

Topic-sociology as science

Part-A

OBJECTIVES

Human beings have always lived in societies, and as members of their societies, they have pondered about their nature. This is like saying that human beings have their own bodies and they always had some idea of the organism. The knowledge about different parts of the body, its anatomy, and its working or physiology developed as a special discipline much later. Thus scientific knowledge about our body and other things around us developed along with new methods of acquiring the same. This method began to be called the scientific method. Now we try to get knowledge about society, its working, its modifications and changes through a scientific method. In bringing scientific approach to the study of society, Durkheim played an important part. So we try to know what he did and how he did it. When you study this , you will be able to

- > locate the characteristics of science
- > identify the bases for defining social facts
- > point out how sociology is different from some other subjects of study
- > describe the types of society
- > classify social facts
- > list the rules of observation of social facts
- > identify the rules for explaining facts.

INTRODUCTION

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) is best remembered for his efforts in making sociology accepted as an autonomous academic discipline. He won recognition for the idea of a science of society, which could contribute to the study of moral and intellectual problems of modern society. While discussing Durkheim's conception of Sociology we shall focus on three important aspects (a) general conditions for establishment of **social science** (b) sociology as a study of 'social facts' and (c) the sociological method.

A) GENERAL CONDITIONS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Sociology was just emerging as a distinctive discipline in Durkheim's lifetime. To the vast majority of educated people including scholars in the universities,

sociology was just a name. When Durkheim was a student at the Ecole Normale there was not a single professorship in sociology in France! It was only in 1887 that the first chair in social science was created for Durkheim by the French Government at the University of Bordeaux. It was many years later that he received the title of Professor of Sociology at Sorbonne in Paris.

Given the existing situation, Durkheim was explicitly concerned with outlining the nature and scope of Sociology. Durkheim considered social sciences to be distinct from natural sciences because social sciences dealt with human relationships. However the method used in the natural sciences could be used in the social sciences as well. He was concerned with examining the nature of Sociology as a social science distinct from Philosophy and Psychology. Philosophy is concerned with ideas and conceptions whereas science is concerned with objective realities. Philosophy is the source from where all sciences have emerged. In his book *Montesquieu and Rousseau*, published in 1892, Durkheim (1960: 3-13) laid down the general conditions for the establishment of a social science (which also apply to Sociology). Let us look at them.

i) Science, he pointed out, is not coextensive with human knowledge or thought. Not every type of question the mind can formulate can be tested by science. It is possible for something to be the object of the philosopher or artist and not necessarily the stuff of science at all. Thus, science deals with a specified, area — or a subject matter of its own, not with total knowledge.

ii) Science must have a definite field to explore. Science is concerned with things, objective realities. For social science to exist it must have a definite subject matter. Philosophers, Durkheim points out, have been aware of ‘things’ called laws, traditions, religion and so on, but the reality of these was in a large measure dissolved by their insistence on dealing with these as manifestations of human will. Inquiry was thus concentrated on the internal will rather than upon external bodies of data. So it is important to look things as they appear in this world.

iii) Science does not describe individuals but types or classes of subject matter. If human societies be classified then they help us in arriving at general rules and discover regularities of behaviour.

iv) Social science, which classifies the various human societies, describes the normal form of social life in each type of society, for the simple reason that it describes the type itself; whatever pertains to the type is normal and whatever is normal is healthy.

v) The subject matter, of a science yields general principles or 'laws'. If societies were not subject to regularities, no social science would be possible. Durkheim further points out that since the principle that all the phenomena of the universe are closely interrelated has been found to be true in the other domains of nature, it is also valid for human societies, which are a part of nature. In putting forth the idea that there is a continuity of the natural and social worlds, Durkheim has been strongly influenced by Comte.

vi) Although there is continuity between the natural and social worlds, the social is as distinctive and autonomous a sphere of subject matter as either the biological or the physical. Durkheim was very much against the view held by some scholars that everything in society should be reduced to human volition. Categories of human will and volition, he points out, belong to psychology not social science. If social science is really to exist, societies must be assumed to have a certain nature, which results from the nature and arrangement of the elements composing them.

vii) Finally, to discern the uniformities, types and laws of society we need a method. The methods of science applicable in the field of the natural sciences are valid within the social field. The criteria of a social science which Durkheim set forth at the beginning of his first published work remained to the end of his life the fundamental criteria of social science and the identifying attributes of the field he called 'sociology'

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