
UNIT 1 STUDYING HUMAN SOCIETY

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

It is hoped that at the end of the Unit :

- you should be able to understand the many-sided nature of a social phenomenon under study;
- familiarize yourself with some logical tools which show the way out of the conventional mode of viewing things on their face value;
- learn the importance of healthy criticism in studying a society; and finally
- remember some Tips essential for knowing through unraveling meanings.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the introductory Unit of the Course which aims to familiarize the students with some tips as to how to study a Society. This is thus an exercise in methodology of studying an knowing social reality. The road taken for this exercise consists in raising correct questions and answering them in a spirit of 'calling a spade only a spade and not by any other name'. The need for healthy and constructive criticism has been highlighted since that is the only way a correct study of the society can be done. In this Unit, care has been taken to present these methodological questions with a good deal of illustrations, analogies and examples drawn from our daily routines and current events. Other Units of this Block dwell on evolution of human society to its post-industrial stage which it is currently at.

1.2 SOCIETY : AN INTRODUCTION

Society is a simple word whose meaning is well known. But to say this does not amount to denying that this word has a long history of meanings. Thus, society is simple and complex; Indian, American, Chinese etc.; agricultural, industrial so on and so forth. As a discipline, the study of Society acquired definitive meaning and shape in the 19th century. Prior to that we had philosophies debating the nature of the Society or the travelers writing about societies visited. It is the famous French sociologist. Emile Durkheim who is given the credit of “treating society as a reality in its own right”. That is to say, it is not only an innocent ‘covering term’ for “things we do not know about or understand properly”.

If we look at the history of meanings of ‘Society’, we see new emphases in its meaning appearing for it, especially after the Enlightenment period. Some laid emphasis on ‘order’, some on ‘rationality’, some on ‘materialism’. As a result, Society came to have different meanings over the years. However, a clear distancing away from a jelly-like and disorderly existence of the humanity has been found to be a common theme in all these meanings which gave central importance to values and human co-existence with passage of years. Many famous thinkers insisted even on using different expressions for Society which was found to be an inadequate term: Marxists use the word ‘social formation’ to specify three levels of relationships it, comprises: economic, ideological and political. Sir Anthony Giddens argues against identifying society with the nation-state and prefers to talk about “social systems”.

1.3 HUMAN BEINGS : AT THE CENTRE OF STUDY OF ALL DISCIPLINES

Society is thus a complex area which, over the years, has been simplified with the emergence of disciplines like History, Political Science, Sociology etc. around some specific aspects of the social reality. But the human beings occupied the centre of study of all these social sciences. They have therefore their different academic personality but all of them are moved by a central dynamic of holding the human society together. In order to facilitate these intellectual pursuits, social scientists are continuously engaged in renewal of hope for humanity. Our study of society therefore seldom can be disassociated from pursuing various concerns for values which keep hope of humanity aflame. According to our Upanishads, knowledge should enable the learner to move from darkness to light.

But knowledge/education may not always help people move forward. It may also be possible that such knowledge is generated and spread which may throw people back into the past of superstitions, and religious fears. It may provoke religious fundamentalism and terrorism which we are witnessing these days. Ms. Mary Douglas, “probably the United Kingdom’s greatest living anthropologist” has done seminal researches to find answers to questions like why a society like England has produced ‘outsiders’ from among her own citizens? For this, she has trained her sights on “how societies organise themselves and how people relate to each other” and came to some conclusions which are going to prove useful to make policies to counter the foremost problem of the day viz. terrorism.

Prof. Noam Chomsky is a perceptive American observer who has emphasized on the need to keep ‘knowledge’ from degenerating into ‘propaganda’. According