

## Introduction to Social Problem

\* *Ashis*

### Introduction

Certain adverse situations that may have harmful consequences may affect societies. They may hinder the normal functioning of the society. Such harmful situations are known as social problems. These problems arise because every society has certain norms and values. When these norms and values are violated, they result in social problems. They are problems because such deviation of norms and values are dysfunctional in the society. Some of the examples of social problems are drug addiction, terrorism, youth unrest, juvenile delinquency, corruption, offences against women, environmental degradation, etc.

However, not all violations of social norms and values result in social problems. For example, when a person sports an unusual hairstyle it does not become a social problem. Similarly, social problem may vary with time and over space. Smoking was not considered a social problem earlier. At present with the rising health consciousness, smoking is considered a major social problem. Similarly, *sati* was not considered as a problem in the medieval India. However, in modern India it is seen as a social problem.

A society may consider a certain practice as a social problem where as it may not be a problem in another society. This is because the norms and values are not the same in all the societies. Divorce may be seen as a

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\* *Ashis, JNU, New Delhi*

serious problem in some societies, but it may not be so in other societies. However, there are certain practices that are considered harmful in all societies viz. murder, terrorism, rape, etc.

### **Definition**

Many scholars have tried to define social problem but it is difficult to arrive at a commonly accepted definition. According to Fuller and Myers, a social problem is “a condition which is defined by a considerable number of persons as a deviation from some social norms which they cherish”. Similarly, Merton and Nisbet define social problem as “a way of behaviour that is regarded by a substantial part of society as being in violation of one or more generally accepted or approved norms”. However, these two definitions are applicable for certain social problems like corruption, drug addiction and communalism. It is not applicable to problems like population explosion. Further, some problems are caused not by the abnormal and deviant behaviour of the individuals but by the normal and accepted behaviour. For example, the degradation of the soil in certain regions of Punjab and Haryana is being caused by the accepted methods of farming. Therefore, for Carr, “a social problem exists whenever we become conscious of a difficulty, a gap between our preference and the reality”.

### **Characteristics of Social Problems**

On the basis of the above discussion and definitions, following characteristics of social problems can be deduced:

- 1) All social problems are situations that have harmful consequences for the society.

- 2) All social problems are deviations from the ideal situation.
- 3) Social problems are caused by many factors.
- 4) All these factors are social in origin.
- 5) Social problems are interrelated.
- 6) Social problems affect every individuals of the society.
- 7) Social problems affect different individuals differently.

### **Social Problems in Indian Context**

We have discussed that social problems vary with time. Similarly, social problems in India have changed with different historical phases. The major social problems in each of these phases reflect the then existing social norms and values.

The major social problems in the early phase of the Indian civilization were increasing rigidity of social hierarchy, continuous conflicts between the *Aryans* and the *Dasas*, emphasis on the observance of rituals, sacrifice of animals etc. With the advent of the Muslim rule in India, new social problems like *sati*, *pardah*, introduction of caste system among the Muslims, etc. emerged.

In the contemporary phase, India is facing several social problems. We have the problems of terrorism, violence, offences against women, children and minorities, unemployment, poverty, drug addiction, communalism, youth unrest, corruption, migration and displacement, environmental degradation, population explosion, prostitution, HIV/AIDS, etc. These problems are the result of various factors that include economic, political, legal, cultural as well as historical.

## **Types of Social Problems**

Broadly, social problems can be divided into two types. Social problems at the individual level and social problems at the collective level. Social problems at the individual level include juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, suicide etc. Social problems at the collective level emerge when the mechanisms of social control fail to regulate the behaviour of its members or when there is breakdown of effective institutional functioning. For example, poverty, exploitation, population explosion, untouchability, famine, floods etc.

Social problems can also be divided into following types in relation to their causative factors:

- 1) Social problems due to social factors.
- 2) Social problems due to cultural factors.
- 3) Social problems due to economic factors.
- 4) Social problems due to political and legal factors.
- 5) Social problems due to ecological factors.

### **1) Social Problems Due to Social Factors**

The nature of heterogeneous societies has been the cause of a number of social problems. In heterogeneous societies like India, where there are people of several religions, castes, linguistic groups and tribal groups living together, several types of social problems can be seen.

The conflict among the different religious groups has given rise to the problem of communalism. In India, Hindu-Muslim conflict has been a major problem. We have also seen conflict between Hindus and Sikhs and between Hindus and Christians. Similarly, the caste

system in India has divided the society into various groups. It has led to the discrimination of one group by the other. The problem of untouchability in India is due to the caste system. Caste system is also responsible for the educational backwardness of the country. Traditionally, the caste determined the eligibility of the people for education. In the traditional system, education was considered to be the prerogative of the upper castes. As a result, the masses were deprived of education. This explains the high rate of illiteracy in India.

Another social factor that may lead to social problem is language. In a country where several languages are spoken, conflict between different linguistic groups can be seen. In India, we have experienced the conflict between different linguistic groups. For example, in Assam and Tamil Nadu.

## **2) Social Problems Due to Cultural Factors**

Several cultural factors have been responsible for a number of social problems. In a traditional society like India, some of the cultural factors that have led to social problems are:

- a) Male child preference,
- b) Patriarchal system,
- c) Lack of regard for public property.

In India the value system is such that a son in the family is considered necessary. It is desirable to have more sons. As a result, the members in the family go on multiplying. This has led to population explosion. The population in India has grown at a phenomenal rate after independence. At present, the population of the country is well beyond one billion that makes India the second most populated country of the world.

As elsewhere in the world, Indian society, by and large, has been patriarchal where woman is subjected to man. They are not seen beyond the roles of a wife or a mother. The woman is given an inferior social status to that of a man in almost every walk of life. As a result, almost half of the population has remained deprived. This deprivation is compounded when the woman belongs to the Scheduled Caste or the Scheduled Tribe.

Another trait of the Indian society that has implications for corruption is the disregard for public property. This lack of respect for public property is one of the root causes of corruption, black money, tax evasion, misappropriation of public goods and use of substandard materials in public construction.

### **3) Social Problems Due to Economic Factors**

Economic factors are also responsible for some of the major social problems being faced by the contemporary society. It is more conspicuous in societies of developing countries like India. Unequal distribution of wealth has led to disparity in the distribution of benefits occurring due to development. As a result there is the problem of poverty. Poverty in turn aggravates other problems like high morbidity and mortality, crime, slum, illiteracy, etc.

Further, the process of urbanisation and industrialisation in India has been very slow. This has resulted in regional disparity in economic development. There are pockets of development where high level of urban and industrial growth can be seen. However, the other regions are still under-developed. It has attracted large number of people to migrate from the under-developed region to the developed region. This in turn has affected the population structure of both the regions. In addition to it, the regions receiving the

migrants are facing the problems of slum, congestion, unemployment, pollution, etc.

#### **4) Social Problems Due to Political and Legal Factors**

Some of the political factors that may cause social problems include electoral politics, political functioning, corruption, etc. In order to win elections and come to power, political parties do not shy away from using communal or parochial modes of mobilisation like caste, religion, and language. Even some of the decisions taken by the ruling party may lead to social problem as they may benefit a particular section of the society at the cost of the entire society. It may result in conflict between different sections of the society. Another problem is the increasing political corruption. Leaders are found indulging in nepotism and red-tapism. They are also seen accepting money in return of some favour.

#### **5) Social Problems Due to Ecological Factors**

Earlier, in an attempt to develop rapidly, environment was grossly ignored. The ecological consequence of such an attempt has now emerged as a major social problem. Rapid industrialisation has led to increase in environmental pollution that includes air pollution, water pollution, noise pollution, and degradation and desertification of the land. This in turn has led to increased morbidity and mortality, emergence of new types of diseases, global warming, ozone depletion, floods etc. that has threatened the existence of mankind itself. Further, to feed the increasing population of the world more and more land is being brought under cultivation. This has disturbed the global ecological balance. Application of modern technological inputs in agriculture like the pesticides, weedicides, insecticides, high yielding variety of seeds, genetically modified crops are threatening the biodiversity of the world. It has

also increased the probability of the emergence of super weeds and insects that may be beyond the human control.

### **Systemic Factors Leading to Social Problems**

According to Merton, social problems may arise because of social disorganisation or because of the deviant behaviour of the individual. For example, in all societies consensus exists on values and interests. Whenever this degree of unanimity is disturbed by conflicting interests, we find trends of disorganisation in that particular society. Similarly, inadequacies in the social system also cause social problems. Society develops formal and informal mechanism of social control to regulate behaviours of its members. Whenever, these mechanisms do not work in an effective manner, the trends of disorganisation become visible in the society.

Social disorganisation is thus manifested in a variety of contexts such as the breakdown in the effective institutional functioning, disorganisation of family, marital breakdown, poverty, violence, crime, population explosion and community disorganisation like youth unrest.

Deviant behaviour is reflected in the violation of norms, values and moral codes. In every society there is a commonly agreed idea of normal behaviour. Whenever someone moves away from the accepted norm and behaves differently, that behaviour may be regarded as abnormal or deviant behaviour. Juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, suicide and prostitution are some of its examples.

## **Approaches to the Study of Social Problems**

The contemporary period has seen a remarkable shift in the way a social problem is perceived by the society. Earlier social problems and their origin were explained with a focus on the individual. The cause of such problems was seen in the genetic make up of the individual and was believed to be beyond redemption. Now the emphasis is on the social, economic, political, and cultural or on the structural factors. Thus, the contemporary approach views the cause of the social problem at the collective level and not at the individual level. Further, earlier emphasis was on the maintenance of social order and preservation of equilibrium that used to make social change a suspect phenomenon. Now, it is accepted that strains and social problems emerge due to contradictions existing in the social system which can be sorted out by removing these contradictions.

At present, there are two important approaches to study the nature and genesis of social problems. They are:

- Functional approach,
- Marxist approach, and
- Gandhian approach.

### **The Functional Approach**

This approach views the society as a system. A system is a set of interconnected parts that together form a whole. The basic unit of analysis is society and its various parts are understood in terms of their relationship to the whole. Thus, social institutions like family, religion and marriage are the parts that constitute the whole, that is, the society. Functionalists see such social institutions only as a part of the society and not as an isolated unit.

The parts of the society are functional if they maintain the system and contribute to its healthy survival. If any part hinders the normal functioning of the society or threatens its existence then it becomes dysfunctional. According to the Functionalists, the concept of dysfunction is of vital importance in the modern study of social problems. Some of the important Functionalists are Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and R.K. Merton.

According to Merton, the study of social problems requires a focus on the dysfunctions of patterns of behaviour, belief and organisation in the society. Such social dysfunctions arise because of a specific inadequacy of a part of the system for meeting a functional requirement. For example, the shift from joint family to nuclear family as a result of industrialisation and urbanisation is dysfunctional for the care of the elderly population. As a result, care for the people in the old age has become a social problem.

The same social pattern can be dysfunctional for some and functional for other in a social system. For example, a large dam may be functional for the people who get benefited from it but is dysfunctional for those who get displaced by it. The accumulation of dysfunctions disturbs the social stability and creates new social problems.

Further, the society develops certain codes of norms and values to maintain equilibrium between the different parts. However, at times, certain circumstances are generated which infringe such social codes. This causes social problems like communalism.

### **Marxist Approach**

The Marxists believe that in all societies except the primitive societies and in the Communist societies, the

society is divided into two classes—the ruling class and the ruled class. The ruling class is a minority but exploits the ruled class who is in majority. For example, in the feudal society, lords exploit their serfs. In capitalist society, the capitalists exploit their workers. This leads to a fundamental conflict of interest between these two classes since, one gains at the expense of the other. So all these societies contain some basic contradictions. Therefore, they cannot survive in their existing form. According to the Marxists, the social problems in the society are due to contradictions inherent in the system itself.

According to Marx, some of the social problems in the capitalist society are:

- Exploitation of a man by man,
- Alienation,
- Inequality, and
- Poverty.

In order to maximise their profit, the capitalists tend to pay the minimum possible wages to the workers and try to extract the maximum labour from them. In this way the capitalists exploit the workers, as they do not give them their due. The workers do not have any say in the production process. They are supposed to produce commodities as desired by the capitalists. So they get alienated from their own products. The units of production in the society are unequally distributed. This leads to inequality in the society. This inequality goes on increasing as the capitalists go on becoming richer and the workers go on becoming poorer. With the concentration of wealth in the hands of the capitalists, there is increase in poverty.

Marx believed that the solution of these problems is not possible through reforms within the existing social structure, that is, capitalism. Instead, it requires a radical change in the structure of the society where capitalism should be replaced by communism.

The Marxist approach, however, is criticised as it overemphasises the role of material forces and conflict. It has over-simplified the class structure of the capitalist society, ignoring the importance of new occupations, professions and the middle class.

### **Gandhian Approach**

Gandhi gave an altogether different perspective to the understanding of the social problems. His views on social problems are contained in his ideas of *sarvodaya* and *swaraj*. Gandhi's views are based on the values of truth and non-violence. Gandhi regarded society to be a unified organisation. Thus he was not in agreement with the Marxists. According to Gandhi, though the interests of different classes may clash, the fact of conflict of interest does not assume primacy over the unity of the community.

Thus, the unity of purpose of the whole community is predominant in Gandhian explanation. Cooperation rather than conflict is the chief characteristic of the society. Different classes forming a community work together or cooperate to achieve the well being of the community as a whole.

Gandhi rejected the view that by reorganising society economically, the social, political and cultural problems would end. Simply economic restructuring of the society cannot ensure solution to social problems. The changes to be brought should be all pervasive. Radical changes have to be brought about in economic, social, political

and cultural spheres of the community. The Gandhian approach opposes the theory of violent revolution and coercive change. The revolution has to be a gradual process and should be brought about by awakening of masses. Thus, a programme of social, economic, cultural and political awakening of the masses has to be undertaken to overcome the social problems.

Gandhi was opposed to the introduction of vast economic, social and cultural changes through legislation. The society must change itself gradually by its own initiative and efforts. Legislation may facilitate the changes when society itself is moving in the same direction. Changes should not be imposed on the society.

Gandhian approach offers a critique of the existing order, propounds certain basic elements of a new society and provides a methodology for solving social problems. Critics have argued that Gandhian approach lacks originality and is a combination of the traditional Indian thinking, welfare thinking and liberalism. It is idealistic and divorced from the hard social realities. However, it must be remembered that it was applied successfully by blacks in the USA and in South Africa and even by the people in the Eastern Europe to fight against communalism.

### **Societal Response to Social Problems**

Social problems are threat to the stability of the society. Solutions to the social problems can be found if the causes of social problems are identified. Social problems are usually caused due to multiple factors. However, with proper analysis the chief factor, the cooperative factors and the minor aggravants in the origin and development of the social problem can be identified. After understanding and judging the social problem,

the social response should be constructive so that effective action can be initiated.

Society may introduce positive changes in the existing institution or may establish a new institution to overcome the problem. Thus the society's response can be at two levels: organised response and individual response. Organised response is at the collective level and is taken by the state or by organisations like Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Self Help Groups (SHGs). At the individual level, it is the effort made by socially concerned persons to combat the problem, for example, efforts of Baba Amte to eradicate the problem of leprosy.

But many problems are such that they are very difficult to control like those problems that are occasioned by natural factors such as flood or earthquake. In such case the society can take efforts to minimise the impact of the problem.

## **Conclusion**

The chapter starts with an introduction to the social problems and then attempts to define what is a social problem. Based on it, the characteristics of social problems have been deduced and social problems in Indian context have been examined. Then an attempt has been made to classify social problems on the basis of causative and systemic factors. Social problems can be due to social, cultural, economic, political, legal, and ecological factors. Systemic factors leading to social problems can be due to social disorganisation or due to the deviant behaviour of the individual. We have also learnt about the approaches to study social problems. Finally, some light has been thrown on the societal response to the social problems.

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