UNIT 5: EMILE DURKHEIM-I

UNIT STRUCTURE

5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 Views on Sociology and its Approach

5.4 Social Fact

- 5.4.1 Characteristics
- 5.4.2 Rules for Observing Social Facts
- 5.4.3 Rules for Explaining Social Facts
- 5.4.4 Testing Sociological Explanations of Social Facts
- 5.4.5 Types

5.5 Division of Labour

5.6 Social Solidarity

- 5.6.1 Mechanical Solidarity
- 5.6.2 Organic Solidarity

5.7 Critical Assessment of Durkheim's Contributions

5.8 Let us Sum up

5.9 Further Reading

5.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

5.11 Model Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to–

- assess the important contributions of Emile Durkheim to Sociology
- discuss Durkheim's concept of 'Social Facts'
- discuss the rules laid down by Durkheim to observe, explain and test social facts, explain Durkheim's idea of 'Social Solidarity'
- discuss Durkheim's concepts of mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was a French sociologist and social philosopher whose works have been profoundly influential in all areas of the social sciences, and who is regarded as one of the founding figures of both sociology and anthropology. He was greatly influenced by the intellectual traditions of Rousseau, Saint-Simon and Comte. He contributed immensely towards developing Sociology as a Science through his 'Structural-Functional' approach. Significantly he was one of the forerunners in the history of sociology to introduce sociology as an academic discipline.

Durkheim along with Max Weber must be credited with founding the modern phase of sociological theory. It began with his first book, *Division of Labor,* submitted as his doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne, along with his Latin doctoral thesis on Montesquieu in 1893. Two years after his monumental work on the *Division of Labor* (1893), he published his second major study, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895). His final book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* was the ripe harvest of a long process of intensive cultivation. Throughout the history of sociological literature, Durkheim has been known for his very systematic writing. His major works published during his lifetime provide us with a picture of his thought process. These books provided different but complementary aspects of Durkheim's thought with special reference to his sociology.

5.3 VIEWS ON SOCIOLOGY AND ITS APPROACH

Durkheim holds the view that Sociology can have a distinct identity as a discipline only when its subject matter is also distinct and specific from that of other social sciences. He emphasized that "Social Facts" should be the subject matter of sociology as he said: *Sociology is the scientific study of social facts*. Social fact, according to him is social phenomena. Durkheim specified the characteristics of social fact and suggested how these social phenomena can be studied and approached. These contain the gist of his views on sociology and the basic sociological approach.

He emphasised that the **Aims of Sociology** should be to:

- Study *social systems.*
- Study *'Social Facts'*. He defined 'Social Facts' as 'things' that constitute a social system, and are inter-linked by cause and effect relationship.
- Study how social facts or social phenomena are *connected t*o each other in a cause-effect relationship.
- Draw *generalisations* that could be observed and tested in society.

Durkheim further stressed on the following :

- Sociology should be the *objective,* not subjective, study of 'Social Facts'. That is, the external characteristics of a social phenomenon are to be studied, and not the subjective interpretations of the phenomenon.
- It should follow the *methods of natural sciences* like observation, classification, comparison and generalisations. It is a scientific study of social facts.
- The *classificatory and comparative methods* should be used for testing the generalisations arrived at.
- Society should be seen as an *evolutionary entity with historical processes*.

Structural-Functional Approach: Durkheim based his ideas on the concept that society is a 'whole' like an organism, where the parts are independent yet interconnected for the maintenance and smooth functioning of the 'whole'. Just as the parts of an organism function independently, yet stay interconnected for the survival of the organism, similarly, the parts of a society (example: groups, institutions, etc.) are independent of each other, yet, are inter-linked for the survival and smooth functioning of the society. This is the idea behind the concept of 'Structural-Functionalism'.

All his life, Durkheim tried to establish Sociology as a distinct scientific discipline. He argued that Sociology is separate from Biology and Psychology, because the former deals with 'Social Facts', while the latter deal with individual facts such as instincts, reflexes, etc. He talked about the logic of the functional approach to the study of society by focusing a distinction

between historical and functional types of enquiry and between functional consequences and individual motivations.

In Durkheim's words, "society is not the mere sum of individuals" (*The Rules of Sociological Method, 1895).* Hence, the study of society is not just the study of a few individuals. It should be the study of the association/ inter-connectedness between the individuals and society or the social system.

Thus, Durkheim insisted that social phenomena depend on social factors and cannot be reduced to individual states, either biological or psychological. Some of his most influential books are: *The Division of Labour in Society (1893), The Rules of Sociological Method (1895), Suicide (1897),* and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912).*



LET US KNOW

In 1897, Durkheim founded the famous sociological journal ***L'Annee Sociologique*** in France. It was one of the most influential and powerful journals of the time.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: Write True or False:

a) Durkheim's approach is that of a Structural Functionalist.

b) Durkheim looks at society as a 'whole' where parts function independently but inter-connectedly.

c) Durkheim insisted that social phenomena are caused by biological or psychological factors.

5.4 SOCIAL FACT

Durkheim defined 'Social Fact' as "a 'thing' that is external to and independent of the individual, but at the same time is exercises constraint upon the individual".

5.4.1 Characteristics

The characteristics of a 'Social Fact' are:

- A Social fact is like a '**thing'**.
- It is **external** to the individual.
- It is **independent** of the individual.
- It exercises **constraint** upon the individual. That is, it exercises force upon the individual. An individual who tends to violate a 'social fact' may have to face social sanctions or social restraint.
- It is **diffused** in society. That is, it is to be generally found in society.
- It **endures** through time, outlasting any group of individuals.

It should be noted here that, Durkheim's notion of 'social fact' emanates a 'functionalist perspective' that emerges from his preoccupation with social order.

Durkheim meant that in society, the social phenomena are the product of collective action. They are born out of association of individuals. Once it is established and institutionalized, it becomes above and apart from the individuals As such, these social phenomena become external to the individual. They are like things, hence termed as 'facts'. Just as material things are external to individuals, and can be observed and experiments conducted on these, social facts also have these characteristics. Therefore, social factors/phenomena are to be studied empirically, not philosophically. Additionally, they have a coercive force upon the individual members of the society. The force is such that the members feel a moral obligation to orient their conduct as per the social norms and rules (social facts). These get internalized in the consciousness of the individuals. Thus, social facts put a constraint on human conduct.

In order to make the study of 'social facts' as scientific as possible, Durkheim laid down certain rules to observe, explain and test them. These rules are mentioned below:

5.4.2 Rules for Observing Social Facts

Durkheim suggested the following rules to observe 'social facts':

- Social Facts should be treated *as if they are 'things'*, external to the individual.
- One should study Social Facts *without pre-conceptions* (prior ideas) i.e. it should be studied objectively. One should proceed to study them without common-sensical knowledge.
- The observer should study the external attributes of a social phenomenon, which can be *categorised, compared and tested*.
- Observation of a Social Fact should *go beyond its individual manifestation*.

5.4.3 Rules for Explaining Social Facts

Durkheim noted that "when the explanation of a social phenomenon is undertaken, we must seek separately the EFFICIENT CAUSE and the FUNCTION it fulfills".

- Here, 'efficient cause' refers to the cause that produces the social phenomenon and 'function' refers to the utility of the social phenomenon in establishing social order.
- Explanation should take into account the historical processes and evolution of the social phenomenon/fact.

5.4.4 Testing Sociological Explanations of Social Facts

In Durkheim's opinion, after observing, categorizing and comparing social phenomena, it is important to explain its causes. This involves establishing *sociological theories/explanations of causal relation between social facts*. These explanations need to be established only after being tested. He regarded indirect experimentation, or the **Comparative Method,** as the method *par excellence* for testing 'social facts'. This method, in turn, is based on the method of '**concomitant variations' or 'correlation'.**

He cited that this method is suitable for sociological analysis. In real social life, one cannot control and manipulate the variables (factors, and according to Durkheim, social facts) for experimentation. These are intertwined in such a complex pattern that one cannot eliminate a variable as and when one wants. In the method of concomitant variation, one need not control the variables, but rather observe their nature as they occur, and arrive at conclusions on causal connections between variables/social facts.



LET US KNOW

The method of **Concomitant Variation** says that, if across a range of situations that lead to a certain effect, we find a certain property of the effect varying with variation in a factor common to those situations, then we can infer that factor as the cause.

Symbolically, the method of concomitant variation can be represented as follows:

If, A B C occur together with X Y Z

A↑BC results in X↑YZ (↑ representing an increase) and

A↓B C results in X↓YZ (↓ representing a decrease)

Then, it can be concluded that A and x are causally connected.

Stated above is an example of 'concomitant variations'. We note that an increase/decrease of 'A', results in the corresponding increase/decrease of 'X'. Therefore, it can be concluded that 'A' is the efficient cause of 'X'. Similarly, this comparative method can be employed to prove that one social fact/phenomenon gives rise to another– the logic being, "a given social effect always has a corresponding social phenomenon as the cause".

5.4.5 Types of Social Facts

- **Normal:** A social fact is normal when it has the following characteristics:

- ❍ It is generally encountered in a society of a certain type, and
- ❍ It has utility for that social type.

Thus, crime can be normal if it fulfils these conditions. Every type of society has a particular rate of crime which is typical of its type of society. This is the normal/usual rate for that type of society. As long as this rate is maintained, then crime as a social fact becomes a normal one. Durkheim further pointed at the functional significance of crime as a means of change.

- ➢ **Pathological:** A social fact becomes pathological when there is a sudden increase from its 'normal' rate. Thus, crime and suicide will become pathological when there is an abrupt increase in their rate of occurrence, from that which is typical/ normal for its societal type.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.2: Write True or False:

a) A social fact is not external to an individual.

b) One can easily violate a social fact.

c) A social fact has a 'function' –It establishes social order.

d) According to Durkheim, comparative method is the best method to study social facts.

e) Social facts are independent entities that are not connected to each other.

f) Social facts are external to and independent of the individual.

5.5 DIVISION OF LABOUR

Durkheim held that social community life would be possible when there is social solidarity. Social solidarity means integration among the members of a society.

This is based on two basic sources:

- Similarity of consciousness
- Division of labour

Similarity of consciousness implies that the people are homogeneous, mentally and morally, they feel the same emotions, cherish the same values and have the same beliefs about the sacred.

Division of labour is the differentiation or specialization of labour in a society. The people perform different tasks in the society.

Durkheim emphasized that both these factors play significant roles in social solidarity. While similarity of consciousness needs to be present in higher or lesser degrees, division of labour, when it is present, play an interesting role in social solidarity. We shall explain this relation between division of labour and social solidarity in the next section. Now, let us discuss the nature of division of labour in a more elaborate manner.

Simple societies, for which Durkheim used the term primitive societies, have a social structure with little or no division of labour. The people occupy very general positions, and perform almost all the activities themselves that are of importance in their social life.



LET US KNOW

The classical social thinkers of the 19th and even the early 20th century used to refer the society with a simple economic life and technology as primitive. However, in the post World War period, the term 'primitive' was attacked for being derogatory. It implied that the people of simple societies are backward in all spheres of life, and that there are other people who are better than them. At that time, the concept of cultural relativism had received scientific attention. This espoused the scientific aptness of appreciating a society in reference to its own context, of understanding them in their terms, rather than with reference to other societies. The latter tendency is termed 'ethno-centrism'. Hence, nowadays, the term simple and complex is used instead of the previous classification of primitive and advanced.

The structure and function of the society tends to gets more complex. This happens as people tend to occupy specialised positions, and each has a much narrow range of tasks and responsibilities. The function performed by an individual tends to be specific and involves very few types of tasks. People are skilled in very few tasks. Hence, a person becomes dependent on other skills and economic activities. The society is now characterized by division of labour. Modern societies are thus characterized by division of labour.

- **Causes:** Durkheim, who advocated the quest of causes of social facts, probes into the causes of the growth of structural and functional complexity of society. He sought to explain division of labour in terms of its causes. These are as follows:
  - Increase in *numerical size* of the population.
  - Concomitant growth of *dynamic density or moral density* experienced by such a population. As population grows, need increases, and as such, there is also an increase in the demands of the people upon each other. Resources are scarce which creates competition among them. Under such a circumstance, a system develops, whereby people are allotted different tasks. This lessens the intensity of competition, and the tasks of one come to complement the other. He referred to this as dynamic density. As the dynamic intensity keeps on increasing, the division of labour becomes more complex.

5.6 SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

Durkheim was particularly interested in the issue of 'social solidarity' or social order in society. This was triggered by the social environment of his time – growing individualism, growing density of population, dislocation of people and moral diversification. Therefore, in his first major publication, *The Divison of Labour (1893)*, he sought to examine how moral regulation and social integration are achieved in societies. This he did by comparing the primitive society with the modern, and contemporary societies in an evolutionary model. He believed that societies evolve from 'primitive' and

simple to modern and complex types. He argued that while 'mechanical solidarity' brings about social solidarity or social integration in primitive societies, the same is achieved in modern societies through 'organic solidarity'.

Durkheim's preoccupation with 'Social Solidarity' emerged because he was concerned with how societies develop mechanisms to curb chaos and establish social order and integration.

5.6.1 Mechanical Solidarity

Primitive societies are marked by low density of population and simple techniques of work repeated from generation to generation. Hence, there is a 'familiarity' among the people and everyone performs almost the same kind of tasks. Yet, no one depends on the other for survival or production. This is because everyone cultivates his own food, builds his own house, etc. In a sense, there is greater economic independence in such societies.

Primitive societies run on a simple set of rules, traditions and expectations. People are bound to each other through common beliefs and consensus found in the '**collective conscience**'. This gives rise to 'mechanical solidarity' in the society.



LET US KNOW

Durkheim defined ***Collective Conscience*** as the body of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society.

Characteristics of Mechanical Solidarity:

- It is found in 'primitive'/ *simple societie*s.
- In these societies, there is less *population density*,
- As such there is *'familiarity'* among its members.
- Everyone performs almost the same kind of traditional tasks. It has a *relatively simple division of labour.*
- These societies are characterised by greater economic independence and moral solidarity.

- Mechanical solidarity is accompanied by '**repressive law'** – punishment and reinforcement of the traditional morality of the people as a whole. It characterizes penal law. In such a society where people are not too much dependent on one another, the values and rules of society could be upheld by a simple repressive law.
- Mechanical solidarity is based on 'collective conscience'.

5.6.2 Organic Solidarity

As societies expand, it is no longer possible for people to do the same tasks or maintain a 'familiarity' with each other. As the density of population increases, the economic activities also increase. It is no longer possible to repeat traditional techniques of work as they become more complex, differentiated and specialised. *Thus, division of labour emerges in society*. For example: in assembly line production, a section of people specialise to produce just one part of the whole product, and not the whole product, unlike the case in primitive societies.

With the growing differentiation/ division of labour, *familiarity among members decreases*. Interests and relationship becomes contractual. The sharing of common beliefs, common rules and regulations decreases. There is a lack of an over-all unity of belief and morality. Such a situation tends to result in moral chaos or '**anomie'**. *Law is restitutive* – whose 'rationale' is simply to make restitution (compensation) for injuries done, reinforcing little more than the terms of the contract itself. (This takes into consideration the elements of law other than the penal, as civil, commercial, administrative and such aspects.)

But then, division of labour results in *interdependence among the members.* There occurs a rise of a network of occupational associations such as guilds, etc. that link individuals to the state; links the guilds, and the groups. The collectively created moral obligations by these associations exercise constraint on the

individual. Thus, social order and integration are maintained in complex, modern societies. This has been identified by Durkheim as 'organic solidarity'.



LET US KNOW

Anomie is a situation of 'normlessness' when there is a breakdown of norms governing social interaction. Without norms to adhere to, people feel unrelated to each other, and possess no framework for meaningful life. It results in chaos in their lives.

Characteristics of Organic Solidarity:

- It is found in *complex and modern societies*, especially in industrial societies.
- It is characterised by *division of labour*. One specialises in producing a part of the product and not the whole product.
- *Men become simply units of labour* or factors of production. Interests and relationship is contractual.
- It is characterised by ***'restitutive law'*** –that is, to simply make restitution for injuries done, or to 'ensure the return of things as they were' or there would be a penalty.
- It is characterised by *greater interdependence in society* arising out of differentiation and specialisation within the modern economy. This unites the specialization of tasks in society in an over-all social solidarity.



LET US KNOW

Social solidarity is essentially a basic moral order pervading society. Durkheim sought the external characteristics whereby the nature of the morality existing among the people might be measured. He looked for some observable index of the nature and intensity of the collective moral sentiments which operated in the society. This 'visible symbol', he argued, was the *law*

in society, and more particularly, it was the *sanction* (that which authorise and endorse) manifested in the law. There are two types of sanctions– repressive and restitutive. This is a clear index of the intensity with which certain moral precepts were held in the 'sentiments' of the community.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.3: Write True or False:

a) Organic solidarity is found in primitive/simple societies.

b) Mechanical solidarity is characterised by greater specialisation and division of labour.

c) Mechanical solidarity is characterised by repressive law, and organic solidarity by restitutive law.

d) Durkheim believed that societies evolved from simple to complex societies.

e) Mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity are the two types of social solidarity given by Weber.

f) Social solidarity is a logic that society creates by itself in order to decrease chaos and maintain social order.

5.7 CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF DURKHEIM'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Durkheim laid the foundations of Sociology as a distinct, objective and powerful Science with his concept of 'Social Fact'. With this concept, he proved that individual actions are actually influenced by social factors, created and enforced by society or the social structure.

Durkheim's preoccupation with social solidarity to maintain social order is also very important. According to him, social facts 'function' to maintain integration and order in society. In this context, he spoke of an evolutionary growth of societies: from primitive and simple to modern and complex. In primitive societies, 'mechanical solidarity' is the social fact for

establishing order, while in complex societies, 'organic solidarity' is the social fact to establish social order.

However, critics argue that a purely objective study of society is not possible, subjective interpretations of a phenomenon are also to be considered. Weber, for instance, belonged to the school of thought that argues that Sociology cannot be as objective as the natural sciences, because it deals with the complex issue of human beings and society. Therefore, a proper sociological understanding of phenomena is possible only when the subjective interpretation of the phenomena is considered.

Another criticism is that Durkheim's notion of societies evolving from primitive to complex is too simplistic. Not every society evolves from primitive to complex with time. For example, most tribal societies in today's world still operate on traditional lines with traditional techniques of work.

Critics also argue that the comparative method for studying social facts, as given by Durkheim, is too simplistic. Societies are complex and a social phenomenon may have more than one 'efficient cause'.

Yet, despite the criticisms against Durkheim's approach, his contributions to Sociology are greatly acknowledged because he successfully established it as a scientific discipline through the methods of observation, classification, comparison, testing and generalisation.



5.8 LET US SUM UP

- Durkheim established Social Facts as the subject-matter of Sociology.
- Social Facts are external to and independent of the individual, yet exercise force or constraint upon the individual.
- Social Facts act as 'things' and cannot be easily violated.
- Social Facts must have an 'efficient cause' and fulfill a 'function' – that is, to establish order.
- A social fact has an 'efficient cause' because all social facts are connected to one another in a cause-effect relationship.

- Durkheim regarded comparative method as the best method to study Social Facts. He believed that this method, along with the emphasis on Social Facts, can make Sociology as objective and scientific as the natural sciences.
- Mechanical solidarity maintains order in primitive societies. It is characterised by '**repressive law'**.
- Repressive law is characterized by punishment and reinforcement of the society's traditional morality. For example, publicly humiliating the offender.
- Organic solidarity maintains social order in complex societies. It is characterised by '**restitutive law'**.
- Restitutive law is characterized by penalties for 'the return of things as they were'. For example, the system of imposing fines in the modern world.



5.9 FURTHER READING

1) Abraham, Francis and Morgan, J. H.; *Sociological Thought*; Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd.
2) Coser, Lewis; *Masters of Sociological Thought*: Delhi, Jaipur: Rawat.



5.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1: a) True, b) True, c) False

Ans. to Q. No. 2: a) False, b) False, c) True, d) True, e) False, f) False

Ans. to Q. No. 3: a) False, b) False, c) True, d) True, e) False, f) True



5.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short Questions: (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q.1: What are the characteristics of a Social Fact?

Q.2: What are the rules to observe, explain and test a Social Fact?

Q.3: What is 'division of labour'? What are the causes of growing division of labour in society?

B) Long Questions: (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q.1: What is 'Social Solidarity'? What are the two types of social solidarity given by Durkheim? What are their characteristics?

Q.2: What is mechanical solidarity? What are its characteristics?

Q.3: What is organic solidarity? What are its characteristics?

Q.4: Critically examine Durkheim's contribution to Sociology.

Q.5: How did Durkheim propose to develop Sociology as a distinct and objective scientific discipline?

*** ***** ***