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Q1(a)

Discuss the nature of Sociology. Highlight its relationship with Social Anthropology.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Define sociology as a systematic study of social relationships and institutions
- **State its nature:** empirical, comparative, generalising, and concerned with structure and meaning
- **Show its relationship with social anthropology:** shared interest in culture and group life, and differences of scale, method and historical setting
- Use named founders and one Indian illustration

Revision summary

Sociology is the systematic study of social relationships, institutions and structures.

Its nature is empirical, comparative and theoretical, after Comte, **Durkheim**, **Marx** and **Weber**.

Social anthropology studies culture and community life, often through intensive fieldwork.

The two subjects share the study of institutions and meaning.

They differ in typical scale, method and historical setting.

Indian village studies show how the border has been crossed in practice.

Introduction

Sociology is the systematic study of how people live together in groups, institutions and structures. Auguste Comte gave the discipline a name and asked for a science of society. **Emile Durkheim** treated social facts as constraints that exist outside the individual. **Max Weber** studied meaningful social action. The nature of sociology follows from this project. It is empirical, comparative and theoretical. Social anthropology studies culture, kinship and everyday life in communities, often through long fieldwork. The two subjects share a border and also keep a division of labour.

Body

Nature of sociology

Sociology studies recurrent patterns such as class, caste, family, state, religion and work. It uses concepts, comparison and evidence. **Durkheim** insisted that social facts must be explained by other social facts. **Karl Marx** located institutions in modes of production and class struggle. **Weber** added interpretation of motives and the study of domination. Robert Merton later asked sociologists to look at both manifest and latent functions. The discipline is

therefore neither a list of opinions nor a branch of psychology. It is generalising, but it does not claim the same laboratory control that physics enjoys. Anthony Giddens called this the study of a world that already interprets itself.

Sociology is also historical and critical. It asks how a present arrangement was made and whose interest it serves. C. Wright Mills linked private troubles to public issues. In India, G. S. Ghurye, M. N. Srinivas and A. R. Desai used this toolkit on caste, village and class. The nature of the subject is therefore scientific in method and social in object.

Relationship with social anthropology

Social anthropology, in the lineage of Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and later Clifford Geertz, has classically studied small-scale communities through participant observation. It has given sociology the ideas of culture, ritual, kinship and the native point of view. Sociology has classically studied large, industrial and state-centred societies through survey, statistics and historical comparison. Durkheim and Marcel Mauss already sat on both sides of this fence. In India, village studies by Srinivas, McKim Marriott and Andre Beteille show how anthropological fieldwork became a method of Indian sociology.

The relationship is close because both study institutions, meaning and inequality. The difference is one of typical scale, typical method and typical research setting, not a wall. Urban ethnography, Dalit studies and the anthropology of the state have narrowed the gap. A fair answer keeps the shared object and names the remaining contrast: sociology's taste for structure and comparison across mass societies, and anthropology's taste for intensive cultural description.

Flow diagram

Sociology -> Structure comparison theory
Social anthropology -> Culture kinship fieldwork
Sociology -> Institutions meaning inequality
Social anthropology -> Institutions meaning inequality

Conclusion

Sociology is a systematic, comparative study of social life, with a nature that is empirical and theoretical at once. Social anthropology is its closest kin in the study of culture and group life. The two subjects exchange methods and concepts, while still differing in typical scale and research style.

Facts & figures

Durkheim on social facts

Ways of acting that constrain the individual from outside and must be explained by other social facts.

Malinowski's fieldwork

Long participant observation that became the classic method of social anthropology.

Srinivas's field view

Indian sociology used anthropological village fieldwork to study caste, village and social change.

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