UNIT 6: EMILE DURKHEIM: SUICIDE AND EDUCATION

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6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- understand how social forces facilitate or hinder suicide
- know different types of suicide
- understand how society influences education
- know the function of education in society
- know the significance of moral education in modern society.

6.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit (unit 5) we got an idea about some of the works of Emile Durkheim. We have come to know that Durkheim have stated that the task of sociologist was to understand social facts. One of the social facts on which Durkheim had done extensive work is Suicide. His theory on suicide was published as a book in the year 1897. Again, he also considered Education as a social fact because in every age it is the society which

determines the nature and the kind of education which it desires to impart to their younger generation. In this unit, we shall further try to understand why suicide is considered a social fact, what are different types of suicide etc. Besides we shall also try to understand Durkheim's views on education and its function towards society.

6.3 EMILE DURKHEIM AND SUICIDE

Emile Durkheim considered suicide as a social fact because it existed/exists in every society. Along with this he considered suicide as a social fact, not as an individual act because according to him there always exists some latent or manifest social forces which compel one to commit suicide. According to Durkheim, suicide rate is a factual order, unified and definite, because in every society suicide exists but its rate may differ from one society to another. Durkheim's major explanations of suicide are as follows:

- Suicide is a social fact. As a social fact, it is related to other social facts. Its cause can be explored in the other social facts of the society. It exists in relation to other social facts.
- In every society, there is a more or less a constant rate of suicide. Durkheim stated that there is no society where suicide does not occur, and many societies show roughly the same rates of suicide over long periods of time. This indicates that suicide may be considered as "normal", or a regular occurrence. The rate of suicide differed from society to society, and fluctuated in a constant manner in relation to certain social conditions.
- When the rate of suicide alters, it is indicative of a changing situation. When there is a sudden increase in the rate of suicide in a group or in the whole society, it becomes indicative of a situation of disintegration or anomie (a condition of relative normlessness in a whole society, or in some components of it).

6.3.1 Types of Suicide

Durkheim distinguished *three* types of suicide on the basis of data gathered from many societies and cultures. They are:

a) Egoistic suicide, b) Altruistic suicide, c) Fatalistic suicide.

a) Egoistic Suicide: This type of suicide results from the lack of integration of the individual into his or her social group. When an individual becomes frustrated from the social expectations and to avoid those frustrations, he/she starts withdrawing from social activities and becomes aloof from others leading to tendency on the part of the suicidal person. The cause of egoistic suicide is, therefore, 'excessive individualism', which the modern, industrial society tends to encourage. Egoistic suicide may be characteristic of the society as a whole or of some particular groups within it. Less integrated groups within a society, such as urban dwellers, industrial workers, Protestants, and unmarried men etc, show tendency towards egoistic suicide. In modern societies people become too obsessive to become more and more successful because in modern societies higher status is given to a more successful person. In the process of trying to become more and more successful, many times people lose social contact. Therefore during the times of despair, they do not receive emotional support and this condition lead to a desire to end their own life.

According to Durkheim, some social groups show less suicidal tendency. Now within Christianity, there are two sects: Catholicism and Protestantism. Despite their common belief in the Bible both the sects promote different practices and way of life. Durkheim found that in both the two groups the suicide rate is very different. Catholics for instance, show a far less suicide rate than the Protestants. This is because, while both faiths prohibit suicide, Catholicism is able to integrate its members more fully into its fold. 'Protestantism promotes a spirit of free

enquiry, encourages greater individual space, has fewer common beliefs and practices that can bind individuals with one another. On the other hand, Catholicism discourages questioning of faith, and there are several customs and practices which one is supposed to follow if one is a catholic. These customs and practices impose regularity of behavior upon the individuals which helps in integrating the people. Again, he pointed that the family plays a pivotal role as counter agent against suicide. A person who is not married has a greater tendency to commit suicide than a married person. In other words, the sense of responsibility within a close knit family reduces the chances of suicide, because in such a family one is not only concerned about himself/herself but also about others. When there is less social integration a sense of loneliness compels individuals to end their own life. Again, there is a popular belief that during political upheavals the number of suicide increases. But, on the contrary, during such crises in society, there is arousal of collective sentiment and individuals become more close to one another. This generates a powerful integrational force which decreases the risk of suicide. Durkheim had further pointed that suicide rate is higher among the wealthy than among the poor. The wealthy people are less integrated and have a far wider range of personal choice than the poor people whose freedom is limited by poverty and this keeps them more socially integrated limiting their chances of committing suicide.

b) **Altruistic Suicide:** It is the result of the excessive integration of the individual into the group. In this case suicide occurs because in some societies an individual's life becomes a property of the society. The individual who is completely integrated into the group feels that it is her or his duty to commit suicide in order to benefit the group or collectivity. Some examples of altruistic suicide are: women throwing themselves at the funeral pyres of their husbands (known as sati), suicide of followers and servants on

the death of their chiefs, also known as Japanese Harakiri : self-demolition by Buddhist monks , self-homicide by army suicide squads and self-destruction by 'human bombs' of militant groups.

Durkheim rejected the popular belief which attributes military suicide to the hardships of military life, disciplinary rigour and lack of liberty. While, with longer service, men might be expected to become accustomed to barrack life, their commitment to the army and aptitude for suicide seem to increase. While military life is much less hard for officers than for private soldiers, the domestic anomie resulting from the death of husband or wife, is also the result of a catastrophe that upsets the scale of life. Altruistic suicide may be classified in to three types; ie, i) obligatory altruistic suicide, ii) optional altruistic suicide and iii) acute altruistic suicide.

Three basic definitions from Emile Durkheim are given below to clarify those types stated above.

i) Obligatory Altruistic Suicide: When a man commits suicide, it is not because he assumes the right to do so, but because it is his duty. If he fails in this obligation, he is disregarded and also punished, usually by religious sanctions.

ii) Optional Altruistic Suicide: A man kills himself without being explicitly forced to do so. Yet these suicides are of the same nature as obligatory suicide. Though public opinion does not formally require them, it is certainly favorable to them. Since here not clinging to life is a virtue, even of the highest rank, the man who renounces life on least provocation of circumstances or through simple vainglory is praiseworthy.

iii) Acute Altruistic Suicide: This type of suicide refers to a situation when it even happens that the individual kills himself purely for the joy of sacrifice.

c) Anomic Suicide: This kind of suicide occurs when there is a situation of normlessnes in a society. Anomic suicide has become a characteristic of modern socio-economic system. This kind of

suicide can be witnessed during financial crises in a society or when a society is undergoing a sudden structural change. However the crises does not emerge due to poverty but may emerge due to sudden transition from prosperity which people are not able to cope with. For example if someone is accustomed with a lavish lifestyle and desires for more than what he/she needs, then there is a chance that such a person they might become frustrated during a crisis time for being unable to maintain that lifestyle.

During normal times a society's moral force would restrain one's unlimited desires. But during crisis situation the restraining mechanism of a society collapses. Therefore while undertaking his study Durkheim found that the rate of suicide is more among the rich people than among the poor people. This is because when one is poor he or she limits his or her desires to their minimum basic need. According to Durkheim, in modern societies, this kind of suicide tends to increase because 'economic progress has largely freed industrial relations from all regulations'. In the absence of regulation there is an ever increasing passion and aspiration. He further pointed out that greater aspiration on the part of the individuals may result in greater impulse leading to voluntary death. Moral force has the capacity to restrain the unlimited desire of the individuals. But in the event of breakdown of the regulatory system or the norms individuals are likely to succumb to voluntary death.

d) **Fatalistic Suicide:** Durkheim identified a fourth type of suicide which he termed as Fatalistic suicide. Just as altruistic suicide was the opposite of egoistic suicide, Durkheim found fatalistic suicide to be the opposite of Anomic suicide. He put forward a very brief discussion of Fatalistic suicide. Fatalistic suicide was the result of excessive social regulation. In modern society, fatalistic suicide occurs among very young husbands and childless married women. Too much regulation unleashes

currents of despair that, in turn , cause the individuals to commit suicide.

Durkheim's main concern regarding suicide was to demonstrate it as a social fact. By relating it to the social conditions, he tries to demonstrate that it is a social fact. His classification of suicide illustrates this point very well. He demonstrated that too much and too little of social integration leads to a higher incidence of suicide in a group.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: What are the four different types of suicide?

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Q.2: Fill in the blanks:

a) Anomic suicide occurs due to .....

b) Japanese Harakiri is an example of ..... suicide.

c) The rate of suicide is more among ..... than among Catholics.

6.4 EMILE DURKHEIM ON EDUCATION

Sociology of education is an important branch of the discipline called Sociology. Several issues pertinent to sociology of education today are influenced by the Durkheimian understanding of education. Therefore it is important to look into some of his works related to education. Emile Durkheim has made significant contribution on the field of educational theory and practice. He was extensively with connected teacher training program. His understanding of education derived from his basic understanding society and social facts. He emphasized the collective origin and nature of beliefs and rules in a society. He further argued that it is through education that the younger generation is socialized regarding the collective beliefs and practices. Some of his views regarding education are discussed below:

Definition of Education: According to Emile Durkheim, "Education is the action exercised by the older generations on those not yet ready for social life. Its object is to awaken in the child those physical, intellectual, and moral states which are required of him both by his society as a whole, and by the milieu for which he is specially destined.''

6.4.1 Education and Socialisation

In every society some kind of formal or informal education system has always existed. It is only in the recent times that education system has assumed a more concrete form. According Durkheim the task of the education system is to transform a human being into a person whom the society in which he or she is born requires. Every society has its own culture, beliefs, practices and it is these practices that make a society different from others. The practices in society also ensure its sustenance over time. Thus, the task of education system is to socialize its younger generation with the specific culture, practices and beliefs in a particular society. Therefore, it is the kind of society which determines the curriculum of education system a society possess.

Once a person becomes adult he or she is expected to perform a specific role which will enable a society to function effectively. For example in a society there is the requirement of farmers, teachers, masons, engineers, doctors and many other vocation and education system is supposed to select (on the basis of his/her innate characteristics) appropriate individuals for different tasks and train them effectively so that later on they can contribute towards the well being of the society.

Education, according to Durkheim, is a social fact because individuals initially do not have control over it. In other words, though a child is born classless yet later on his/her family background will determine the kind of education he or she receives. Again a society can be liberal or conservative in nature and the nature of a society will determine the kind of education in that particular society and

accordingly a child will be brought up as liberal or conservative. Therefore it is society which shapes its citizens according to the way it wants them to be

However in complex societies where division of labour and specialization is imperative, education trains an individual to develop his/her individual thinking. However, this individual thinking is meant to contribute towards the wellbeing of society.

6.4.2 Social Integration and Moral Education

Emile Durkheim's idea of education is closely associated with the notion of morality. Morality is nothing but the idea regarding what is good or bad. A good citizen is expected to be morally sound. He or she is expected to do their duty/roles properly, help others, contribute towards society's wellbeing etc. However these qualities are not inherent in an individual by birth. They are gradually acquired over a period of time gradually. Most importantly individuals are 'socialised' to uphold the morals of society.

According to Durkheim, *morality* includes two aspects. *One* is the regularity and the *other* is moral authority. Moral authority and preference for regularity is associated with the idea of discipline. An authority is required to impose discipline and discipline regularizes conduct. Doing something regularly gradually becomes a habit. In different societies the pattern of imposing regularity of behavior has been different. In ancient society, religion was an aspect which no one questioned. Therefore whatever religion demanded people were required to do without questioning and thereby regularity of behavior was obtained. This ensured order in society. But gradually people began to question the authority of religion and thereby people refused to behave according to its dictates. According to Durkheim, in such a situation education needs to play a critical role in maintaining order in society. Since today societies are very different education must understand the need of this kind of society and the kind of conduct it requires of its citizen to sustain itself.

Since society provides us with moral support we as individuals have a 'moral' obligation towards society to maintain the order. As we have already discussed, it is society which defines what is moral and what is one's moral obligation. For example ancient societies were more religious in nature. In such societies, the moral obligation lay in performing the religious rites appropriately and, if required, even to sacrifice 'self' for the sake of society. Therefore, in such societies morality was associated with the notion of sacredness. It was the collective belief regarding the sacred which kept the society intact. Therefore, during that period the younger generation was made to internalize the that fact it is their moral obligation to perform those practices so that the integrity of the society remains intact.

But with the gradual development of science and technology as people began to question many religious practices even morality came to be associated with science and rationality. What is good or bad came to be defined on the basis of the scientific logic behind a particular act. Apart from this, today we live in complex societies where people from many religious groups reside. Therefore, in order to maintain peace and order in society every individual needs perform his or her tasks rationally. Durkheim pointed out that the need to secularize education system today. The ideas, sentiments or practices imparted to the students must be accountable to reason only. For example, present day India is different from what it was in ancient times. Today, especially in cities, people from different culture, trait, and religion stay together. Earlier though different people stayed together certain practices like caste system prohibited full integration. Therefore students are taught to respect this diversity and to be more tolerant regarding other cultural practices. The rationale behind this teaching is that only when we respect each other, we shall remain united and only when we are united we as a nation can progress.

6.4.3 Stages of Inculcating Moral Education

A child is born to a particular society without any knowledge regarding it. In order to integrate the child with the society in which he or she is born it important to make the society an integral part of the child. Every society consists of a complex of sentiments, ways of perceiving, ideas about what is right and what is wrong etc. Thus, society expects its education system to infuse these aspects in an individual so that he or she can not only adjust to social environment but also later on perform the adult roles effectively. This training process does not take place at once. The formal socialization regarding morals through educational institutions is done gradually through several stages.

According to Durkheim, moral education should begin from childhood itself. He divided childhood into two stages. In the first stage the task of imparting moral education lies on family itself. A child witnesses the second stage of receiving moral education when he or she gets enrolled in a school for the first time. When they enter school they come in contact with a wider world. At home children are generally the centre of attention. But at school they are gradually taught to adjust with others. Durkheim pointed it is the task of the public schools to instill a sense of appreciation for the collective beliefs. The personality of a child should be shaped according to the national character. But in order to achieve this goal, the education system must be able to effectively draw out an enlightened mind out of a welter of confused state of mind. This task is difficult because a child's mind is like a ***kaleidoscope***, which keeps on changing every movement.



Kaleidoscope: A situation/pattern containing a lot of different parts that are always changing.

Education in general and moral education particularly must be able to inculcate among the children a sense of duty and an appreciation for the rules and regulation. The entire system of rules and regulation existing in a school is responsible for developing a sense of duty and appreciation for rules and regulation. For example, some of the rules which a student must follow are: to be punctual, to

do the classwork and homework regularly, dress properly, cooperate with others etc. Most importantly, children are made to feel obliged towards their duty even though the duties may appear to be difficult. All the obligations of the students are a part of the discipline practiced in the school. The sense of obligation is derived out of child's respect for authority. This means that rather than imposing the rules blindly on the child, a child must be made to understand the logic behind practicing those rules. Once the children are able to see its importance they will easily internalize the rules. For instance rather than punishing a child severely for not completing his or her homework in time the authority (teacher) should ask the reason for not completing it and most importantly it should be explained to them why doing homework in time is important. Here lies the significance of a good teacher. A lot depends on how a teacher communicates the rules, what is his/her conduct and the authority which they posses. Gradually the rules in school prepare a child to become a responsible citizen later on.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.2: Fill in the blanks:

a) The task of education system is to ..... its younger generation.

b) Moral education should begin from .....

c) Rules and regulation practiced in a school is responsible for developing a ..... and appreciation for rules and regulation.



6.5 LET US SUM UP

- Education is a social fact because it is external to the individuals.
- What a society wants to teach its younger generation is pre decided.
- Every society has his/her own culture, beliefs, practices and it is these practices which make a society different from others.

- The task of the education system is to socialize its younger generation with the specific culture, practices and beliefs in a particular society.
- Education system selects individuals on the basis of their innate traits for different tasks and trains them accordingly.
- Education system also trains individuals to develop original ideas so that they can contribute towards the effective functioning of the society.
- Morality is nothing but the idea regarding what is good or bad.
- Every society defines what is 'wrong' or 'right'.
- Society provides us with moral support and we as individuals have a 'moral' obligation towards society.
- Morality consists of two aspects: moral authority and preference for regularity.
- During earlier times religion possessed the sacred authority which defined the conduct of the individuals. Therefore religion imposed regularity of behavior which helped to keep the society in order.
- With the erosion of religion education system was expected to define the proper code of conduct so that the social fabric remains intact.
- Public schools became the agent of socializing the children regarding the moral code of conduct.
- Teachers also assumed the role of moral authority which imposed regularity of behavior over the younger generation.
- The imposition of regularity of behavior was achieved by making the children understand the significance of the rules and regulations.
- Education system is expected to make the children appreciate the rules and develop a sense of obligation towards their duty.
- The internalization of rules and regulation would enable one to become a good citizen.



6.6 FURTHER READING

1) Abrahim, Francis and Morgan, John Henry (2009); *Sociological Thought*; New Delhi: Macmillan Press ltd.

2) Durkheim, Emile (1956); *Education and Sociology*; New York: The Free Press.

3) Durkheim, Emile (1961); *Moral Education: A study in Theory and Application of Sociology of Education;* New York: The Free Press.

6.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q. No. 1: Egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide, anomic suicide, fatalistic suicide.

Ans. to Q. No. 2: a) Anomic suicide occurs due to normlessness.

b) Japanese Harakiri is an example of altruistic suicide.

c) The rate of suicide is more among Protestants than among Catholics.

Ans. to Q. No. 3: a) Socialise b) Childhood c) Sense of duty

6.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short Questions: (Answer each question in about 1 or 2 words)

Q.1: When was Emile Durkheim's book Suicide published?

Q.2: What is morality?

B) Write Short Notes: (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q.1: What is Anomic Suicide?

Q.2: What is obligatory Altruistic Suicide?

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

Q.1: What is meant by suicide? What are the different types of suicide?

Q.2: Why education is considered as a social fact? What is the function of education in society.

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