UNIT 1. INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- define social problems
- explain the nature of social problems
- identify the types of social problems
- recognise the causes of social problems
- evaluate the consequences of social problems.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will discuss a very important topic related to the study of society. In our day to day life we have come across various terms like environmental pollution, resource depletion, unemployment, child labour, poverty, dowry death, drug abuse, ethnicity, racial discrimination and so on. Each of these represents an existing condition which threatens the well-being of a society. But we all realize that many of them draw relatively less

public attention. Again, we find that all such social conditions do not affect all the societies of the world as a whole. For example, there are some social problems in India which are not at all a problem in some other countries, like the issues related to caste system. Again, when we talk about a social problems like racial discrimination, it is not a matter of concern for the people living in the remote corner of Arunachal Pradesh. But for some other societies in Africa and America people talk much about racial discrimination. But why it is so ?

The general trend is that people do not pay much attention to any social condition as mentioned above, until and unless it hampers their value system or affects the people adversely. If a particular social condition affects the society adversely, the situation attracts more attention. It becomes a public concern, a public outcry and people would try to find a solution for it. Because they feel that there is a break up in the normal situation or what is happening is not the expected norm. At that moment, that particular social condition becomes a social problem. Thus, it is very essential to identify the exact meaning of social problems, to understand its nature, or to identify the different types of social problems. The most important thing about a social problem is to find out the causes of social problems because the roots of all social problems are also different. Moreover, in order to find a solution it is very essential to know the causes.because an understanding of the causes leads to finding a solution. To mitigate the problem, a proper solution to it is imperative as because the consequences of any social problem are detrimental to the health of society.

In this unit we will discuss the meaning, nature and types of social problems, their causes and consequences.

1.3 CONCEPT OF SOCIAL PROBLEM

1.3.1. Meaning of Social Problem

Let us start with the question "what does social problem really mean?" Whether it affects the mass people or a smaller group of

people? If a group is involved, how many people are supposed to be affected by a social problem? Whether all the people of the world face the same problem? If so, whether the problem experienced in the past was same as it is today? These are some of the questions that needs to be answered in order to understand the meaning and the nature of social problem.

The nature of the social problems occurring in different countries or areas is not uniform. But certain specific problems like unemployment, gambling, crime etc. are very common to all countries. On the other hand, there are certain specific problems which are typical to a particular country or area. For example, the problems of caste in India and the problem faced by the Negroes in the USA are quite peculiar to these two countries only.

The nature of social problem changes with the passage of time. A problem of the past may not be a problem today. Similarly, a condition which becomes a crucial social problem today might not have been a problem a few decades ago. For example , the population explosion in our country was not viewed as a social problem upto the late 40's of the twentieth century but from the early 1950's it came to be perceived as a very crucial problem. Social changes create new conditions in which an issue comes to be identified as a social problem. Similarly, youth unrest in India was not a problem upto the 1940s but in the 1950s and 1960s it became a problem and in the 1970s and 1980s it became a very serious one and it has continued to be so even today.

1.3.2 Definition of social Problem

There are a number of definitions for the term 'Social Problem'. Reinhardt in (1952) defines social problem as " a situation confronting a group or a section of a society which inflicts injurious consequences that can be handled only collectively".

Walsh and Furfey (1961) defined social problem as a " deviation from the social ideal remediable by group effort". This deviation reflects two important elements. They are:

I) a situation which is less than ideal that is , which is undesirable or abnormal.; and, ii) one which is remediable by collective effort. Although there is no consensus about which situation is undesirable and there is no standard norm to designate any ideal situation, the term social problem applies to that situation which society describes as unfavorable.

E, Chandran (1990) defines it as an enduring, major community issue which persists for many years , may be for a few decades, or even for centuries.

Lowell J Carr (1935) mentioned that 'a social problem exists whenever we become conscious of a difficulty, a gap between our preferences and reality.

Merton and Nisbet (1971) mentioned that a social problem is 'a way of behavior that is regarded by a substantial part of a social order as being in violation of one or more generally accepted or approved norms". Significantly it is observed that this definition may apply to some particular problems like corruption, alcoholism and communalism, but not to problems like population explosion.

According to Horton and Leslie, "social problems are conditions that are socially recognized and socially debated". According to them, " It is a condition affecting a significant number of people in ways considered undesirable about which it is felt something can be done through collective social action ". Such a definition of social problem speaks about four distinct ideas -

- it is a condition affecting a significant number of people,
- it is an undesirable, condition
- it is a situation about which it is felt that something can be done,
- it can be tackled through collective social action.

Now, if we analyse the definition of Horton and Leisle we will be able to know how a social condition becomes a social problem and at what point of time? According to them, the condition must affect a sizable number of people. If your pet annoys you daily, it is not regarded as social problem. Because, it is not a reason for disturbance to a larger group. On the other hand, corruption in India is considered a big social problem as significant proportion of a India's population is affected by the growing cases of corruption. Every day we find the reports of corruption in news paper and T.V. where people talk and debate on corruption which affects the common people. But it is difficult to quantify the number of people affected by this condition. One way to determine the number of people affected by corruption is to count the number of articles published in News paper, popular journals, magazines etc.

Now, when there is a gap between social ideals and social reality social problems like corruption may occur. At the beginning of the 20th century alcohol abuse was perceived to be a very serious social problem, responsible for family breakdown, abandonment of children, accidental death at work, and violence in society. So it came to be perceived as a social problem. Now a days, drug abuse has become a greater social problem. When a society considers consuming alchohol or drugs as dangerously harmful habit, then these are regarded as a social problem. Likewise child labour is treated as a social problem as most people began to think that it is not desirable in the society. Therefore, a considerable number of people must think a particular social condition to be harmful; then only can it be recognized as a social problem. Therefore, the recognition of something as a social problem involves a value judgement. It means that the values held by a society which decide whether a particular condition is harmful or bad for a larger section of the people or not .

To denote a condition as a social problem, there must be some hope to find solution to that problem. Let us take the example of famine. Until recently it was not considered as social problem because it was regarded as part of natural event that cannot be changed. Similarly, flood control became a social concern only when people came to think that flood

could be prevented. Otherwise it will be perceived as a collective destiny or fate of the people. Therefore, if there is no solution for a condition, it cannot be regarded as a problem.

Again, if a person does not like the content of a programme in a media channel, and shows his/her resentment by doing something against it, the condition cannot be called a social problem. But if thousands of viewers become dissatisfied with the programme and collectively try to do something about it, a social problem may be identified. It means that a collective effort is needed to call a social condition as social problem.

According to Weinberg (1964), social problems are "behavior patterns or conditions which arise from social processes and are considered objectionable or undesirable by many members of a society that they recognize that corrective policies, programmes and services are necessary to cope with them"

According to him there are six characteristics of social problems which is reflected in the definition of social problem given by him. According to him,

- A social problem is recognized when it is collectively defined as objectionable by many members of the community. Thus, adverse conditions not defined by the community as reprehensible are not considered as social problems. For example, if taking alcohol is not regarded as objectionable by a society, it can not be considered as a social problem for that society. But as society recognizes and discusses the problems inherent in alcohol consumption , studies its consequences and devises a plan of corrective action to control it, it comes to be defined as a social problem even though the original situation may not have changed.
- The notion of social problem change when the concerned behavioural patterns are interpreted differently. For example, till a few decades ago, mental illness was viewed as insanity and it was considered so disgraceful that the families kept the member's mental illness a secret. Now the behavior of a mentally

ill person is seen only as one type of 'deviant behaviour' which requires psychiatric and social treatment. Thus, the problem of mental illness today is met more realistically and effectively.

- Mass media (newspaper, magazines, television, radio, movies) play an important role in creating awareness about the scope and urgency of social problems.
- Social problems have to be viewed in the context of society's values and institutions. For example, the problem of racial conflict in the United States is different from the problem of untouchability in India.
- Social problems need to be analyzed in terms of the influences by group processes and social relationships.
- Social problems vary historically. For example, the problem of refugee settlemenl in India in 1947-48 was different from the problem of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka in 1988-89.

While understanding the meaning of social problem, a few other factors should also be discussed. Sometimes it seems that a particular social condition is defined as social problem because an influential or powerful section of people, although smaller in number, is affected by a particular social condition.

As mentiond above, media also plays an important role in identifying a social condition as a social problem. Rapid increase in the number of affected people by a condition leads to naming that condition as social problem.

Sometimes an imagined condition may also become a social problem. Most social conditions are indeed real, but issues based on mass delusions do arise, at times. A social problem requires a mood of concern , but it need not be bassed on objectively correct view of situations. Sometimes even if people are not deluded about the existence of conditions or have correct judgement about them, they may worry about other matters which may harm the community very little but ignore serious matters that may adversely affect the society or the community.

Apart from Weinberg's interpretation of six characteristics, we can find out some characteristics of social problems on the basis of the above mentioned definitions.

These characteristics are:

- All social problems have some common basis of origin.
- All social problems are social in origin
- All social problems are deviations from the 'ideal' situation.
- All social problems are situations which have injurious consequences for society.
- All social problems are interconnected.
- All social problems are caused by pathological social conditions.
- Social Problems occur in all societies.
- All social problems affect a number of people.
- The solution for a social problem requires a collective approach.

1.4 TYPES OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

There are various view points regarding the types of social problems. On the basis of the origin of social problems ,Case in 1964, identified four types of social problems. These are the problems-

- which are rooted in some aspects of physical environment,
- which are inherent in the nature or distribution of the population involved,
- which result from poor social organization,
- which evolve from a conflict of cultural values within the society.

According to Fuller and Myers, in 1941, there are three types of social problems such as

- **Physical problems :** In this category, those social problems are included which have evolved due to the disturbance in the nature. The problems like floods, famines etc. originate not because of value conflict in the society but due to some natural causes.
- **Ameliorative problems :** This category includes those problems for which, there is consensus about the effects of the problems.

But regarding the solutions, there prevail multiple opinions. For example, crime, poverty, AIDS etc.

- **Moral problems :** Moral problems are those regarding which there is no consensus pertaining to their nature and causes. For example, gambling, alchoholism, drug abuse and divorce etc.

1.5 CAUSES OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

There are many causes for the emergence of a specific social problem. Again, one social problem may lead to another or one is enmeshed with another. For example, poverty is a social problem and it leads to other such problems like undernutrition, crime, etc.

Social problems exist in all types of societies, simple as well as complex. Basically, they arise due to adverse social conditions. Lack of adjustment and conflict among the members of a group that affects the social relationship, is often a root cause of social problem.

According to Ram Ahuja, three factors are important in the understanding of the casusal factors in social problems.

- The causal factors are numerous. Broadly, the potential causes of social problems found in social environment are-
  - contradiction in social system,
  - malfunctioning of economic systems,
  - lack of change in religious systems, and
  - defective functioning of political system.
- Social problems provide the strong basis of common casual factors.
- Social problems are interrelated and interdependent in the sense that they are cumulatively promotive and provocative , that is, they foster and encourage one another.

According to Reinhardt (1954), three factors are responsible for the development of any social problem . These are mentioned below :

- **Differentiation and multiplication of interests and functions:**

If there is increased chances of clash of interests among various individuals, groups, institutions and systems, conflict may arise resulting in

new social problem. Reinhardt has compared this situation with a large machine or an organism, in which there prevails greater chance of maladjustment among different parts. Untouchability, communal riots and political crimes are the social problems which result in because of clashes and conflicts among different castes and classes.

- **Accelerating frequency of social change or growth of civilization:**

Sometimes social problems evolve due to the multiplication of scientific and mechanical innovation. For example, the invention of machines has destroyed many old forms of employment resulting in the migration of millions of people, and giving rise to class conflict. It is, thus, the structural and functional maladjustments arising from revolutionary inventions which create many social problems.

- **Man has developed insight to make a scientific analysis:**

Ever since man has developed his social insight of looking into the working of nature, issues which were formerly regarded as simple are now perceived as the result of the various kinds of natural conditions which influence man and society.

- **Political subordination :** Problems like poverty, unemployment, rising population, low standard of living, and illiteracy are the results of political subordination.

1.6 CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL PROBLEM

The result of any social problem is very harmful in general but the intensity of the evil effect varies from problem to problem. From the definition of social problem we have come to know that it reflects a disorganized social relationship. It disrupts the normal and the expected norms of the society. In fact, social problems and social disorganization are closely related to each other. Professor Timms observes : the conditions giving rise to social problems have been described as states of social pathology, of social disorganization, and of dissensus and deviation. He states that some persons become deviants because of certain circumstances and then try to make a group of their own, thus creating other social problems.In such

pathological condition it is very difficult to find a positive growth for the individual as well as for the society . All social problems are a hindrance to development. Again, one social problem leads to a number of harmful consequences. For example, the problem of unemployment may lead to poverty, beggary, alcoholism, poor health, crime, etc. Likewise, the problems faced by scheduled caste and scheduled tribe in India may lead to various social movements. It may also affect the whole political situation. The problems of flood or famine may create the emergence of a new group of destitutes. As a whole, social problems disturb the economic, political and religious atmosphere of any society concerned. Therefore, social problems are a scourge of the society. The society can progress only when this scourge is removed with the collective effort of the society.

The tendency of contemporary sociological theory and practice is to recognise the problems of the social life. It seeks to recognize the influence of the environment upon the development and experience of all individuals, regardless of their genetic constitution and equipment. It also intends to recognize the increasing complexity and interdependence of modern social life



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

State whether the following statements are true or false.

Q1. Corruption in India is considered a social problem.

Q2. Collective effort is needed to turn a social condition as a social problem.

Q3. If your pet annoys you daily, it becomes a social problem.

Q4. Moral problems include those problems for which there is consensus about the effects of these problems.



1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learnt that -

- There are various view points regarding the concept of social problem. Most people know something about social problem but their knowledge is generally disorganized and frequently contradictory.
- There are a number of definitions put forward by sociologists when they try to explain social problem and what it means.
- The nature of social problems that occur in different countries or areas is not same. But certain specific problems are very common to all countries. On the other hand, there are certain specific problems which are very typical to a particular country or area only.
- According to the definition of Horton and Leisle a social condition becomes a social problem when the condition affect a sizeable numbers of people.
- A collective effort is needed to call a social condition a social problem.
- Sometimes it happens that a social problem emerges because an influential or powerful section of people, although smaller in number, are affected by a particular social condition.
- Media also plays an important in identifying a social problem.
- There exist a various view points regardinig the types of social problem.
- Basically, social problem arises due to the pathological social condition. Where there is lack of adjustment and conflict among the members of a group, affects the social relationship leading to a social problem.



1.8 FURTHER READING

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1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. True. 2. True.
3. False 4. False.



1.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q1. Define social problem.

Q2. Make a list of social problems in your area.

Q3. Discuss the types of social problems.

Q4. State two causes of social problems.

Q5. What are the factors that make a social condition a social problem ?

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