can be drawn:

Social conflict revolves around social power. In almost all kinds of social conflict struggle to get hold of power is central. Access to power or hold over power ensures a group's success in attaining its goal. Consequently the powerful group wins and the weaker one loses the competition. For example, the recent Gurjar movement in Rajasthan to get entry into scheduled tribes club was thwarted by Meenas, another tribe of Rajasthan.

This could be possible only because Meenas have proliferated in highest services of India and today they enjoy tremendous political, bureaucratic, and economic clout. This access to power has made them formidable. Therefore, they successfully thwarted Gurjars' attempt to share tribal status with and take a part of the cake of reservation from them.

Social conflict involves incompatibility in the sense that in social conflict some people are able to get what they want while others fail to get what they want. Thus for some their want remains an unfulfilled desire and they keep seething with discontent. This incompatibility once created develops into a vicious cycle which is broken only when some strong social reform movement takes place.

For example, for centuries people belonging to Harijan community were being maltreated by the so called upper class Hindus. They could raise their voice against it only when people like Mahatma Gandhi, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotiba Phule took cudgel against it and it converted into a movement of self-respect for Harijans that it was realised that these people need to be given fair treatment. Even then only a small dent could be made in the existing situation.

Mostly social situations are such that not all individuals in it have similar or identical interests. Every person participating in social interaction tries to maximise his gain at the expense of other person involved. This situation invariably leads to struggle to win and keeping others from goal. However, it is impossible to find a social situation which can be described as pure group conflict like struggle between two warring teams of football. In most social conflict situations element of cooperation is intertwined along with competition.

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## 4.3 FORMS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

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A social conflict may take different forms and manifest itself in different manners. However, psychologists have identified three different forms of social conflict which are as follow:

### **4.3.1 Overt Conflict**

In this form social conflict is open and explicit. Competition between both the parties is fierce and direct. For example, negotiation between management representatives and labour union or war between two countries. A more simple example of it is debate, in which one speaker emphasises and justifies his own point while questioning the validity of opponents point of view. The explicit aim is to defeat the opponent and ensure ones victory.

### **4.3.2 Objective Conflict**

Objective conflict occurs when one group tries to gain advantage over another group or groups. Thus by objective social conflict we mean a social situation inherently benefits some while causing loss to others. For example, it is often seen that when government takes some welfare steps, some people are more benefitted but some others receive less than expected benefits and still some others are at loss. This gives rise to a kind of social conflict known as objective social conflict.

Let us take the case reservation in jobs. OBC were given a quota of 27 % in Government jobs and this category included in it numerous castes. However, only a few of the dominant castes in OBC category— Jats, Ahir, Kurmy and Kumawat— were able to garner majority of the share in OBC quota and other castes like Gurjar, Luhars etc. could not reap much benefit. Result was that slowly members of these castes started feeling left out and began to clammer for a separate quota for them. Recent Gurjar movement for inclusion in the scheduled tribe category was a result of such objective conflict because Gurjars were not able to compete with Jats and Ahirs in the OBC category and could not obtain equal benefit.

### **4.3.3 Subjective Conflict**

When a person identifies or perceives a situation involving struggle it is known as subjective conflict. Sometimes a person remains in a state of subjective struggle without bringing it to overt level.

#### **Self Assessment Questions**

1) Define the Nature of social conflict.

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2) Describe the nature of social conflict.

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3) What are the forms of social conflict ?

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4) Describe overt conflict

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5) How is objective conflict different from subjective conflict?

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## 4.4 METHODS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Like any other problem Social psychologists have developed number of approaches for resolution of social conflict. Some of the main methods as follow:

*Mutually beneficial goal:* A common approach to ameliorate social conflict is to establish mutually beneficial goals. Such goals prompt the warring parties to work in close cooperation and help reduce feelings of group struggle. In a classical experiment Sherif and Sherif put two groups in a social situation which involved competition between the two parties. It was observed that very soon they developed feelings of animosity and competition. Things reached to a level where both parties raided each other's camps to hurt and damage their prospects of attaining goal. In the next phase of the experiment both the warring parties were put in a situation which called for joint efforts to reach the goal. Since neither of them had sufficient resources to attain goal on their own, they were left with no alternative but to help each other to surmount problems faced by them. Not longer than before it was observed that members of both parties began trying to understand each other's concerns. They started seeing members of opposite group very often and appreciated each other's approach to handle problems. Thus by the end of the experiment both the groups had developed better understanding of each other and there was a marked reduction in feeling of conflict.

*Compromise:* Reaching a compromise between the two parties also leads to reduction of struggle. Compromise is a situation where no party stands to gain or lose anything. Thus it gradually leads to reduction in struggle. For example, when Gurjars in Rajasthan pressurised the government for inclusion into scheduled tribes, the Meenas vehemently opposed their demand since they have been the

biggest gainer in Rajasthan. This conflict led to open war between them and resulted in many casualties and bloodshed. Now that location of both communities is such that they are found living side by side almost all over Rajasthan, they soon realised the futility of opposing each other. A compromise was struck between the two and an understanding was arrived at under which gurjars dropped their demand for inclusion into scheduled tribe but asked for a separate quota for themselves and Meenas agreed to support Gurjars demand. Thus under the new agreement both parties stood to gain or lose nothing at the cost of each other.

*Developing special norms:* Conflict between two warring factions or groups may be reduced through development of special norms. For example, in a game, the question of who will take first turn may be settled by leaving it to the umpire. Thus the bone of contention is removed and thereby the cause of conflict is removed. Psychologists have delineated social conditions, on the basis of studies, where conflict and struggle can be handled through developing special norms. According to them social conditions where in both the parties have the ability and will to influence each other lend themselves to such interventions. This technique has reportedly been successfully used in a number of situations with different communities.

*Prosocial behavior:* By prosocial behaviour we mean behavior that creates some kind of positive social influence among others. For example, giving charity, working for the welfare of others, helping others in distress are some of the forms of prosocial behaviour. Studies reveal that when members of a community engage in some kind of prosocial behaviour toward members of other community it has direct impact on their perception and opinion about them and results significantly in the reduction of feelings of conflict and struggle.

Psychologists observed that when an individual engages in prosocial behaviour, that is when a person is involved in helping a person in distress, the person passes through four stages:

- 1) First, the individual takes stock of the seriousness of the condition or situation in which help is to be given.
- 2) Second, the individual takes responsibility for the helping another person.
- 3) Third, the individual enters a state where he wishes to help the person in distress and
- 4) Finally the person recognises the fact that the individual is capable of helping another person.

*Use of scientific approaches:* Social psychologists suggested some scientific approaches for reduction of group conflict, which is as follows:

a) Win-Lose approach b) Lose-Lose approach c) Lose-Win approach. Let us describe these approaches:

**Win-Lose approach** – In this type of approach one party or group adopts different methods, means and approaches aimed at ensuring defeat of opponent party and victory for themselves. In other words, one group tries to thwart another group from reaching the target or goal so that they can reach the goal. This approach has two underlying assumptions: that is (i) conflict among people

is inevitable and unanimity is impossible. (ii) gain of one party results is loss for the other party . In other words, only one party can win or reach the goal and another party is bound to fail in the process. In such situations, conflicts do arise. Now that conflict is inevitable and there can only be one winner, the best technique or approach is leaving no stone unturned to ensure defeat of opponents and victory for self.

Success can be achieved using socially acceptable means like exercising our democratic rights and also to some extent by using subversive methods like threatening the opponents of dire consequences, making opponent allies cross over the fence by luring them with different types of benefits or even taking recourse to unlawful activities as advocated. Thus in nutshell this approach advocates putting in exercise the age old aphorism that every thing is fair in love and war. It is the end that matters the most and not the means employed to achieve the end.

**Lose-Lose approach** – This approach is called lose-lose approach because none of the parties involved in the struggle stand to gain much and are not able to cause what they wanted to happen. Underlying assumptions of this approach are:

- i) Some thing is better than nothing.
- ii) It is better to stay away from struggle than indulging in it and wasting resources.
- iii) When groups reconcile with each other after initial bouts of struggle the lose-lose approach is exemplified.
- iv) Another characteristic of this approach is that it results in quick solution of the problem and values and motives of individuals do not find place.

**Win-Win approach:** This approach is different from the above two approaches mentioned earlier. This is considered ideal for reduction of struggle between warring groups. It involves both parties resorting to different types of cooperative measures and techniques to arrive at a conscious solution of the struggle so that all the concerned parties are benefitted to the maximum.

Underlying assumption in this approach is that it considers struggle as a mutual problem which can be solved amicably. It lays emphasis on the difficulties and problems of both parties and not on the means of ensuring victory. Both parties sit together and work on the solution of the problem and whosoever reaches the solution first acquaints the other party. Thus the solution arrived at is acceptable to all concerned. However successful application of this approach requires skill in human relations otherwise it is difficult to achieve success using this approach.

### **Self Assessment Questions**

- 1) What is meant by mutually beneficial goal?

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2) Define and describe “compromising” as a conflict resolution strategy.

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3) What type of special norms will you develop for conflict resolution?

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4) Can pro social behavior be used for resolution of conflict? Explain

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5) What are the various scientific approaches for reducing conflict?

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## **4.5 BLAKE AND MOUTON STRATEGIES**

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Blake & Mouton on the basis of their research stated that people adopt one of the following five strategies for reduction of conflict and struggle which are given below:

*Withdrawing:* In this the person resolves the problem by stepping back from the situation of struggle (lose-lose approach).

*Smoothing:* This comprises of putting emphasis on points of common interests and avoiding discussion on matters of debate or controversy. Thus this approach tries to minimize differences between the two warring factions (lose-lose approach).

*Compromising:* This strategy seeks to decrease differences through discussion (lose-lose approach).

*Forcing:* This approach is an all or none approach in that it takes a competitive stand. It is this way or that way approach (win-lose approach).

*Confrontation and problem solving:* Both parties openly discuss all matters and the best mutually acceptable solution is accepted (win-win approach)



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## 4.6 TWO DIMENSIONAL MODEL

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This model presumes that all sorts of conflict handling behaviour can be understood in terms of two dimensions i.e. assertiveness and cooperation. These two basic dimensions of behaviour define five different modes for responding to conflict situations:

**Competing** is assertive and uncooperative—an individual pursues his own concerns at the other person's expense. This is a power-oriented mode in which you use whatever power seems appropriate to win your own position—your ability to argue, your rank, or economic sanctions. Competing means “standing up for your rights,” defending a position which you believe is correct, or simply trying to win.

**Accommodating** is unassertive and cooperative—the complete opposite of competing. When accommodating, the individual neglects his own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode. Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when you would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view.

**Avoiding** is unassertive and uncooperative—the person neither pursues his own concerns nor those of the other individual. Thus he does not deal with the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

**Collaborating** is both assertive and cooperative—the complete opposite of avoiding. Collaborating involves an attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies their concerns. It means digging into an issue to pinpoint the underlying needs and wants of the two individuals. Collaborating between two persons might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights or trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

**Compromising** is moderate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. The objective is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. It falls intermediate between competing and accommodating. Compromising gives up more than competing but less than accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding, but does not explore it in as much depth as collaborating. In some situations, compromising might mean splitting the difference between the two positions, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground solution.

Each of us is capable of using all five conflict-handling modes. None of us can be characterised as having a single style of dealing with conflict. But certain people use some modes better than others and, therefore, tend to rely on those modes more heavily than others—whether because of temperament or practice.

**Third party intervention** Another way of resolving group conflict is to seek mediation of an arbitrator or third party. This third party tries to arrive at a solution keeping in view the characteristics of the warring factions. Solution generated by the third party is binding on all the concerned parties. A good feature of this type of resolution is that the third party does not enforce a decision but the decision is arrived at through open discussion and negotiation over points of problems. However, this approach requires third party to be very mature and adept at human relations.



### Self Assessment Questions

- 1) Describe in detail what Blake and Mouton strategies involve in conflict resolution?

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- 2) Discuss the two dimensional model in conflict resolution.

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- 3) What is meant by third party intervention and how does it help in resolving the conflict?

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## 4.7 GROUP CONFLICT IN INDIAN SOCIETY

**Tribal problems** In Indian society tribal groups have a special place. They represent minority communities and always emphasise on keeping their independent existence. These tribes think that assimilation with majority population would jeopardize their separate identity. Formation of state of Jharkhand out of Bihar exemplifies this attitude of tribals.

**Caste conflict** India is conglomeration of castes which can broadly be divided into three categories, that is the forward castes, backward castes and scheduled castes and tribes. These castes always show an inclination to outsmart each other.

**Communal problems** Since independence India has been plagued with communal problem between Hindus and Muslims. This has witnessed innumerable bloody riots between the people of two religions and cost thousands of innocent lives and millions of dollars worth property.

Demolition of Babri Masjid is a blatant example of conflict between these two communities.

Other social conflict problems are— labour management problems, student problems, landlord-tenant problem, confrontation between advantaged and disadvantaged class, language problem and job problem etc.

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## 4.8 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we studied the nature of social conflict. We tried to understand various elements involved in it. We also studied different types of social conflict and their implications on the life of people in the society. This was followed by a detailed discussion on methods of conflict resolution. Now we understand different approaches taken to resolve social conflict and the rationale behind them.

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## 4.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Discuss social conflict and various forms of social conflict in detail.
- 2) Throw light on various approaches to conflict resolution.
- 3) Discuss in detail different types social conflict that plague India and suggest approaches for their resolution.

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## 4.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Arrow, Kenneth J.(1995). *Barriers to Conflict Resolution*. W.W. Norton. NY

Burton, John W. and Frank Dukes.(1990). *Conflict: Readings in Management and Resolution*. St. Martin's Press. NY