
UNIT 1 NATURE AND SCOPE OF SOCIOLOGY

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 What is sociology?
 - 1.2.1 Concept of Society and Culture
 - 1.2.2 Emergence of Sociology
 - 1.2.3 Social Groups
 - 1.2.4 Kinds of Social Groups
- 1.3 Major Concerns of Sociology
 - 1.3.1 Concept of Culture
 - 1.3.2 Sociology and Science
- 1.4 Some Founding Fathers
 - 1.4.1 August Comte
 - 1.4.2 Emile Durkheim
 - 1.4.3 Max Weber
 - 1.4.4 Karl Marx
 - 1.4.5 Herbert Spencer
- 1.5 Sociology and other Social Sciences
 - 1.5.1 Social Psychology and Sociology
 - 1.5.2 Sociology and Anthropology
 - 1.5.3 Sociology and Economics
 - 1.5.4 Basic and Applied Sociology
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Further Readings
- 1.8 Key Words
- 1.9 Model Answers to Check Your Progress

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this unit, you should be able to:

- give a definition of sociology;
- describe social groups and their different classifications;
- explain the major concerns of sociology;
- describe the relation between sociology and science;
- explain the relation between sociology and other social sciences; and
- give in brief the ideas about the founding fathers of sociology such as, Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Spencer

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Sociology, as compared to other social sciences, like economics and political science, is a young discipline. One could say, it is about a hundred-and-fifty years old but there

has been a more rapid development of the subject in the last fifty to sixty years. This is partly due to desire, particularly, after the Second World War, to understand more about the behaviour of people in social situations. All social science subjects are concerned with the behaviour of people but each of them studies different aspects. Sociology, however, is concerned with social relations in general, and with social groups and institutions in particular.

1.2 WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

Sociology can be defined as a study of society or social life, of group interaction and of social behaviour.

1.2.1 Concept of Society and Culture

Society has been defined as a relatively self sufficient, usually large group of people who maintain direct or indirect contact with each other through a culture. Culture is generally understood as the shared language, beliefs, goals, artefacts and experiences that combine together to form a unique pattern. In other words, culture is a society's way of life (Stebbins, Robert A. 1987; p- 172)

1.2.2 Emergence of Sociology

During the 19th century sociology emerged as separate social science in Europe and its objective was the study of society. Auguste Comte, Spencer and Emile Durkheim besides several other social thinkers sought to establish the idea of society as a matter of study, unique in itself. They examined society as a whole - which is more than the sum of its parts. Society is more than the actions, thoughts, values, belief and wishes of its individual members. It is a complex and abstract reality; yet all human beings live in a society.

A sociologist is interested in the general study of social behaviour as it occurs in groups, large or small, and lays special stress on understanding social life in the contemporary world. The word 'general' has been used as other social science disciplines deal with more specific areas. For example, a political scientist studies governmental functions and activities and an economist studies production and distribution of goods. It is, however, difficult to draw an exact line of difference. Social psychology, social anthropology, political science and economics, all in a sense, have human social life as their general subject.

As sociology is a relatively young discipline compared with the discipline of philosophy, economics and political science, sometimes, people confuse it with social work. Sociology is used in the discipline of social work to analyse and understand social problems. Social work is concerned with the uplift of those socially deprived, physically handicapped, etc. Sociology is not concerned with the reformation of society as such nor is it directly involved in social planning or directed change. The sociological understanding and research can help in better planning and in finding ways and means of acceptance of improved practices, in the formulation of development policies and programmes. It is generally accepted that sociologists do not interfere with social process. They are supposed to be value-neutral, i.e., they are not supposed to have any bias or prejudice in the analysis of the social behaviour. There are, however, at present, some, who question this and feel that sociologists must take an active role in the development process.

We have defined sociology as the study of social life and group interaction and social behaviour. In order to understand social life, sociology is interested in the study of the organisation and the functioning of societies or social groups.

1.2.3 Social Groups

Just as every human being is born in a society, everywhere, social life is lived in groups, whether large or small. The term 'group' is used in different ways. There might be a group, which is watching a game in progress, there might be a group of people crossing a street. In sociology, the group is viewed in a different way. It has already been mentioned that the basic interest of sociology is human social behaviour. This leads to a study of how people relate to each other or interact with each other. The social group, therefore, would have to have the following:

- i) a group of persons (two or more);
- ii) a patterned interaction (i.e., there is a regularity in the social relations, based on shared beliefs, values and norms); and
- iii) the interaction is sustained over a period of time.

The groups are formed in order to satisfy some human needs. A basic need is survival and a family, which is an example of a group, enables us to meet this need. As individuals, it is not possible to fulfil all the needs. It is through the groups that the needs are met. We derive many satisfactions from living in groups and therefore, being a part of the group becomes important. The solidarity of a group is dependent upon the frequency of interaction and the emotional attachment.

Box 1.1: Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft

Ferdinand Tonnies (1855-1936), a noted German sociologist, while examining different kinds of societies found that there were two kinds of social groups, similar to the concepts of primary and secondary groups found in all societies. He found that in small homogeneous societies members interacted with one another on face to face, informal basis. In these groups tradition dictated social behaviour. Tonnies called this kind of society a *Gemeinschaft*, which when translated means broadly "a communal, or traditional society".

In comparison, societies that are large and heterogeneous, such as the modern industrial societies, relationships among members are impersonal, formal, functional and specialised. According to Tonnies these societies have often contractual relationships which are on the basis of clear cut, legal contracts rather than being governed by traditions. Tonnies calls these societies *Gesellschaft*, or "associational societies".

1.2.4 Kinds of Social Groups

The classification of social groups in two major types is based on the extent of attachment the individual would have to a group. The major classifications are (i) primary and (ii) secondary groups.

- i) A primary group has been defined as one in which the members have very close or intimate relations and there is an emotional involvement. It has also been defined as primary because it is this group, which is chiefly responsible for nurture of social ideas of the individual. From the description above, we can go on to a more precise definition.

Personality of an individual is involved in a primary group. The best example of the primary group is the family. As one tries to analyse one's behaviour within the family and the functions, the family performs for each individual member, one can understand the importance of a primary group in shaping the ideas, beliefs and norms of the members.

The primary groups (family, play groups, a community, etc.) also acts as a link between the individual and the larger society.

- ii) In contrast to the primary group, there are secondary groups. In the secondary group, members interact with one another in a very specific range of activities. The relationships in the secondary group are more casual, impersonal and for specific purposes. A student body of a large college is a secondary group as they interact as students. People working in a factory are also an example of a secondary group as they relate to each other as workers. You can see yourself how the relationships between the family and in a work place differ. From that, you will be able to understand the difference between primary and the secondary groups. The understanding of the nature of the groups and their functions is very important for understanding social behaviour.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space provided below for your answers.
 ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) Give a definition of sociology. Write about five lines.

- 2) What is social group? Use about five lines for your answer.

- 3) Given below are some social situations, which amongst them can be called primary group. Tick the correct answer:
 - a) Meeting of political leaders during a summit.
 - b) Children playing “Kho Kho” in a field.
 - c) A feminist leader addressing women labourers.
 - d) School Principal addressing students in an assembly.

1.3 MAJOR CONCERNS OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology seeks to study the society and to analyse it in terms of the social relations that have a pattern. Sociology addresses itself to three basic questions:

- i) how and why societies emerge?
- ii) how and why societies persist? and
- iii) how and why societies change?

Sociology has been concerned with the evolution of society. It has tried to analyse the factors and forces underlying the historical transformations of society. For example, societies have evolved from primitive tribal state to rural communities. How villages have become important centres of commercial activity or of art and culture and grown into towns and cities.

Sociology has also been concerned with the units of social life. The attempt has been to look at various types of groups, communities, associations and society. The effort has been to study the pattern of social relationships in these units. An important area which sociology deals with is social institutions. The institutions provide a structure for the society and perform functions, which enable the society to meet its needs. In any society, there are five basic social institutions; family, political institutions, economic institutions, religious institutions and educational institutions. However, in more complex

societies, there may be many other institutions such as bureaucracy, military organisations, welfare and recreational organisations, etc. Caste is also an institution, which is more or less peculiar to India.

Another area of study and analysis by sociologists is social processes. In one sense, the social institutions provide the stability and order whereas social processes are the dynamic aspects of social relations. Among the various processes that will be dealt with in the latter units are socialisation, social control, co-operation, conflict, social deviation and social change.

1.3.1 Concept of Culture

‘Culture’ is another very important concept. As mentioned earlier, we are immersed in culture from birth onwards, we take culture for granted. It is difficult to imagine what life would be like without culture. Culture provides summing up of the past experiences, which are the necessary foundation for living in the present. Culture is learned and shared among members of the group. Culture in a sense, can seem to be the chief means of survival and adaptation.

On each of the topics mentioned, which are concerns of sociology, there will be units which will deal in much greater detail. The society is dynamic and is changing, consequently, the areas of interest of sociologists are increasing. Today, there is sociology of knowledge, sociology of science and art, sociology of health, sociology of development, etc. This indicates the expanding nature of sociology.

1.3.2 Sociology and Science

At times, sociology has been defined as the science of society. This raises the question as to what science is. Some have thought of science as an approach whereas others have thought about it in terms of the subject matter. Simply stated, we might say that the scientific approach consists of certain assumption that the phenomena studied have a regularity and hence, a pattern. The method emphasises observation and verification of social phenomena. This involves a systematic approach to the study of phenomena.

The systematic approach consists of:

- i) defining a problem for study;
- ii) collecting data on the problem defined;
- iii) analysing and organising the data; which would help in formulation of hypothesis; and
- iv) further testing of the hypothesis and on the basis of this, develop new concepts and theories.

Sociology has been using a systematic approach in the study of social life. On the basis of the knowledge gathered through the systematic approach, it has tried to build a body of reliable knowledge. From this knowledge, it has tried to establish the patterns of relationships from which effort can be made at understanding social behaviour.

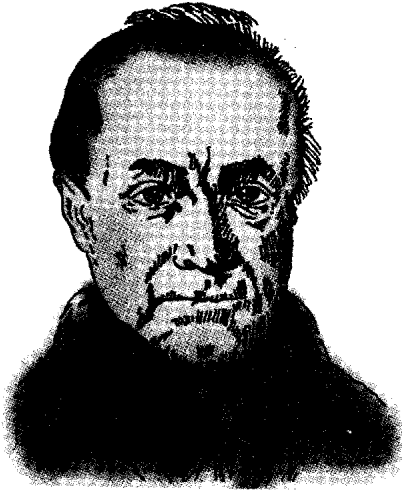
If we look at sociology from the point of view of its approach to the study of society, then sociology can be considered to be a science.

Check Your Progress 2

- Note:** i) Use the space provided below for your answers.
ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

- 1) Write a note, in eight lines, on the basic concerns of sociology.

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Auguste Comte
(1798 – 1857)

2) Explain the relationship between sociology and science. Write about five lines.

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1.4 SOME FOUNDING FATHERS

Later on, in various units of this course you will come across the names of many early sociologists. A brief introduction is given of early sociologists, whose contribution to sociology is lasting. All of them wrote on the nature of human behaviour. In a way, they tried to understand profound changes taking place in society.

1.4.1 Auguste Comte (1798-1857)

Comte is regarded as the founder of modern sociology. He is the first one to have used the word 'Sociology'. He tried to create a new science of society, which could not only explain the past of mankind but also, predict its future course. He felt that society moves through definite and fixed stages and that, it progresses towards ever-increasing perfection. The three stages, according to him, in which the society moves, were:

- i) the theological or the religious
to
- ii) the metaphysical or the philosophical
to
- iii) the positive or the scientific stage.

In the first stage, people thought, all phenomena were caused by supernatural forces. Abstract forces of either a religious or secular type were considered to be the source of knowledge in the second stage. In the last stage, scientific laws were supposed to determine both the natural and the social worlds.

He also talked about two broad areas — 'social statistics', which deals with the orderly and stable aspects of social life and patterns of behaviour (family, occupational, polity, etc.). The second area called 'social dynamics' emphasises the study of changes in a social system. According to him, sociology was to be the queen of all sciences.

Illustration

1.4.2 Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

Durkheim was also interested in sociology being a scientific discipline. He wrote a book in 1895 entitled: **Rules of Sociological Method**. To him, social solidarity was one of the main principles of human life. He distinguished between two kinds of solidarity: '**mechanical solidarity**' based on common assumptions, beliefs, sentiments like those found in traditional societies and '**organic solidarity**' based on the division of labour and inter-related interests as found in industrial societies. When solidarity is broken, there would be social disorganisation and confusion in society.

He considered sociology as having wide interests, which includes sociology of religion, sociology of knowledge, sociology of law, sociology of crime, economic sociology, and sociology of education, art and aesthetics.



Emile Durkheim
(1858 – 1917)

An important concept given by Durkheim was social facts, which, according to him, are external to the individual but they exert pressure on the individual in the behaviour pattern. Customs, traditions, folkways and mores are social facts. He felt that sociology should be involved in the reformation of society. For him society was a reality in itself, that is, it is more than its parts.

1.4.3 Max Weber (1864-1920)

Weber used the concept of social action rather than social relations. A comprehensive study of social action, to him, meant understanding the meanings human beings give to their behavioural pattern. The social behaviour was not merely a mechanical learning of norms but how people interpreted the social values. Sociology studies all kinds of social action without making any value judgements.

Weber was concerned with understanding of inter-relations between parts of society and also, with comparative studies of different societies. He studied religion in different societies. His work on **Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism** is one of the well known works in sociology. Through both these approaches, he tried to develop propositions having general validity. For example, he classified authority into three types — charismatic, traditional and rational. These concepts are still used in the study of leadership authority and power.

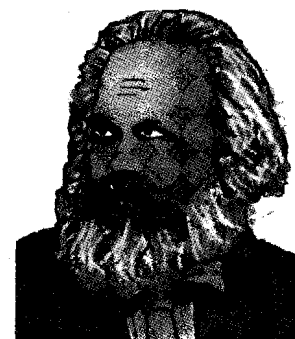
Max Weber
(1864 – 1920)



1.4.4 Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Marx has helped through his ideas in understanding the nature of society, particularly, how conflicts occur. Marx writes in 1848 that all history is a history of classes and class struggles. The society gets divided between the oppressors and the oppressed—masters and slaves, lords and serfs and in the modern times, capitalists and workers. To analyse the structure of society, it was necessary to understand the forces of production and relations of production. The contradiction between the forces and the relations of production leads to class struggle. According to him, each society dies in time because of internal conflicts and contradictions and is replaced by a higher one. In time, capitalism would be destroyed and there would emerge a classless society characterised by absence of conflict, exploitation and alienation from this world.

Karl Marx
(1818 – 1883)



1.4.5 Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)

Spencer also emphasised a total view of society. According to him, the study of sociology covers the fields of family, politics, religion and social control, division of labour and social stratification. He emphasised the study of whole more than the study of parts. The individual institutions have significant relations. It is through a study of these inter-relations that one can hope to understand society. He indicated that the inter dependence of the various parts was functional, i.e., each of the part performs different functions, which is necessary for the total well being of society. A large number of sociologists, who are “functionalists”, use Spencer’s idea of the functional inter dependence as a basis for their approach to the study of society.

Herbert Spencer
(1820 – 1903)



Above descriptions of the contributions of founding fathers of sociology are sketchy. The main purpose is to introduce their names and to give you some idea of their concerns in sociology. In the later units of Elective course 13 on Sociological Thought we will be studying their approaches, theories and contributions in greater details.

1.5 SOCIOLOGY AND OTHER SOCIAL SCIENCES

As mentioned earlier, sociology has a broad perspective. It is concerned with those aspects of social life, which are present in all forms. It embraces every social setting. Most related social sciences have restricted range of specialisations. It must be pointed

out that human behaviour cannot be divided neatly into different compartments and each assigned to a specific social science. Hence, the boundaries between the disciplines are often overlapping. Almost all the social sciences get outside their 'own' and into 'somebody else's' domain with great frequency.

1.5.1 Social Psychology and Sociology

Social psychology is the study of social and cultural influences on the individual. It focuses on the behaviour of a single person and hence, differs from sociology, which is more concerned with relations among groups.

However, there are areas of common interest such as socialisation, norms and values. Moreover, the influences of the group on the individual and of the individual on the group are also of interest to both social psychology and sociology.

1.5.2 Sociology and Anthropology

There are many fields in anthropology, namely; archaeology, linguistics, physical anthropology and social anthropology. Although, anthropology has been regarded as the study of early (primitive) cultures, and sociology of the more contemporary society. This distinction is no longer valid. Many of the early village studies in India have been done by social anthropologists. The tribal communities in India have, by and large, been studied by anthropologists, in both their physical and social aspects. There is, hence, some overlap between the areas of study of sociology and anthropology, particularly, social anthropology. Culture and social organisations are concepts studied in both these disciplines.

1.5.3 Sociology and Economics

Sociology and economics both study industry but do so differently. Economics would study economic factors of industry, productivity, labour, industrial policy, marketing, etc., whereas a sociologist would study the impact of industrialisation on society. Economists study economic institutions such as factories, banks, trade and transportation but are not concerned with religion, family or politics. Sociology is interested in interaction between the economic institutions and other institutions in society, namely, political and religious.

Social life, in modern times, is very complex and no discipline by itself can study all of it in depth. While each social discipline focuses on a particular aspect of the society, there is need to keep in mind the inter-relations of institutions of society. Only some social sciences have been discussed so as to give a feel of relationships among social sciences. Similar analysis of the relation of sociology can be made to philosophy, history, public administration, etc.

1.5.4 Basic and Applied Sociology

Sociologists are interested in conducting research studies in the area of social life and developing theories with regard to human social behaviour. The purpose is to build a body of reliable knowledge through which various aspects of social life can be understood and explained. While this is important, it is necessary to make use of this knowledge in various aspects of human affairs. There are many factors, which have an impact on social relations. Increased use of technology is one such area. Sociologists could anticipate as to how people will receive and react to new technology and changes it might bring about in social relations. There are many programmes of development that are launched. Sociologist can indicate what care needs to be taken in introducing changes without affecting their way of life so that suggested programmes can be accepted. The reactions towards the innovations — acceptance, resistance or non-

acceptance should be noted, when studies could also provide further insight into social values and social behaviour.

Sociology thus provides an understanding about the social order in which we live and about the forces that shape and mould it. It also suggests paths of action to ensure the emergence of new social patterns. Imaginatively pursued the study of sociology enables us to understand the condition and the predicament of human beings. It can, also help in finding solutions for the present problems and dilemmas of society.

Check Your Progress 3

- Note:** i) Use the space provided below for your answers.
ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.
- 1) What is the difference between basic and applied sociology?

Write about ten lines for your answer.

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have given you a definition of sociology. We also explained the idea of social groups. We have explained basic areas of concern for sociology. These include the mention of the concept of culture. It also includes the relationship of sociology with science as whole.

This unit also provides thumbnail sketches of five founding fathers of sociology. The theories of these thinkers continue to influence present day sociology and other social sciences as well. Finally we looked at sociology in its relation to psychology, economics, and so on. We have therefore provided a good idea about the nature and scope of sociology.

1.7 FURTHER READINGS

1) Mc. Kee, James B., 1981. *Sociology : The Study of Society*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York.

2) Ogburn and Nimkoff, 1972. *A Handbook of Sociology*. Eurasian Publishing House: New Delhi

1.8 KEY WORDS

- Classification** : A way of putting data or information into different categories and groups.
- Culture** : This embodies the customs, rites and beliefs of a group of people. It includes both material culture, such as, houses, pots, coins etc. as well as non-material culture, such as, values, beliefs, norms etc.
- Group** : Comprises two or more people who have a meaningful interaction with each other and common goals.
- Primary group** : A social group with close ties and shared interests, e.g. the family.
- Secondary group** : A large group with looser ties but common well defined goals, e.g. office employees, or members of a club or associations.

1.9 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) In broad terms, sociology can be defined as the study of social life, group interaction and social behaviour, while other social sciences study specialised areas of social behaviour, Sociology is interested in taking an overall view of social life.
- 2) A social group refers to a group of persons (two or more), who have a regular social interaction, based on shared beliefs, values and norms. The interaction takes place on a basis over a period of time. The interacting persons view themselves as members of the group. Examples of a group are the nuclear family, a football team, etc.
- 3) b)

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Sociology is basically concerned with the study of patterns in social relations. Once relations between people are familiar and well-established, they become institutionalised ways of social behaviour, then, it is sociology's concern to make comparative studies of social institutions, such as, the family, economy and polity. Sociology is also concerned with the study of social processes, which reflect the dynamic aspects of social relations.
- 2) Being the scientific study of society, sociology views science as an approach to study social phenomena. In science, patterns in natural phenomena are discovered by observation and verification; in sociology, social phenomena are observed to formulate and test hypotheses.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Sociology is engaged in giving explanations of human social behaviour. For making use of this knowledge of human affairs, sociological findings can be and are used in planning development programmes. This kind of use of sociology is given the name of applied sociology. It is obvious that basic sociology is confined to researches into human social behaviour. Applied sociology differs from basic sociology in the sense that it only makes use of sociological findings in planning and implementing action-oriented programmes for development.