UNIT 5 : SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- explain the concept of social institution
- discuss the major social institutions operating in modern societies
- discuss the functions of these institutions.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will learn that norms integrate in such ways that certain important functions of the society are fulfilled. Thus, we have economic institution, political institution, religious institution, family, marriage, kinship etc, in every society. The more complex and differentiated a society becomes, the more varied its institutions become. Each of these institutions comprises certain sets of norms and values that guide the behaviour of the people. The institutions are also interrelated. In this unit we will learn about the meaning of social institution and some of the important social institutions such as family, education and religion.

5.3 CONCEPT OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

5.3.1 Meaning and Definition

In common parlance (language) we often use the word institution in a very loose way to mean different things. For example, we call a school an educational institution, or banks financial institutions. An institution in Sociology has a much broader meaning and scope than what we commonly mean by an institution, such as educational institutions, financial institutions, etc.

In Sociology, by institution we mean a system of social arrangements that guide the behaviour of persons in a society in prescribed ways in important areas of social life. They are devised by the people in a society and continue for generations so as to ensure smooth functioning of the society. We may describe an institution as a socially established and approved way of doing things. In other words, we can define an institution as an organised way of doing something.

Social institutions are cultural patterns grouped about the central needs of man in society. We have learnt that in a society there are some rules and established patterns of behaviour that provide

guidelines for behaviour. These norms i.e. standard forms of behaviour and values, guide how people should behave and perform their roles in society. According to Francis E. Merrill, "*institutions are more regularised and formal, and hence differ from other patterns. The needs they meet, the values they serve, and the directions they provide are so important that every society organizes institutional behaviour more formally than the lesser important behaviour.*" These are basic to a groups' survival. Thus, the short-lived patterns of dancing, talking and passing dress fashions and fads are not institutions. On the other hand, some behaviour patterns become very much regularized and patterned, and fulfil some basic social needs, as for example, marriage. Marriage fulfils the basic social needs of birth, regulated sex relation and mutual socio-economic relation between spouses so that the behaviour related to these becomes patterned and regularised in the society. Marriage is, thus, an institution. Institutions are, thus, more enduring than other patterns of behaviour.

Hence, institutions are the established behaviour procedures or patterns of behaviour that are recognized by the society and fulfil some basic needs of the society. In every society some institutions are universally prevalent. These are family, kinship, marriage, economy and political institutions. In other words, these are reflected in the expected procedures of behaviour and the behaviour itself. Institutions are interrelated; for example, the Special Marriage Act 1954 is an outcome of the Indian Parliament which is a political institution. This Act is an example of political institution. This Act is related to the institution of marriage.

Practice and customs related to institutions may change over time or vary from society to society, but some institutions are found nearly everywhere and at all times. The family is a classic example of an institution. It is found in all societies and has always existed in some form or the other. This brings us to the concept of association.

An **association** is a group of people, whereas an **institution** refers to a procedure or way of functioning of a particular group.

➢ **Definitions:** The common way in which we describe an institution is that it is a socially established and approved way of doing things. In society, every group has its own values which it holds as very important and most of the group activities are centred round them. These activities through repetition get established as patterns of behaviour which are regarded by the group members as proper and appropriate. Any departure or deviations is regarded as serious offence. Thus, a certain way of doing or performing a certain activity in society is formalised and thus becomes an institution.

The term 'institution' has been defined in different ways by different sociologists. MacIver and Page have defined institution as *"established forms of procedure characteristic of group activity."* According to Ginsberg, social institutions "*may be described as recognized and established usages governing the relations between individuals and groups."* Graham Sumner has defined an institution as "*a concept and a structure. Concept means ideas, notion, doctrine or interest and Structure means a framework, or apparatus, or perhaps only a number of functionaries set to co-operate in prescribed ways at a certain conjuncture".*

Thus, these writers have used the term in a limited manner to mean only the rules of procedure that govern associations or groups. Some other writers use the term institution in a broader way to include both the structure as well as the forms of procedures. It is in this sense that most of us refer to the family, the government, college or the University as institutions.

Social institutions are normative structures. Through these institutions the central activities centering round the family, education, the economy and polity, and religion are performed. Social institutions are patterns that direct the behaviour of human beings in their manifold activities.

5.3.2 Characteristics

There are some important characteristics of social institutions:

- Social institutions are collective in nature.
- Social institutions are systems of social arrangements that guide the behaviour of persons in a society in prescribed ways in important areas of social life.
- They are devised by the people in a society and continue for generations so as to ensure smooth functioning of the society.
- Social institutions are universal. These are found in all societies at all points of times.
- Institutions are means of satisfying basic social needs of people. They are cultural instruments through which human beings obtain their material, social and cultural satisfactions.
- Institutions regulate human behaviour. These are the means of social control.
- Institutions are relatively permanent in their content and abstract in nature.

Different institutions are interrelated. In the succeeding paragraphs we will discuss various institutional structures separately. It will give an idea about the ideal institutional structures and comparing the same to the reality so as to understand what is happening in each of these central activities.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: What do you mean by institution?

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Q2: Give an example of social institution.

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5.4 FAMILY

Family is the basic social institution. It is the most important primary group and almost all human beings have grown up in some kind of family. Family is a small social group consisting of a father, mother and one or more children. Families vary from society to society. Relationship between the members of the family is considered the oldest social institution of mankind. It has the capability to absorb changes in the society.

According to Burgees and Locke, *"Family is a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption constituting a single household interacting and intercommunicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, father and mother, son and daughter, brother and sister, creating a common culture."*

G.P. Murdock defines family as *"a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of them maintain a socially approved sexual relation and one or more children, own or adopted of the sexually cohabiting adults."*

5.4.1 Characteristics

The distinctive features of family are as follows -

- **It is universal:** Family is present in all human societies.
- **Emotional basis:** It is based on the most profound impulses of our organic nature like mating, procreation, maternal devotion and parental care. The secondary emotions include romantic love, affection, desire for economic security, yearning for perpetuity.
- **Formative influence:** Family moulds the personality of the individual. It is the basic agent of socialization.
- **Limited size:** The size of the family is limited.
- **Nuclear position** in the social structure. In simpler societies the whole society is built upon family. In complex societies also it continues to be the most essential institution.

- **Responsibility of the members:** It is the most demanding of all social institutions as far as obligation and responsibilities of the individual members are concerned.
- **Social regulation:** Family regulates the behaviour of its members in accordance with social norms and values.
- **Temporary and unchanging nature of family:** The institution of family is permanent and universal but the family as an association changes its structure due to death, new birth, migration and divorce.
- **It is bilateral in nature.** It means the relatives of both the father's and mother's side are given equal importance. In other kin groups like clan or *gotra*, and caste in Hindu society only the father's side is included. In matrilineal societies like the Khasi and the Garo, clan members belong to mother's side only. But in all societies families include members from both the sides as the spouses belong to different clans.

5.4.2 Types

Family may be viewed from different viewpoints. From the point of family structure we may divide family into *two* broad categories.

- **Nuclear Family** (also known as simple, primary, elementary family) it is composed of a man, his wife and their unmarried children. It is most common in contemporary Western and Indian societies as well as among some tribal communities.
- **Joint family**: If two or more nuclear families live together with a common hearth (kitchen) and a common purse (income), then this type of family is known as joint family. Hindu joint family is the best example of such family where several brothers and their parents live together.

From the point of view of an **individual** (ego) the family may be classified into two types:

- **Family of orientation**: It is the family in which one is born.

One's identity in this family is as son or daughter of the parents.

- **Family of procreation**: It is the family which one sets up after one's marriage. One's identity in this family will be as father or mother of the children.

  While, for the parents it is family of procreation, for the children the same family is family of orientation.

  On the basis of **residence** families may be divided into the following categories:

- **Patrilocal family**: If after marriage the bride goes to reside in the residence of the groom's parents then it is known as patrilocal family.
- **Matrilocal family**: In this type of family, the groom after marriage goes to reside in the residence of the bride's parents. Among the Khasi, Garos and Jaintias of Meghalaya such types of families can be observed.

5.4.3 According to Kingsley Davis the major social functions of the family are functions

- Reproduction,
- Maintenance,
- Social replacement of the young, and
- Socialisation.

We may explain the functions of the family in another way as detailed below:

- **Biological Function:** The basic function of the family is the bearing of the children. This function is most important since the very continuance of the species depends upon it. In this process the family regulates and regularizes the incorporation of members into the society.
- **Socialising function:** The second function is rearing children to the stage that the society considers to be normal adulthood. The task of the family is to channelise the drives, urges and

impulses of the individual in ways approved by the society. The family does it by the use of parental authority and parental affection.

- **Sustenance Function:** The third function that societies expect the family to perform is to provide sustenance to family members. Thus, the family sustains its members by providing the day to day needs of food, shelter, clothing, care and personal protection. By performing these vital functions the family plays a very significant role in society.
- **Property Transmission:** A fourth function given to this institution is the holding and transmission of property. The rules vary from society to society but in general, property is held and transmitted through the family.
- **Transmission of culture:** The family also functions as a transmitter of cultural heritage from one generation to the next.



ACTIVITY 5.1

Think of some other functions which are performed by the family.

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3: What are the different types of family according to its structure?

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Q4: What is matrilocal family?

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5.5 EDUCATION

Education is a social institution. It is called social institution because it is a system of interrelated social roles and norms that ensures the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another. The educational institution is not only a formal organisation specifically devoted to education but also socially determined means of transmitting the culture.

The term 'education' is derived from the Latin word 'educare' which means to bring up. The idea of education is not merely to impart knowledge to the pupil in some subjects but to develop in him those habits and attitudes with which he may successfully face the future. For Durkheim, one of the founding figures of Sociology, education played an important role in the socialisation of children. He believes that education enables children to internalise the social rules that contribute to the functioning of society.

In earlier societies like hunting and gathering societies, there was no social institution called education and there were no schools. Children learnt simply what they needed to know from their parents. Thus socialization started at home. In ancient India there was the 'gurukula' system; young men usually from upper caste, lived with the great teachers and learnt from them. In feudal system of Europe, children were the prerogative of the social elites; young men from the upper classes who had nothing else to do went to school to learn.

The concept of universal education is a relatively new idea. It was only in the beginning of the twentieth century that most of the nations began to practise the concept of mass education. The school is a social system with a definite pattern of role and social relationships and a formal organisation. Although the structure and functions vary, schools are principal agencies that transmit knowledge, information and culture.

5.5.1 Definition of Education

Durkheim conceives education as '*the socialisation of the younger generation*'. He states that it is a '*continuous effort to impose on the child ways of seeing, feeling and acting which he could not have arrived at spontaneously*'.

A.W. Green writes '*Historically, it (education) has meant the conscious training of the young for the later adoption of adult roles. By modern convention, however, education has come to mean from training by specialists within the formal organisation of the school*'.

5.5.2 Functions of Education

Education as a social institution is responsible for the functions of society. Some of the significant functions are discussed below.

- *Socialisation*: The social objective of education is the socialisation process. Socialisation begins at home and continues at school. At home children identify the rules with their parents. In school for the first time they are exposed to the larger society. In the old traditional society, children learnt almost everything from their parents. But as societies become more complex we need formal organisations like schools to prepare children for adults. In school the children are also in the company of children from diverse backgrounds, they spend more time with their peers. So they learn a distinct set of values, norms and attitudes.
- *Cultural Transmission*: Schools play a very important role in transmitting the cultural heritage of society from one generation to another. Culture here refers to a set of beliefs and skills, art, literature, philosophy, etc. that are not carried through the mechanism of heredity. They must be learned. Schools are designed and equipped to pass on society's accumulated

knowledge to the new generation of students.

- *Conferring of Status*: Conferring status is one of the most important functions of education. Education is the key social institution that prepares students for important roles in society. It is the criteria for status, rank through which individuals can get honour, reward, etc.

5.6 RELIGION

5.6.1 Meaning and Characteristics

Religion is another common aspect of all human culture found almost universally in all human groups. It is one aspect of the total human response to the need and drive for security, not only in this world but also in the next; not only in our relationships to the physical and social environment but also in relation to unseen beings and unseen forces.

Religion is very difficult to define. Different people have defined it in different ways. It means many things to many people and it has meant many different things in different cultures.

E.B Tylor, an anthropologist has defined religion *"as the belief in supernatural beings".* Emile Durkheim, defined religion as, *"a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them".*

Taking various definitions together, we find that all the traditional definitions of religion involve three aspects:

- belief in a supernatural being or beings in a supernatural world
- dependence on the supernatural world for help, inspiration, and strength, and
- behaviour patterns, practices (rituals) which express the dependence.



LET US KNOW

There are certain religions that may not fit well with the traditional definitions of religion. Although religion is defined as the system of beliefs and practices centering the supernatural, yet certain religious groups/sects like that of Buddhism is devoid of supernatural elements. Such a religion also like other religions, provides a world view, explains the events around us and has means and behaviour patterns to address the crises that may occur in our lives. The basic character is that these are considered sacred.

5.6.2 Forms

Religion expresses itself in a diversity of forms since man pays homage to the universal controlling forces in an untold number of ways. The belief in one supreme God as creator and controller of mankind is only one form of religious belief. This is termed as **Monotheism**. While some other societies like Hindus believe in many Gods and it is known as **Polytheism.**

Apart from this, there are many forms of religious beliefs and practices, some of which have been described below.

- **Animism:** It is the belief system according to which all things animate (living) or inanimate (non-living) are endowed with souls (anima). It is also the belief in souls, ghosts, spirits, reincarnation, transmigration of souls. This belief, according to Tylor and others, is the original and basic element in religion.
- **Animatism**: It is the belief that all or certain important objects contain communicable energy. Fetishism is a related belief according to which certain stones, (tabiz) are considered to have extra ordinary powers – good or evil.
- **Totemism :** In this form of belief system, the tribes of Australia, America and Africa believe that they have descended from certain animals, plants and objects. Such animals and objects

are known as totems. Totems are treated with great reverence by the members of the group. Totemism is also prevalent among many tribes in Central India.

- **Magic:** Magic is the beliefs and practices concerned with producing effects with coercion (forcefully controlling) of supernatural forces or agents. Magic is a deliberate, purposeful attempt on the part of the magician to make the supernatural beings do according to his /her wish. Magic may be white or black. White magic does not aim at harming someone, whereas the main purpose of black magic is to bring about harm to someone.

There is a remarkable difference between magic and religion. Religion means an essential relation to the Supreme Being, whereas magic is primarily concerned with the attainment of some practical goals of the one who practises it. Religion denotes submission to the will of the God, whereas magic is virtually a command to the supernatural powers.

5.6.3 Role or Function of Religion in Human Societies

Religion has a significant role to play both in the life of the individual and in the social life in general.

- To the individual, religion provides emotional security. It helps man to rationalize his/her sufferings and make them bearable.
- It enables men to understand and explain the events occurring around them.
- At the social level, religion functions as a powerful means of social control. It controls human conduct and regulates behaviour through the ever prevailing fear of the supernatural forces. This feeling is inculcated (learnt) by individuals very early in their lives.
- Moreover, religion functions as a bond of social union and unity amongst all who follow the same religion.

However, if religion creates a sense of unity amongst those

who believe in the same religion, it tends to create, at the same time, deep differences between people. This is mainly due to misinterpretation (wrong concept) of religion.



LET US KNOW

In most of the societies we come across religious explanation of birth, marriage, death, disease, and of natural disasters such as famine and flood, and of the various happenings in the world. Most of these are associated with some rituals like the funeral rites, birth rites etc. Even attaining of puberty and adulthood is associated with rites and rituals that are meant to make smooth the passage form one social stage to another and to resolve crisis, if any, with the involvement of the supernatural beings. Not only disease and natural disasters, but even events in one's life as birth, marriage and death are sometimes considered events of some crisis that require supernatural intervention.



5.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learnt that–

- Social institutions are an integration of norms and standardised patterns of behaviour that fulfil the basic requirements of social life.
- Social Institution means a system of social arrangements that guides the behaviour of persons in a society in prescribed ways in important areas of social life.
- Family is the basic social institution and the relationship between the members of the family is considered to be the oldest social institution of mankind.
- Education is a social institution because it is a system of interrelated social roles and norms that ensures the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another.
- Religion enables the understanding of the meanings of the world around us and to behave in ways that can manage crisis in individual and social life, both in this world and the world hereafter.



5.8 FURTHER READING

1) T.B. Bottomore. *Sociology: A guide to Problems and Literature*. Mumbai: Blackie and Son (India) Ltd.

2) Madan, T.N. and D.N. Majumdar.(1987). *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*.New Delhi: National Publishing House.



5.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Institution means a system of social arrangements that guide the behaviour of persons in a society in prescribed ways in important areas of social life.

Ans to Q No 2: Family is a social institution.

Ans to Q No 3: According to structure, family are divided into nuclear family and jopint family.

Ans to Q No 4: In matrilocal family, the groom after marriage goes to reside in the residence of the bride's parents. For example, Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya.



5.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

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

Q 1: Define social institution. Discuss its characteristics.

Q 2: Define family. What are its characteristics?

Q 3: Write briefly education as a social institution.

Q 4: What is religion? What role is played by religion in human society?

Q 5: Give an account of the various forms of religion.

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

Q 1: Describe the various types of families.

Q 2: Discuss the functions of family.

Q 3: What is education? Discuss the functions of education.

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