
Chapter 3

Understanding Social Institutions

❖ Social Institutions

- The functionalist view holds that a social institution is a complex set of social norms, beliefs, values and role relationships that arise in response to needs of the society.
- The conflict view believes that social institutions are oriented to serve the interests of dominant social groups and their ideas.
- Social institutions can be formal and informal.
- The five spheres of social institutions are education, economics, politics, religion and marriage, kinship and family

❖ Characteristics of Social Institutions

- Institutions consist of a concept (idea, notion, doctrine, interest) and structure. They are abstract.
- Institutions exist to discipline and regulate human behaviour.
- Institutions are recognised and established and have a permanent and binding character.

❖ Marriage, family and kinship

- **Family**
 - People having blood relations and living under one roof for a long period of time are known as family. Families exist in all societies but with different characteristics.
 - The family performs important tasks, contributes to basic social needs and perpetuates social order according to functionalists.
 - Nuclear families are prominently visible in industrial societies. However, there are exceptions in societies like India.
 - Family and kinship ties are subject to change and transformation due to macro-economic processes but the pattern of change varies among countries and regions.
- **Marriage**
 - Marriage is a ritual through which two people of opposite sex are socially acknowledged and approved to be life partners.
 - On the basis of criteria of selection of mate, marriages are divided into endogamy, that is, selection of the mate from the group of the individual and exogamy, that is, selection of the mate from outside the group of the individual.
 - Kinship is the connection between individuals, established either through marriage or through the lines of descent that connect blood relatives.
 - Consanguinal kin are related through birth while affines are related through marriage.



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- The family of birth is called the family of orientation and the family in which a person is married is called the family of procreation.

❖ Economics

- Work is the carrying out of paid or unpaid task that requires mental and physical labour to achieve the production of goods and services to cater to human needs.
- In modern times, work has become more complicated, specialised and has a more complex division of labour as compared to earlier societies.
- The nature of work has been considerably transformed in modern societies due to economic interdependence, mass production and change in location and duration of work.
- The competition between different firms and countries has increased due to globalisation. Over the decades, there has been a shift towards flexible production and decentralisation of work.

❖ Politics

- Politics is concerned with the distribution of power in the society.
- Power is the ability of individuals or groups to carry out their will even when opposed by others. Power is exercised through legitimate authority.
- The stateless societies function through cross-cutting alliances, based upon kinship, marriage and residence.
- The modern states are defined by sovereignty, citizenship and nationalism. They function through the apparatus of the government and provide civil, political and social rights to their citizens.
- The broadening of social and welfare rights has led to the notion of the welfare state.
- Sociology studies the distribution of power among castes, communities and classes in a broad manner.

❖ Religion

- Religion is an institution having a set of symbols, rituals and ceremonies and a community of believers.
- It is closely associated with power as it has a public character and inextricably linked to other social institutions.
- An example of impact of religion upon economic behaviour was the relation between Calvinism and capitalism, according to Weber.
- Sociologists believed that the influence of religion would decrease through modernisation and secularisation of societies.



❖ Education

- Education is a life-long process that involves formal and informal institutions of learning.
- Informal institutions of learning include the family, neighbourhood and society.
- Schooling provides formal learning to individuals and promotes uniformity, standardised aspirations and universalistic values.
- Education maintains and renews the social structure according to functionalists while it is a stratifying agent for conflict theorists.

❖ Important Terms and Definitions

- **Citizen:** A member of a political society, who enjoys rights and exercises the duties of state.
- **Division of Labour:** The specialisation of work tasks, in which the individuals carry out specific functions according to their role in the society.
- **Gender:** The social differentiation between males and females.
- **Ideology:** Shared ideas or beliefs, of the individuals in a group to regulate the appropriate functions in a society.
- **Legitimacy:** The belief that a particular political order is just and valid.
- **Monogamy:** A marriage involving one husband and one wife alone.
- **Polygamy:** A marriage involving more than one mate at one time.
- **Polyandry:** A marriage when more than one man is married to a woman.
- **Polygyny:** A marriage when more than one woman is married to a man.
- **Service Industries:** Industries involved in the production of services, such as the travel industry.
- **State Society:** A society which comprises of a formal governing body.
- **Stateless Society:** A society which lacks the formal governing body.
- **Sovereignty:** The undisputed political rule of a state over a given territorial area.