

CHAPTER 1

SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIETY

I

INTRODUCTION

Let us begin with some suggestions that are often made to young students like you. One advice often made is, “Study hard and you will do well in life.” The second advice as often made is, “ If you do this subject or set of subjects you will have a better chance of getting a good job in the future”. The third could be, “ As a boy this does not seem a correct choice of subject” or “As a girl, do you think your choice of subjects is a practical one?” The fourth, “Your family needs you to get a job soon so why choose a profession that will take a very long time” or “You will join your family business so why do you wish to do this subject?”

Let us examine the suggestions. Do you think the first advice contradicts the other three? For the first advice suggests that if you work very hard, you will do very well and get a good job. The onus rests upon the individual. The second advice suggests that apart from your individual effort, there is a job

market that decides which subject choice may increase or decrease your chances in the job market. The third and fourth advice complicate the matter even more. It is not just our personal effort or just the job market that makes a difference — our gender and family or social background also matter.

Individual efforts matter a great deal but do not necessarily define outcomes. As we saw there are other social factors that play an important role in the final outcome. Here we have only mentioned the ‘job market’, the ‘socioeconomic background’ and ‘gender’. Can you think of other factors? We could well ask, “Who decides what is a ‘good job’?” Do all societies have similar notions of what is a “good job?” Is money the criteria? Or is it respect or social recognition or individual satisfaction that decides the worth of a job? Do culture and social norms have any role to play?

The individual student must study hard to do well. But how well h/she does is structured by a whole set of societal factors. The job market is defined by the needs of the economy.



The needs of the economy are again determined by the economic and political policies pursued by the government. The chances of the individual student are affected both by these broader political and economic measures as well as by the social background of her/his family. This gives us a preliminary sense of how sociology studies human society as an interconnected whole. And how society and the individual interact with each other. The problem of choosing subjects in the senior secondary school is a source of personal worry for the individual student. That this is a broader public issue, affecting students as a collective entity is self evident. One of the tasks of sociology is to unravel the connection between a personal problem and a public issue. This is the first theme of this chapter.

We have already seen that a 'good job' means different things to different societies. The social esteem that a particular kind of job has or does not have for an individual depends on the culture of his/her 'relevant society'. What do we mean by 'relevant society'? Does it mean the 'society' the individual belongs to? Which society does the individual belong to? Is it the neighbourhood? Is it the community? Is it the caste or tribe? Is it the professional circle of the parents? Is it the nation? Second, this chapter therefore looks at how the individual in modern times belongs to more than one society. And how societies are unequal.

Third, this chapter introduces sociology as a systematic study of society, distinct from philosophical and religious reflections, as well as our everyday common sense observation about society. Fourth, this distinct way of studying society can be better understood if we look back historically at the intellectual ideas and material contexts within which sociology was born and later grew. These ideas and material developments were mainly western but with global consequences. Fifth, we look at this global aspect and the manner in which sociology emerged in India. It is important to remember that just as each of us have a biography, so does a discipline. Understanding the history of a discipline helps understand the discipline. Finally the scope of sociology and its relationship to other disciplines is discussed.

II

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: THE PERSONAL PROBLEM AND THE PUBLIC ISSUE

We began with a set of suggestions that drew our attention to how the individual and society are dialectically linked. This is a point that sociologists over several generations have been concerned with. C. Wright Mills rests his vision of the sociological imagination precisely in the unravelling of how the personal and public are related.



Activity 1

Read the text from Mills carefully. Then examine the visual and report below. Do you notice how the visual is of a poor and homeless couple? The sociological imagination helps to understand and explain homelessness as a public issue. Can you identify what could be the causes for homelessness? Different groups in your class can collect information on possible causes for example, employment possibilities, rural to urban migration, etc. Discuss these. Do you notice how the state considers homelessness as a public issue that requires concrete measures to be taken, for instance, the Indira Awas Yojana?

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and promise... Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between 'the personal troubles of the milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure'... Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with himself and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware... Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life.

The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialised, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both... (Mills 1959).



A homeless couple

The Indira Awas Yojana, operationalised from 1999-2000 is a major scheme by the government's Ministry of Rural Development (MORD) and Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) to construct houses free of cost for the poor and the homeless. Can you think of other issues that show the connection between personal problems and public issues?



III

PLURALITIES AND INEQUALITIES AMONG SOCIETIES

In the contemporary world we belong, in a sense, to more than one 'society'. When amidst foreigners reference to 'our society' may mean 'Indian society', but when amongst fellow Indians we may use the term 'our society' to denote a linguistic or ethnic community, a religious or caste or tribal society.

This diversity makes deciding which 'society' we are talking about difficult. But perhaps this difficulty of mapping society is not confined to sociologists alone as the comment below will show.

While reflecting on what to focus on in his films, the great Indian film maker Satyajit Ray wondered:

What should you put in your films? What can you leave out? Would you leave the city behind and go to the village where cows graze in the endless fields and the shepherd plays the flute? You can make a film here that would be pure and fresh and have the delicate rhythm of a boatman's song.

Or would you rather go back in time-way back to the Epics, where the gods and demons took sides in the great battle where brothers killed brothers...

Or would you rather stay where you are, right in the present, in the heart of this monstrous, teeming, bewildering city, and try to orchestrate its dizzying contrasts of sight and sound and milieu?

This question of what to focus in society is indeed central to sociology. We can take Satyajit Ray's comments further and wonder whether his depiction of the village is romantic. It would be interesting to contrast this with a sociologist's account of the Dalit in the village below.

The first time I saw him, he was sitting on the dusty road in front of one of the small thatched-roofed tea shops in the village with his glass and saucer placed conspicuously beside him—a silent signal to the shopkeeper that an Untouchable wanted to buy some tea. Muli was a gaunt forty-year-old with betel-blackened teeth who wore his long hair swept back (Freeman 1978).

A quote from Amartya Sen perhaps illustrates well how inequality is central to differences among societies.

Some Indians are rich; most are not. Some are very well educated; others are illiterate. Some lead easy lives of luxury; others toil hard for little reward. Some are politically powerful; others cannot influence anything. Some have great opportunities for advancement in life; others lack them altogether. Some are treated with respect by the police; others are treated like dirt. These are different kinds of inequality, and each of them requires serious attention (Sen 2005:210-11).



Hunger Kills The World

- Chronic hunger killed 6 m people worldwide in 2005
- Hunger and related diseases claim more lives than Aids, malaria and tuberculosis combined
- In Haiti, every hour a 5-year-old or younger dies of malnutrition
- Solving the problem of child hunger key to ending world hunger
- Providing relief to an estimated 100 m deprived children would cost about \$5bn a year







Bust that fat...

India is ranked amongst the top ten obese countries in the world. And what's startling is that Delhiites like to gorge on food that leads to weight-related problems.





Discuss the visuals
What kind of pluralities and inequalities do they show?

**Activity 2**

The Economic Survey of the Government of India suggests that access to sanitation facilities is just 31 per cent. Find out about other indicators of social inequality, for instance education, health, employment etc.

IV**INTRODUCING SOCIOLOGY**

You have already been acquainted with the sociological imagination and the central concern of sociology to study society as an interconnected whole. Our discussion on the individual's choices and the job market showed how the economic, political, familial, cultural, educational institutions are interconnected. And how the individual is both constrained by it and yet can change it to an extent. The next few chapters will elaborate on different institutions as well as on culture. It will also focus on some key terms and concepts in sociology that will enable you to understand society. For sociology is the study of human social life, groups and societies. Its subject matter is our own behaviour as social beings.

Sociology is not the first subject to do so. People have always observed and reflected upon societies and groups in which they live. This is evident in the writings of philosophers, religious teachers, and legislators of all civilisations and epochs. This human trait to think about our lives and about society is by no means confined to philosophers and social thinkers. All of us do have ideas about our own

everyday life and also about others' lives, about our own 'society' and also about others' 'society'. These are our everyday notions, our common sense in terms of which we live our lives. However the observations and ideas that sociology as a discipline makes about 'society' is different from both that of philosophical reflections and common sense.

Observations of philosophical and religious thinkers are often about what is moral or immoral in human behaviour, about the desirable way of living and about a good society. Sociology too concerns itself with norms and values. But its focus is not on norms and values as they ought to be, as goals that people should pursue. Its concern is with the way they function in actual societies. (In Chapter 3, you will see how sociology of religion is different from a theological study). Empirical study of societies is an important part of what sociologists do. This however does not mean that sociology is not concerned with values. It only means that when a sociologist studies a society, the sociologist is willing to observe and collect findings, even if they are not to her/his personal liking.

Peter Berger makes an unusual but effective comparison to make the point.



