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Social Problems : Concept and Approaches

Drug abuse, alcoholism, terrorism, poverty, unemployment and crime, are not individual problems but affect the public at large. 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 public issue is one which affects the society as a whole, or the larger structure of social life. The sociologists' aim is to understand how these problems crop up in the functioning of different social structures, 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 reorganised and restructured in dealing with them. Relating theory to practice provides a scientific perspective to treat the problem.

The Concept of Social Problems

A social problem has been defined as a "deviation from the social ideal remediable by group effort" (Walsh and Furfey, 1961:1). 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 unfavorable. The 'issue' should also be such that an individual cannot 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 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 then what is needed to solve the problem is an organised group or social effort. Thus, a problem may be an individual problem under one set of circumstances and a social problem under others.

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 two decades hence. For example, the population explosion in our country was not viewed as a social problem upto the late 40's of the twentieth century but from the early 50's it came to be perceived as a very crucial 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 40's but in the 50's and the 60's it became a problem and in the 70's and 80's it became a very serious one and continues to be so in the 90's.

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". Reinhardt (1952 : 14) has explained a social problem as "a situation confronting a group or a section of society which promises or inflicts injurious consequences that can be handled only collectively." 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. 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 peoples". According to Carr (1955 : 306), "a social problem exists whenever we become conscious of a difficulty, a gap between our preferences and reality". Herbert 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". Paul Landis (1959) is of the opinion that "social problems are men's unfulfilled aspirations for welfare." Clarence Marshall 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 eighties, manifest by the fact that not many articles appeared on this issue in newspapers and magazines. The appearing of numerous articles in the last five or six years 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 no 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 criticising the practice as harmful and awful, only then did the custom of *sati* 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 by 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 in the 70's and 80's of the twentieth century, 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 paucity 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 to complete the Rajasthan canal because of the scarcity of economic resources. The scarcity of drinking water became a social problem in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, only when it was realised 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 recognise that corrective policies, programmes and services are necessary to cope with them. Weinberg gives six characteristics of social problems:

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 the society, it is not considered a social problem. But as the 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 mental illness 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 (like newspapers, television, radio, magazines, 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 the 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 *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 *inter-connected*.
- 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.

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 take interest 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 every thing 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 do not take 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, they remain concerned about the problem, yet (they) 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 to 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 believe, 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 after 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 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 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 either they mind their own business or they remain indifferent and callous to certain issues. For example, the growth of slums which promotes family disorganisation 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 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 mobilised 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 selfish interests. *Six*, it is not correct to believe that social problems will solve themselves, if left alone. The feeling that time will solve all problems is unsound and unrealistic in this age. It is only a rationalisation for inactivity. It may, in fact, aggravate the 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, 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 the family in controlling drug abuse. Thus, data in itself is nothing; it is the objective interpretation of the data which is meaningful. *Last*, 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 the 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 the people and providing them with alternatives to compensate failure in one field with success in another. It may not be possible to eliminate family disorganisation but it is surely possible to find means to reduce tensions in the 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 in complex (which are characterised by impersonal secondary relations, anonymity, loneliness, high mobility and extreme specialisation, and where change is faster), that is, wherever and whenever a relationship is affected between a group of individuals leading 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, we can classify them into two groups: found in individuals and found in the social environment.

Potential Causes of Social Problems

<i>Found in Individuals</i>	<i>Found in the Social Environment</i>
(a) Hereditary Traits	(a) Contradictions in Social Systems
(b) Acquired Traits	(b) Malfunctioning of Economic Systems
	(c) Lack of Change in Religious Systems
	(d) Defective Functioning of Political Systems

All the factors are not present in all the problems, that is, the causal factors vary from problem to problem.

(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:

(1) Differentiation and Multiplication of Interests and Functions

The principle that the greater the number of parts in a machine or an organism, the greater 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.

(2) 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 innovation 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.

(3) 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

Though social problems are essentially subjective, they can be studied scientifically. We will examine some of the theoretical approaches which present universal explanations for all types of social problems.

Social Disorganisation Approach

Social disorganisation 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 characterised by the lack of cooperation, 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 (after 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 disorganisation 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 demoralisation, 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 rules 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 disorganisation, 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 organisation of the former system of behaviour. Talking of social disorganisation in slum life, Whyte (1955: 268) has referred to deviant or non-approved group organisation in slums.

However, according to one school of thought, the state of social disorganisation does not always create social problems. For example, during Hitler's regime, Germany was not a disorganised society nor during Stalin's regime, was Russia in a state of disorganisation; 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 disorganisation 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 disorganised 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 disorganisation 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 dissatisfied 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, 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 nineteenth century and in the first quarter of the twentieth 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 twentieth century, thus, remained a period of culture lag. It took more than a generation to adapt 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 but 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 generalised 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 generalised standards of behaviour. Examples of values are equality, justice, freedom, patriotism, mobility, individualism, 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 peasants 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 'organisational' 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 probably true that our current values overemphasise money and material possessions and this attitude may encourage corruption, smuggling, drug trafficking,

blackmarketing, 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 inter-personal relations in the 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, 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-confirmity 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 disorganisation 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 deviance 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 who 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 they have learned the norms and values like honesty, truthfulness, integrity, justice and cooperation, but 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 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 a different set 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 his 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 characterised 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 *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 institutionalised means, that is, to a state of anomie. Merton maintains that people adapt to this disjunction either by rejecting the cultural goals or the institutionalised 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 organisation of these statuses into a reasonably coherent social system" (Merton and Nisbet, 1971: 823).

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

Types of Social Problems

Clarence Marshall Case (1964: 3-4) has given four types of social problems on the basis of their origin: (i) those 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 organisation, and (iv) which evolve from a conflict of cultural values within the society.

Fuller and Myers (1941: 367) have given 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 drug addiction, and (iii) *Moral problems* : there is no consensus pertaining to the nature or causes of these problems, for example, gambling and divorce.

Methods of Studying Social Problems

Three methods have mainly been used in studying social problems : (1) Case study method, (2) Social survey method, and (3) Multiple-factor method. Each method has certain advantages as well as limitations.

The Case Study Method

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 (Beutelheim, 1955: 318). For collecting information, it depends on both primary and secondary sources like documents, letters and newspapers, (Allport Gordon, 1942). Depending upon the nature of the social problem, the case study can be used to study a subculture of deviants such as that of organised criminals, blackmarketeers, smugglers, drug-addicts, the organisation of personality or the modes of relations in an institution such as prison.

In analysing the causes of a social problem, the case study method is a qualitative procedure which seeks to formulate generalisations about the development of problem 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.

This method requires a capacity for cultivating the cooperation and trust of subjects as well as a skill for intensive guided interviewing (Wernberg, 1960: 69).

The Social Survey Method

This is a valuable technique for studying social problems in contemporary society. It collects data from samples of respondents representing a cross section of a given population through a schedule or a questionnaire. This instrument is frequently used in the field of sociology to answer concrete as well as abstract questions. Studies on begging, drug-abuse, alcoholism, female crime, dowry, juvenile delinquency and violence against women in India, or Kansey's (1948) survey of sex behaviour in the U.S.A. are the best examples of studying social problems through this technique. All these studies have pointed

out the empirical relationship between two or more variables in creating a social problem.

The survey method does not necessarily start with a hypothesis. It can end in developing a hypothesis or it may not at all be concerned with hypothesis. When it seeks answers to questions, it does not test a hypothesis. For example, what is the magnitude of abuse among child girls in a particular type of industry is a practical question which the information gathered in the survey will answer. But the survey can test the hypothesis too. For example, this author tested the hypothesis that "familial maladjustment is the most important cause of criminality among females" (Ram Ahuja, 1966); and also the hypothesis that crime/violence against women is caused by "social structural conditions that create anxieties and stresses which affect the adjustment, attachment and commitment of man." "Maladjustment, unattachment and non-commitment lead to frustrations and relative deprivations which in turn determine man's attitude toward women. Depending on his personality traits and the resistance potential of the victim, the man uses violence against women" (Ram Ahuja, 1987).

The Multiple-Factor Method

This method determines the relationship between several factors and a social problem. Factors such as the nature of associations, socio-economic status, sub-culture, marital status, residential background, intra-family relations, frustrations and inherited traits can be correlated positively or negatively with the social problem under investigation; for example, the relation between crime and poverty or between drug-addiction and peer-group associations and high economic status or between wife battering and inferiority complex and alcoholism or between suicide and feeling of social isolation, marital status, and religion.

The multi-factor approach is used both in single disciplinary studies as well as in inter-disciplinary studies of social problems, for instance, collaborative studies on drug addiction by medical scientists, psychologists, sociologists and criminologists in India (Mohan D., *Drug Addiction*, 1980).

Stages in the Development of a Social Problem

Fuller and Myres (1941: 320-28) have referred to three stages through which the problems pass in the process of being defined and solved:

1. *Awareness* : In this first stage, people become convinced that the problem exists, the condition is undesirable, and that something can be done about it. In the beginning, only a few people raise questions but gradually more people become aware of the existence of the problem.

2. *Policy determination* : As awareness spreads to larger segments of the society, possible solutions come to be discussed, for example, population explosion in India and discussion of various means of family planning in the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s. Thus, the emphasis in the second stage shifts from what should be done to how should it be done.

3. *Reform* : As basic solutions and policies are decided upon, the stage of *action* is reached, for example, not only a plan for clearing the slums is put in to practice but people living there are also accommodated elsewhere. No wonder, this stage is called the state of implementation rather than the stage of decision.

Herbert Blumer (1971, 290-309) has referred to five stages in the course of a social problem: (1) emergence of a problem, (2) legitimisation of a problem, (3) mobilisation of action, (4) formulation of an official plan, and (5) implementation of the official plan. He says that movement from one stage to other is not automatic but it depends on many contingencies.

Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse (1977, 141-50) have talked of four stages in the development of a social problem:

(1) *Agitation* : The people feel aggrieved about the existing situation in the society. They agitate against this grievance (i) to convince others that the problem exists, and (ii) to initiate action to improve conditions and to attack the alleged cause of the grievance. The agitation is started not necessarily by the victims but even by moral crusaders on behalf of the victims, for example, the prohibition movement is started not by alcoholics but by social workers and social reformers. Thus, the agitation is to convert private troubles into public issues by declaring them to be harmful, offensive and undesirable. However, it is not necessary that their efforts should succeed. The efforts fail either because the claims made are too vague, or because the group that makes these efforts is insignificant or powerless, or because the group creates conflicting interests.

(2) *Legitimation and Cooptation* : When the group in power or the power-holders acknowledge the existence of the problem, the problem acquires legitimacy. Whereas in the first stage, the claimants of the problems are viewed as peculiar individuals, in this stage they are viewed as legitimate spokesmen of the aggrieved people. They are,

therefore, coopted for discussing alternate solutions, for example, giving representation to workers in factories, in management bodies or to students in the Academic Councils.

(3) *Bureaucratization and Reaction* : When the focus in the first stage is on the complaint-group, in the second stage it is on the decision-makers and in the third stage, it is the bureaucrats and their efficiency which attracts attention in the third stage. The extent to which the bureaucrats look for solutions to the problem and the extent to which they are able to fob off vested interests, will determine whether the agitation will take the form of a movement or not.

(4) *Re-emergence of the Movement* : The defective policies of the decision-makers and the bureaucrats and their disinterestedness in the problem rekindle the feelings of the aggrieved people and their crusaders who start a movement to force the power-holders to adopt ameliorative measures for solving the problem.

Thus, according to Spector and Kitsuse (1977: 20) "social problems are pre-eminently a political process through which the problem comes to be publicly accepted as such and through which particular institutional responses to the problem are shaped and then reshaped"

Rural and Urban Problems

Many scholars have referred to characteristic difference between the rural and the urban areas and social problems are sometimes identified by these differences.

Characteristics of rural problems

Some important characteristics of the rural areas in India which are associated with certain social problems are: (i) people are directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture, (ii) the upper caste people still hold large lands while people of the lower castes own either marginal land or work as landless labourers, (iii) people are scattered in comparison to the urban people, (iv) not only the roles but the values of the rural people too continue to be traditional, and (v) the price the farmers get for their products is less in relation to the work they put in. Although the rural economic distress does not affect all farmers equally but the lower and middle-class farmers who are in a majority are forced to send their sons and brothers to the urban areas to find new sources of livelihood. In cities, they are forced to remain in slum and work as daily wage-earners due to the lack of education and proper training. The

standard of living of the rural farmers is very low and their exploitation by big landlords, intermediaries and money-lenders is far greater. No wonder, their whole life is generally frustrating. The other rural problems are due to the fact that since the rural people do not live in concentrated masses, the availability of specialised services to them is minimal. This is true for medical, market, banking, transport, communication, education, recreation, and many other services necessary for modern living. Thus, in a general way, people in the rural areas are at a great disadvantage and have to suffer many social problems

Characteristics of Urban Problems

Just as many of the rural problems are the result of isolation and scattered living, many urban problems spring from concentration of population. Slums, unemployment, crimes, delinquencies, begging, corruption, drug abuse, air pollution, etc are all urban problems which are generally the result of intolerable living conditions in towns and cities. In a village, each man is so known to the others that his misdeeds are noticed and talked about. But in a city, the crowded conditions make for anonymity. Most city people live without social pressures which tends to increase the rate of deviance. Besides, the interdependence in the city life is so high that the failure of even one *small but essential part renders the other parts inoperative*. The simple examples are strikes by scavengers, by transport workers, by employees of the State Electricity Board, by workers of water-works or by shop-keepers. Anonymity increases cases of riots, communal conflicts, and agitations. It is no wonder that the characteristics of city life become responsible for many social problems.

Solving Social Problems

The solving of a social problem depends upon finding out the causes of troublesome social conditions which create the problem. As already stated, though every social problem is caused by multiple factors, but it is always possible to find out the chief factor, the cooperative factors, and the minor aggravants in the origin and development of the problem. Every problem is likely to be unique and is likely to have individualistic traits which may differentiate it from other problems. Many a time, the nature of the social problem is such that the control becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible. This happens when a

social problem is occasioned by natural factors like droughts or floods or when the conflict of social interests blocks the application of curative programmes, or a revolution is needed to change the existing political or economic systems. But after understanding and judging social problems, the society has to be effective and has to take some action whether it is by attempting to alter the established social institutions or by trying to alleviate them by adopting measures without trying to change the existing institutions. Further, action can be organised or personalised. The former is action through group effort like giving a share to industrial workers in the management of the industry, the latter is action through individual life and influencing others by living a life in accordance with good principles. Gandhiji used the second method for solving the problem of untouchability—by living with untouchables and treating them with sympathy and kindness. When others imitated his example and followed him, the effect became greater and greater and the government was ultimately forced to enact a law in 1955 prohibiting the practice of untouchability.

Organised action, thus, can be taken by the state or a political party or by the *panchayat* or an official group. An important point in organised action is the distribution of functions between state agencies and those not connected with the state. Sometimes the problem is solved by the combination of organised and personalised action.

Social problems can be solved only when individuals in a society possess the following four feelings: (1) feeling that a situation can be corrected, (2) determination to correct the situation, (3) confidence in the people and a belief that there is no limit to progress because of their intelligence and efforts, and (4) the use of technological and rational knowledge and skill for correcting the situation.

The following three points have to be remembered while trying to reach a solution to social problems.

1. *Multiple-factor Approach* · Each social problem is caused by a number of factors, for example, the problem of crime cannot be contained unless it is collectively perceived in terms of heredity, poverty, unemployment, social associations, functioning of social structures, strains and frustrations, and so on.

2. *Interrelatedness* · No social problem can be perceived atomistically. Each problem has some relation to the other problems.

3. *Relativity* · Each social problem is related to time and space. What is considered a problem in one society may not be considered so in the other.

Social Problems and Social Change in India

Societies often face problems because of social and cultural changes. Social change is change in the patterned roles, or a change in the network of social relations, or a change in the structures and organisation of a society. Social change is never complete, it is always partial. It can be minor or fundamental. Further, the change can be spontaneous or planned. Planned change is to achieve some set collective ideals. After Independence, India also had set some collective goals to achieve.

Some of the important changes that we find in our society in the last four decades are change from tradition to modernity in certain values and institutions, from ascribed status to achieved status, from predominance of primary groups to predominance of secondary groups, from informal means of control to formal means of control, from collectivity to individualism, from sacred values to secular values, from folklore to science and rationalism, from homogeneity to heterogeneity, and increasing processes of industrialization and urbanization, increasing awareness of rights among various sections of society due to the spread of education, weakening of the caste system, weakening of traditional sources of security, an increase in the aspirations of minority groups, occupational mobility, enactment of several social laws, and linking religion with politics.

Thus, though we have achieved many of the set collective goals, many contradictions have also set into our system. For example, aspirations of the people have become high but the legitimate means for achieving these aspirations are either not available or not accessible. We preach nationalism but practice casteism, linguism, and parochialism. Many laws have been enacted but either these laws are full of loopholes or they are not properly implemented. We talk of egalitarianism but we enforce discrimination. We aspire for ideational culture but what is emerging is the sensate culture. All these contradictions have increased discontentment and frustrations among people which in turn have resulted in many social problems. Youth unrest, tribal unrest, peasant unrest, industrial unrest, student unrest, violence against women, and so forth, have all led to agitations, riots, insurgency and terrorism.

Sociology, Sociologists and Social Problems

The three problems which need analysis with regard to the relationship between sociology and social problems are (1) how does sociology

perceive social problems; (2) what sociological principles does sociology offer about the social problems; and (3) to what extent is the knowledge of the sociologists about social problems impartial, confirmed, and concrete ?

As far as the sociologists' perspective is concerned, they view social problems as problems which arise out of the functioning of systems and structures in a society, or which are the result of group influences. They are also concerned with social relationships which emerge and are sustained because of the social problems. Thus, in analysing alcoholism, whereas a doctor will be concerned with its effects on the body, a psychiatrist will be concerned with its effects on attitudes and behaviour, a sociologist will be concerned with its effects on social relations and roles, that is, the relations with family members, with colleagues in the office, and with neighbours and friends as well as its effect on work efficiency, status, and so on.

The study of social problems in sociology aspires toward a body of valid and logically related principles, and in some cases towards a systematic theory too (Arnold Rose, 1957. 189-99). Sociological knowledge of social problems is not complete. We have considerable knowledge about some problems like crime and drug abuse, but inadequate knowledge about others, like suicide, war, mental illness. According to Weinberg (1960. 64), this unevenness in knowledge about social problems is because our approach to social problems is generally 'problem-centred' than 'theory-centred'. Most sociologists study social problems because of the practical interest of the community rather than for building a theory, or filling up the theoretical gaps. As regards bias in the sociologists' knowledge, though it is true that their orientation and their values can influence their study of social problems, yet they try to interpret facts without any distortion (Kolb, 1954. 66-67). For example, a sociologist from a lower or a middle class is likely to have a bias towards his own class, yet he does not analyse corruption in upper class on the basis of his personal reactions. He remains impartial without being affected by any pressures. However, one possibility that exists is that the persons involved in many social problems (that is, subjects) can and do directly influence the knowledge which emerges. For example, a sociological study of wife battering is possible in a society like India on a 'snow-ball' method because the complaints of assault are never lodged with the police. The study generally points out the involvement of women from lower income groups. Hence, we do not have much knowledge

about battered women in upper-middle or upper income groups. The fact that data on all types of battered women is not available is bound to affect the sociological conclusions or hypotheses. Similarly, the study of role adjustment of working women restricted to the lower class rarely points to separation, desertion or divorce between husband and wife but the study of working women in middle and upper classes would probably show a higher likelihood of these problems

One more fact in the study of social problems by the sociologists is that some sociologists think that the only role of a sociologist is that of an analyst, that is, he is to understand social problems but not take interest in their solution. Others think that a sociologist has not only to study social problems but has to devise ways and means to correct them. Knowledge cannot be detached completely from concerted corrective action. It has to be used in alleviating social problems. But the fact to be remembered is that a sociologist by himself cannot solve a social problem. Much depends on the officials, politicians, agencies and the general public.

What is the task of the sociologist? The time has come when sociologists have to undertake 'management of change in society' like management of business or management of administration. The central concerns of sociology are order and change. The concern for change includes the directionality of change, and sociologists have to move from delving deep into the hoary past through Indology and ancient history and from postulating concepts and theories suitable to study Indian social reality to futuristic plans and to identifying and dealing with crises in the society.

A question may be raised: should the sociologists be concerned with applied programmes directed at finding solutions to our social problems and in the basic research activities designed to support them? My answer would be in the affirmative. The depth of a society's problems may require deeper structural and cultural changes. While the sociologists have always been involved in analysing and understanding established practices, now they have to be called upon to suggest new structures and new practices. In so doing, the question arises as to what are the appropriate ways for the sociologists to suggest changes? The first question is, how directly should the sociologists involve themselves in effecting a change in public policy? Should sociologists remain dispassionate scientists, only providing data for others to use, or should they become actively involved as impassioned advocates of change? There is a school which stresses direct action in public policies

on the part of the sociologists. We have to support this school. Sociology is a science which has to be pursued for its fruits, for the sake of what it can do. In its initial stages, the gifts of sociology may not have been great but after the labour that has been put in developing this science in the last five to six decades, the fruits may be plucked not for their beauty but for their utility. Earlier, we might have been bogged down in explaining various concepts or in historically tracing the growth and functioning of various social institutions and communities but today our discipline has to take up the questions of the present and the future imbalances seriously. In this, questions of relevance and priorities in researches are significant. Why have top Indian sociologists remained indifferent to studying problems and critical issues like insurgency in North-East India; terrorism in Punjab; linguistic mobilization in Assam; cultural polarization in Mizoram; anti-reservation agitations in Gujarat; Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar; communal riots in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra; police torture and criminalization of politics in Bihar? Is it because they are afraid of displeasing the establishment by their unbiased and critical evaluations and losing their positions in Councils and Committees and Commissions, or is it because they think that these issues do not fall within the scope of their pure science? I am not trying to be critical but only pointing to the need for sociologists to take interest in the management of change in society. If sociology and sociologists alienate themselves from the immediate issues and problems of our society, both our discipline and our scholars will render themselves irrelevant to the nation as well as to humanism. It is time that the sociologists develop better predictive capabilities and present the options to the public in a comprehensible manner. This alone will help the society in tackling social problems effectively.

To conclude, it may be said that the sociologists' role in social problems is to create an awareness about the social problems, to analyse the causes of social problems, to develop theories about social problems, to discuss effects of social problems on individuals, groups and society, and to examine the consequences of alternate plans suggested for solving the problems.

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