
UNIT 1 SOCIAL SCIENCES: PERSPECTIVES AND INTERRELATIONSHIPS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Science and Social Sciences
 - 1.2.1 Nature of Science
 - 1.2.2 Nature of Social Sciences
 - 1.2.3 Basic Components of Social Sciences
 - 1.2.4 Interrelationships among Components of Social Sciences
- 1.3 Sources of Data
 - 1.3.1 Primary Sources
 - 1.3.2 Secondary Sources
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Key Words
- 1.6 Hints/Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to:

- explain how social sciences are different from the sciences;
- discuss the subject matter, method of enquiry and perspectives in social sciences; and
- highlight the sources of data in the field of social sciences.

1 . INTRODUCTION

When we use the word 'science' many of us think of such disciplines as biology, chemistry and physics. We also think of laboratories in which experiments are carried out. These experiments form the bases on which scientific knowledge is based. But, do we know what social sciences are? Are social sciences also 'science' in the sense the term is used in relation to biology, chemistry, and physics? What do social scientists study? Well, in this unit, we will look for answers to these questions. We will find out the differences between social sciences and 'sciences', the sources of data and the methods used to create social science knowledge. In addition to these, we will learn what constitutes the subject matter of social sciences study in a general sense and of its different components in a specific sense.

1.2 SCIENCE AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Often social sciences are contrasted with 'science'. There have been long arguments on similarities and differences between science and social sciences. We will look into this aspect in detail. It will then be possible for us to form our own opinion on this issue and to advance a set of arguments to support it. Before defining social science, let us understand what the term 'science' implies.

1.2.1 Nature of Science

In a broad sense, science is the systematic study of an object or phenomenon. It is based on observation, measurement and experimentation. More interestingly a scientist can demonstrate his/her findings to others. Scientific knowledge is based on verifiable facts using certain methods that may be checked by anyone and may be made use of anywhere. This means that scientific facts are universal. Let us understand these points more closely with the help of an example. Consider the example of scientists' discovery of the revolution of the earth around the sun. This discovery took several years of scientific research in the course of which difficult experiments and long calculations were made. The scientists studied the phenomenon without any personal bias of their caste, class, gender or religion (i.e., their study was objective). After they had determined that it was the earth that revolves around the sun and calculated its speed, they were in a position to explain and prove their point to anybody who had the interest, ability and basic knowledge to understand it. Other scientists could then use the information generated by the group of scientists. Scientists can establish universal laws e.g., the law of gravity, the laws of motion and several others.

In essence, we have learnt that science is the study dealing with demonstrable facts that are systematically arranged. Science then may be understood as systematic knowledge of the physical world acquired through the processes of observation and experimentation.

1.2.2 Nature of Social Sciences

Now, let us understand what social sciences are. We know that science studies aspects of the physical, material world like the ocean, the mountains, storms etc. Social sciences deal with different aspects of human society and interpersonal relationships among people in society. Often, the conclusions that social scientists draw are said to be too general and of common sense understanding. This happens because social sciences deal with society and social issues like marriage, Caste, family etc. of which most people are aware. The common people form opinions about them. However, insight and understanding of social scientists is not mere common sense. Social science studies are well planned, systematic and based on specialized knowledge of its different components. For example, many of us are familiar with some of the medicines for common fever; but this knowledge does not qualify us to practice as a professional doctor. We do not know the nature, types and consequences of fever on the body and the methods and techniques of doing proper diagnosis. Moreover, we do not know precisely which medicine would work for a particular kind of fever. The medicine for fever caused by viral infection, for instance, would be different from that caused by change of weather. A doctor who has studied the field of medicine and undergone rigorous training in this area is able to diagnose an illness and treat it. Similarly, it needs a social scientist to understand

and explain social processes and social issues. A social scientist can easily explain the implicit reason of, for example, increasing incidence of suicide, or the social function of conflict and crime, the causes of poverty or the nature of bureaucracy. This understanding is often used to predict future trends or forces that would govern society in the years to come.

The chief concern of a social scientist is with the complex web of human relationships. It is interesting to note that since human beings study other human beings it is only natural that personal bias will creep into their interpretations. An example will clarify this point further. Consider a situation in which a Brahmin social scientist sets out to study a community of say cobblers who are placed low in the hierarchy of castes in the country. We may expect that the attitude of the Brahmin researcher towards the cobblers is likely to influence his/her basic findings. The reverse could also be true i.e., a researcher who belongs to the cobbler caste may find his/her own perception and impression of Brahmins influencing the conduct of his/her research. Further, the personal qualities and attributes of the researcher affect the study tremendously. It is well known that the understanding and interpretation of social reality are greatly influenced among others, by the gender, the degree of curiosity, and general awareness of the researcher. This kind of influence of an individual's attitudes, opinions and biases is known as subjectivity (as opposed to objectivity in which none of these would be significant). Again, unlike the scientists who can carry out experiments in laboratories objectively, a social scientist cannot conduct an experiment in the four walls of the laboratory. The conclusions of social scientists are based on their own understanding and interpretation of reality rather than on specific, clear-cut results of experiments.

What complicates social sciences' study is the mutual interdependence of issues. Any change in one issue brings about a change in others. Consider the example of introduction of water taps in village homes. Prior to the provision of taps in houses, people, particularly women used to collect at common wells and express themselves freely. They would sing songs together, share each other's common old memories, and even negotiate marriage proposals. While fixing of taps in houses brought great convenience to people especially women who were saved from the task of walking long distances and carrying pots and pitches filled with water, it also distanced them from one another. They are liable to feel lonely and tired in the course of completing household chores without respite or outlet to talk and share experiences.

We need to understand that while scientific facts are universal i.e., they remain applicable in different societies and in different periods of time, social facts are relevant within specific social contexts i.e., they often vary from one society to another. Further, social facts undergo change over a period of time. Consider the example of child marriage in India at this stage. Now, while child marriage was more frequent say hundred years from now, it is more common in rural areas than in urban areas even today. Like other social facts, child marriage is greatly influenced by the beliefs, values and morals of people. Thus, it should be clear that social facts need to be seen in the context in which they are found.

The question that one can ask at this stage is, if human behavior is variable and there are many kinds of societies, how can one understand social phenomena? Well, based on several studies carried out in different societies, the social scientist draws general trends and generalizations. These trends and generalizations are then used to develop theories. Generalization and theories in social sciences are developed after a close study of social facts and their interrelationships in societies.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Is it possible to interpret social reality objectively? Give at least two examples.

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- 2) What are the major similarities and differences between 'science' and 'social sciences' ?

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1.2.3 Basic Components of Social Sciences

It is mentioned earlier, social scientists study different aspects and processes that operate in society. This means that issues of governance and administration; production, consumption and distribution; social relationships in both historical and contemporary framework are significant for social scientists. Components of social sciences are identified on the basis of the focus of enquiry and research. Chronological account of events form the subject matter of history; contemporary social relationships, patterns of behaviour, ideas, beliefs, customs and rituals are the subject matter of sociology; aspects of income, expenditure, production, consumption, distribution and exchange of goods and services are the subject matter of economics; state organisation, modes of governance, distribution of power, legislation and execution of laws are subject matter of political science and public administration. Let us examine each of these in little more detail.

i) Economics

The discipline of economics broadly deals with the production, consumption and distribution of goods and services. From these basic concerns emerge issues of industrial organization, money supply and banking, public finance and international trade. Though they seem to be divergent from the core area of interest and specialization of most economists, environmental and resource economics deals with, among others, cost-benefit analysis and valuation; resource scarcity and poverty, vis-à-vis environment. Environmental and resources economics contributes to the development of policies for pollution control and management of common, shared resources.

Two major dimensions of economics are, (i) macro economics that explores the economy of a nation or world at large on the basis of data about inflation, unemployment and industrial production rates; and (ii) micro economics that explores the pattern(s) of behaviour of households, companies and industries. The purpose is to explain the behaviour of economics agents such as consumers, producers and government.

ii) History

The discipline of history is concerned with studying and interpreting past events. History is distinguished from prehistory. While history deals with systematic study of information about the past after the advent of writing skills, prehistory studies the period before the existence of written records. Some historians deny the appropriateness of distinguishing between history and prehistory. Historical information can be classified according to

chronology, geography, nation states, ethnic groups and subject or topic. Historians base their studies on both written (in the form of unpublished manuscript or printed records), coins or other objects, design and architecture of buildings, and interview.

The study of history provides information about past successes and failures of nations, leaders, political regimes, military strategies and economic systems. Some of the frequently studied aspects in the discipline of history are imperialism, colonialism and nationalism and their impact on the social, cultural and economic life of people; polity society and economy. These themes may be studied across societies or in the context of specific nation states (e.g., India, China, Japan).

This information may be put to use by individuals, social and ethnic groups, and nation states. The discipline contributes to our understanding of contemporary social reality with reference to the past. The present, as they say, is the consequence of the past.

iii) **Political Science**

Any society is constituted of communities located within a specific territory. The people of a society share common culture and often carry out similar activities. The people of one society think of themselves as constituting a unified and distinct entity, they develop a sense of shared identity and remain different from other communities. Within any society there are specific ways in which a definite category of people takes the role of controller or regulator of the affairs of the society. Over a period of time a distinct relationship between those who govern or regulate and control and those who are governed gets established. Governance is made possible through rules and legislations, exercise of authority, and a set of rewards and sanctions. These are the core issues of political science. Political science may be understood as a discipline that deals with the study of different dimensions of government and politics. Those who specialize in this field are interested in the nature and changing forms of states; roles and responsibilities of government, political parties, voter behaviour, and how state, political processes, and power influence the economic set up and market trends. These themes have been discussed over centuries since the times of Kautilya in ancient India and the great Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. The systematic study in a consolidated form along these lines developed only in the last 100 years. It can safely be said that political science in the modern sense and as a definable area of study emerged as late as the 19th century,

iv) **Public Administration**

In a broad sense, public administration is the study and implementation of government policy. The term policy refers to a strategy, plan of course of actions that is prudent or advantageous (e.g., the policy of population control or new energy policy, education policy etc.). Since public administration deals with policy, there is no denying that the discipline is linked with pursuing public good, social justice, and public interest. From the 16th century itself, need was felt for experts who could manage taxes, administration and the military organization. Over a period of time expertise in these fields developed and a science of administrative studies emerged. As the discipline developed and diversified in scope, it came to incorporate discussions on the meaning, forms and purpose of government, the bureaucracy, budgets, governance, and public affairs. Of course, the line of demarcation between political science and public administration is rather thin as the two disciplines are very closely linked.

v) **Sociology**

The term 'sociology' owes origin to the Latin word *socius* that means 'companion' and Greek word *logos* that means 'study of'. Auguste Comte who sought to analyze

multiple aspects of economic, political and cultural life and to delineate general laws of society coined the term 'sociology'. Sociology places tremendous importance on groups of individuals who share territorial locations, culture and common activities and are interdependent on each other. While one can clearly deduce that sociology is the study of different dimensions of society, it is not clear what these dimensions of society, it is not self-evident what these dimensions are. Well, the basic subject matter of sociology is the study of social structure or the ordered interrelationships between different elements of society. Kinship system, religious, political and economic institutions constitute the core of social structure. Within any social structure people are hierarchically arranged. This is a commonly studied aspect of society.

Another aspect of society that is of interest to a sociologist is collective representations that exist independent of the individuals who form a part of the collectivity. Apart from these, sociologists study organizations, institutions and development of society.

1.2.4 Interrelationships among Components of Social Sciences

We have understood that the components of social sciences are closely interrelated. Focusing on specific interests and social issues such as politics and government, economy, administration etc. distinct disciplines have emerged. Each discipline has its own method of analysis, paradigms and theories to study, understand, and explain the specific aspects of social reality. Each discipline studies one or the other aspect of social reality in its own characteristic way, yet at the same time it has close links with others. Different disciplines within the broad scope of social sciences are interrelated with one another and they often draw on each other's methodologies and findings.

Any meaningful study of a social phenomenon or event requires a clear understanding of its history, political consequences, economic implications and social bearing. The study of partition of India for example, is a legitimate field of enquiry of all the disciplines within the ambit of social sciences from their respective perspectives. Now, historians study the historical antecedents that led to the partition of the nation; political scientists and public administrators study the transfer of power to the states of India and Pakistan; economists focus on the resource allocation and its implication on the growth of the economy; and sociologists study the implications of this divide on the people, the rehabilitation of those displaced and the voices of those who were victims of violence and bloodshed. Now, while different disciplines focus on one or the other aspect of partition it would be incorrect to say that they do not make use of each others' approach and perspective. It is true that a holistic study of partition would incorporate inputs from each discipline.

1.3 SOURCES OF DATA

Studies in the field of social sciences are based on data that are collected from two sources: primary sources and secondary sources.

1.3.1 Primary Source's

Data and information from primary sources are collected at first hand. Hence, collecting data from primary sources involves direct investigation by the researcher. For example, if we want to know which brand of washing soap is most popular among the low-income group in a city, we would identify colonies in which the population of low-income group people is high. Thereafter, we would go to the shop and find out from the shopkeepers which brand of washing soap is sold most. Subsequently, we would

Speak to some of the buyers to find out the reasons for which they choose a particular brand over others. This is the process of direct investigation that yields primary data.

Direct investigation may be carried out by participating in the activities of the people from whom the data are to be collected. This is called intensive fieldwork. It is believed that sufficiently reliable data can be collected if the researcher lives among the people for a fairly long time. Intensive fieldwork is suited for research into small communities from which detailed information is required. The other mode of direct investigation is the survey method. The survey method is best suited when study has to be carried out in a large, diverse and widely scattered groups in population. Here the researcher does not participate in the life and culture of the people but collects specific information through a set of framed questions. You should have heard about public opinion surveys through which the researcher acquires an understanding of public opinion as representing collective will (say, voting), tastes, and beliefs of the people. Similarly, there are other kinds of surveys designed on the basis of different objectives.

1.3. Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are those that provide data collected from published and unpublished works. Here, data are transcribed or compiled from original sources but those who own the data are not the ones who have collected it. Consider the example of census. Trained personnel who go from house to house filling up questionnaires collect census data. These data do not belong to the trained personnel who collect them. They hand over the data to the census office that processes, compiles and makes them widely available. The data in effect, belong to the census office.

Secondary sources of data, as mentioned earlier could be unpublished in the form of manuscripts or published in the form of books, articles, records and documents. It may be understood that there is a difference between record and document. A record is a text that is prepared to attest to a formal transaction e.g., voter's identity card, warranty cards, driving license. A researcher uses the record to verify facts and understand the administration system. A document is prepared for personal reasons, for personal use and reference. Letters of Jawaharlal Nehru to his daughter Indira Gandhi (that are now published in the form of a book) is an example of document. It is used by a researcher to acquire insight into the experiences of a person. The examples of documents are memoirs, diaries and letters.

In India, commonly used secondary sources of published data are the following.

- a) **Central Statistical Organization (CSO):** It is a national organization which publishes data on national income, national income, national savings, etc. the data are available in the publication which is entitled, 'National Accounts Statistics'.
- b) **National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO):** This organization makes available data on different aspects of national economy. The basic aspects on which NSSO provides data are agriculture, consumption expenditure, industry and labour.
- c) **Reserve Bank of India Publications (RBI):** Apart from its other functions in the banking sector of the country, the Reserve Bank of India compiles information relating to different banks in the country. This information is published in, 'Report on Currency and Finance', 'Reserve Bank of India Bulletin', etc.,
- d) **Labour Bureau:** This organization provides data on labour in India through its publications, 'Indian Labour Statistics', 'Indian Labour Year Book', 'Indian Labour Journal', etc.,

- e) Population Census: A census of the population in the country incorporating different aspects e.g., age, sex, income, etc., is undertaken by the office of the Registrar General regularly after a period of ten years.

In addition to these sources of published data are unpublished reports, records, documents, findings of enquiry committees and manuscripts that are employed by social science researchers. For instance, the famous Mandal Commission Report is an important source of data on 'castes' as these were used for establishing the case for 'reservations' in public jobs. The internet has emerged as a major source of secondary data. You may be aware that there are e-books i.e., full texts of books designed for internet users. The kind of data used by the researcher depend on the aims and objectives of the research and availability of data. Often a researcher combines primary sources with secondary sources of data. This means that it is likely that a social science researcher would be engaging in direct investigation and at the same time supplementing the data collected in this way with data from secondary sources.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What is the major difference between primary and secondary sources of data?

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- 2) What are the major sources of published data?

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1.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the major features of 'science' and social sciences in order to understand the distinction between 'science' and 'social sciences'. Thereafter we explored the subject matter of social sciences and identified the major components of social sciences. We learnt that these components do not exist as watertight compartments but are integrated and interdependent both in terms of common areas of study and sources of data.. They make use of available data and also collect data directly from the 'field' themselves. Sometimes database that is used to make interpretation by specialists in one discipline is also used by those in other disciplines. This the reason that the disciplines within social sciences are distinct yet integrated with each other.

1.5 KEYWORDS

- Social Fact** : It refers to ways of acting, thinking and behaving that are largely general, understood and accepted by members of a society. Thus, customs, rules, norms, beliefs and practices, language are all treated as social facts.
- Kinship** : Kinship includes all the people who are identified as one's relations either through blood relationships (e.g., brother and sister) or through marriage (e.g., husband and wife).

Function : The way(s) through which the different parts of a system that are interrelated with each other contribute to the maintenance and stability of the total system.

Distribution : The process through which goods and services reach the users. The process of distribution could be controlled by the government, non-government organizations, the local bodies or the producers directly.

1.6 HINTS/ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Read sub-section 1.2.1 and 1.2.2 carefully and write your own viewpoint. You could explain your point of view with the help of an example.
- 2) Both science and social sciences studies are planned and systematic aiming to acquire a full understanding of the subject under study. The major differences between the two, however, relate with the subject matter, basic approach and perspective.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Read sub-sections 1.3.1 and 1.3.2 carefully and then write your answer.
- 2) The major sources of published data are:
 - i) Central Statistical Organization
 - ii) National Sample Survey Organizations
 - iii) Reserve Bank of India Publications
 - iv) Labour Bureau
 - v) Population Census

You could elaborate on these points after reading sub-section 1.3.2