
UNIT 32 SOCIAL CONFLICT

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32.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you must be able to:

- define social conflict and describe its nature;
- explain the integrative and disintegrative aspects of social conflicts;
- list and describe the four types of social conflict, commonly seen to occur in human societies; and
- describe conflict as a condition of social change.

32.1 INTRODUCTION

Social conflict is an important area of sociological study. In this unit, we discuss the basic concept of social conflict, and describe the contributions of Karl Marx and Max Weber on the nature of social conflict. Then, the unit deals with the various functions of conflict in society. Finally, we discuss the types of conflicts found in almost all societies, and conflict in relation to change.

32.2 SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

If one were to look at the major concerns in sociology, we find primarily two: The first one tends to focus on the nature of social order, social stability, and consensus. The second one deals with change, disorder, instability and social conflict. Sociological perspectives fall broadly in the categories of function i.e., consensus-based, and conflict which is primarily oriented, to explaining the elements of instability and change.

Under the influence of the evolutionary perspective in the natural sciences, many early sociologists have also dealt with the phenomenon of social conflict. However, the discussions centred on the unintended (more or less autonomous) interaction, in the tradition of the Darwinian concept of “struggle for survival”. This phase was followed by an examination of the problems of order or the problems of social solidarity. These gave rise to the functionalist school in sociology and social anthropology. Karl Marx was an important social thinker who systematically analysed the phenomenon of social conflicts. Yet the major discussions in academic sociology centred on the explanations of social structure and social organisation. This phase continued almost until the first half of the present century. It was after the 1950s, that a focused and systematic examination of the phenomenon of social conflict was undertaken. Let us look at some of the perspectives on social conflict in order to understand its nature.

Today conflict theorists insist that conflict is a perennial feature of social life, and that as a result societies are in a state of constant change. They see conflicts involving a broad range of interests and groups. The interests are economic, political, legal, religious, social and moral. The groups involved are young against old, male against female, one ethnic group against another, one caste against another, one religious group against another, workers against employers and so on. Why do conflicts emerge and continue to persist in social life? The broad answer appears to be that things like power, prestige, wealth and other resources are not equally available to everyone—they are scarce commodities. Those who have them or who have control over these scarce commodities, will always try to defend and protect their interests at the expense of others. As a result, conflict emerges between the groups of opposing interests.

32.2.1 Perspective of Economic Determinism

Karl Marx’s (1818-1883) contribution to the area of social conflict is of immense importance. Social conflict, he believed, was the source of all social change. He saw conflict **as a social relationship between two classes having opposing economic interests**. These two classes in capitalist society are the bourgeoisie, (or owners or the “haves” who own the means of production). The economic power of the “haves”, gives them power in other spheres too like political and social. The acquisition of power by one class is according to Marx, always at the cost of the other class. The unequal distribution of power is sought to be resisted by the class of the have-nots. These organise themselves to overthrow the rule of the “haves” through revolutionary action. The resulting new social order (where there would be no classes) is an improvement on the old one. In this sense, social conflict can be seen as a vehicle of social progress. Thus, Marx looked at social conflicts essentially within the sphere of economic life. His analysis concentrated primarily on the analysis of class conflicts in the capitalist society.



**Opposing Economic Interest of the Bourgeoisie & the Proletariat;
Marxist View of Social Conflict**

32.2.2 Perspective of Max Weber

Max Weber (1864-1920) too insisted that social conflict cannot be excluded from social life. He pointed out that conflict is a social relationship which has its own characteristics. The important characteristics are:

- i) The action within the relationship is oriented intentionally, to carry out the will of the actors or groups against another actor or group.
- ii) the effort to carry out one's will against the other, stimulates a resistance from the other against this imposition. So Weber insists that for a relationship to be called a "conflict relationship", there must be the following elements:
 - a) Power, and exercise of the power intentionally.
 - b) Resistance from the group or individual facing this imposition.

Weber did not see conflict as being confined to the economic sphere alone. He held that conflict arises over the scarcity of such resources, like prestige and power, as well as property and other forms of material wealth. He observed that conflict can emerge in organisations and bureaucracies too. He pointed out that leaders who manage the resources of large scale industrial, government, religious organisations have a great deal of power. They can assert and have asserted their will, against the will of other groups in society and even outside the society (e.g. multinational corporations).

From what has been said so far about the nature of social conflict, the following aspects of conflict relationship emerge:

- i) conflict is a struggle over values. It may occur as a struggle over claims to status, power and other scarce resources.

- ii) at least two parties are involved in the conflict relationships, to gain these desired values or things.
- iii) the conflicting parties often aim to neutralise, injure or eliminate their rivals.
- iv) conflicts can occur within a groups or between groups.
- v) conflicts have persisted through time, and they are a perennial feature of social life.

Activity 1

You must have read the story of “Mahabharata” or seen the television, serial based on it. Recall the main elements of conflict between the “Pandavas” and the “Kauravas”. Write an essay on the analysis of this conflict in about two pages. Discuss your essay with the students and your Academic Counsellor at your study centre.

Check Your Progress 1

- Note:** a) Use the space given below for your answer.
- b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.
- 1) According to Marx the basic cause of conflict is unequal distribution of political power and authority. Tick the correct box Yes No
 - 2) To Weber, the basic cause of conflict is confined to the economic sphere alone. Tick the correct box Yes No
 - 3) The two conflicting classes of the capitalist society, according to Marx, are:
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32.3 ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

From all these accounts of social conflict, we can gather something about the essential elements of social conflict as given below:

- i) In social conflict, the focus is essentially on the opposition between two or more social **categories**. It may be a social group such as a trade union, political party, professional organisation, family etc. It could also be a **class** such as the working class, capitalist class, lower class, upper class, and middle class. What is implied in all these examples is that there is a socially defined expectation, of what that category is supposed to do in relation to another. For social conflict to emerge, there must be at least two social categories which are not only related to one another, but also opposing one another.
- ii) All situations of conflict involve the element of power. We cannot have a social conflict relationship, where there is no effort at the imposition of one’s will on the other. A conflict relationship is based on the distribution of power in a group.

The imposition of will by one actor or group on another, creates a condition whereby the other actor or the group negates this claim.

- iii) Conflict may involve hostile sentiments and attitudes.
- iv) It is important to differentiate between objective bases of conflict, and its subjective bases. As we have said before, conflicts can break out over distribution of a variety of scarce material and non-material things such as wealth, income, power, prestige, domination over territory, etc. Such occasions for conflict need to be separated from subjective elements like hostile aggressive attitudes, feelings of resentment, hatred, etc. which may also figure in the conflict relationship.
- v) The **interests** that we focus upon in conflict could be of several kinds. they may be **economic** i.e., involving control over the resources and benefits available in society. They can be social involving prestige or politics i.e., who will lay a claim to legitimate authority. They may be **religious** i.e., whose interpretation regarding the supraempirical world is to be accepted as valid. Whichever be the interest or interests, conflict is present when two or more parties have opposing interests.
- vi) The conflict relationship often involves two positions – for and against the powerful and the powerless; the exploiter and the exploited; the one who (which) has authority to control and the one who (which) has not. Of course there may also be a number of groups competing for power, and that power need not be concentrated in the hands of a particular social group.
- vii) Conflicts may be confined to small groups, or it can encompass the whole world (as exemplified by the World Wars. Conflicts may vary in intensity according to the importance of the issue involved. The scope of the issues involved in a conflict may range from minor positional differences, to radical transformation of the whole society.
- viii) Conflicts may occur between societies (e.g. wars between nations) or it may occur within a society between groups. Even within a group, there may be factions, conflicting over an issue or several issues. for example, within the Congress party there may be division of interests and ideologies.
- ix) The conflict interaction might take myriad courses. It is possible that it may be nipped in the bud by the powerful group, or that it may extend over a long period of time. It may involve varying degrees of violence. Violent conflicts between groups often involve the use of force.

Activity 2

Visit your local library or your Study Centre library. Open an Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences or Britannica and read carefully about “Cold War” between the different nations of the world before the break up of Russia. Write a note of one page on “Cold War and its Implications” and compare your note with those of others at your study centre. You may also discuss this topic with your Academic Counsellor.

32.4 FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

From the above discussion of elements of social conflict one is prompted to ask “Are conflicts dysfunctional to society?” Conflict need not be regarded as only a

destructive process, that leads to disorder and breakdown of social order. Theorists like Dahrendorf and Coser have focused on the integrative nature of social conflicts.

32.4.1 Positive Consequences of Conflict

Based on Simmel's pioneering and insightful work, Coser (1956) has shown that conflict may have some positive consequences. First, by conflicting with another group, the social solidarity of a given group is increased within. There is a better co-ordination, and a better structural arrangement inside the group. We are all quite conversant with this situation. Whenever our country has faced external aggression, the whole nation has stood together as one, after eliminating all internal dissension. The example of conflict between India and Pakistan is known to all of us which leads to internal cohesion within the country. Sometimes wily politicians in power may deliberately raise the bogey of external dangers, to divert attention from their internal problems. Secondly, conflict may bring together two hitherto unrelated groups in coalition, thereby increasing the scope of co-operative interaction. Thirdly, conflict may give rise to some unchartered areas of co-operation between parties, for example the emergence of the Red Cross during World War-I. Fourthly, conflict interaction might clarify the issues which might have been clouded earlier, thereby improving the understanding of the opponent, and creating new avenues of interaction.

32.4.2 Dysfunctions of conflict

There are, of course, numerous dysfunction's of social conflict such as increasing differences in a group resulting, in extreme cases, in the break-up of the group. Civil war may result in the emergence of one of the parts as an independent state. Apart from this, the cost of conflict, in terms of loss of human life and property are well-known. It is also possible that the conflicting groups may develop deep-seated suspicions and animosities within the respective groups, which may prolong over time, resulting in continued instability of the group. It is only in extreme cases of complete annihilation of one group by the other that the seeds of conflict once sown may not sprout again.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

- 1) Which of the following is not an element of social conflict:
 - a) Opposite Economic interest.
 - b) Presence of two or more groups.
 - c) Like-mindedness between the two group members.
- 2) Does conflict with another group increase the social solidarity of that group? Tick the correct box. Yes No
- 3) Give an example of dysfunction of social conflict. Use two lines for your answer.

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32.5 TYPES OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

Although a number of criteria can be used for generating a typology of conflicts, such as, conflicts based on interests, based on whether gradual change or immediate radical change is desired, or conflict in terms of time span, or in terms of the scope of conflicts. Here we shall talk of four major kinds of conflicts. These are conflicts which are seen to occur in almost all societies. We shall discuss briefly the following:

- i) Class conflicts which are based on the system of stratification existing in a society.
- ii) Political conflicts which are based on the acquisition of, and competition for political power.
- iii) Communal/ethnic conflicts, which are mainly based on considerations of maintenance of the group.
- iv) Factional conflicts—which occur among small group, claiming position of power within small communities.

Before proceeding to look at these types of conflict individually, it should be mentioned here, that there is yet another type of conflict, which has been assigned historical importance over the ages. Only a few modern sociologists have undertaken a systematic study of this type of conflict, referred to as “War”. Early sociologists like Comte and Spencer had recognised the importance of wars, and conquests in bringing about social change. Recently there is a growing realisation, that sociologists cannot afford to ignore the problem of war in the nuclear age. The recent studies on war and peace have focused on the conditions and factors that may provoke a war and on the issue of avoiding a war. These studies have helped in clarifying ideas about the complex phenomenon of violent conflicts, specially conflicts that involve the use of force. Violent conflicts like wars, conquests, revolutions, have contributed to the emergence of large social units. New forms of stratification, and new kind of relationships between groups within a society and between societies, may also result from conflicts.

32.5.1 Class Conflicts

All complex societies are characterised by the phenomenon of social stratification, which arranges all the members of the society into categories in a hierarchical manner, with differing amounts of prestige, power and rewards. It is this unequal distribution of benefits, that a society makes available to the various strata, that in turn becomes the basis of a struggle between various classes. Marx insisted that conflict between classes was the only source of radical change.

Class conflict according to him, was based on economic interests. He visualised human societies as passing through various stages of development, depending on the manner in which economic activities are carried out. He distinguished between the class of the **haves** and the class of the **have-nots**. He pointed out that in every kind of society these two groups have persisted. In the slave society there were the masters and the slaves. In the feudal society, there were the lords and the serfs. In the capitalist society, there are the capitalists and the workers.

The strength of Marx’s class concept lies in the fact that he sees the two classes, as being linked with each other in terms of an exploitative relationship. The **haves** have power over the **have-nots** by virtue of its ownership of the means of production. When the **have-nots** become aware of their exploited condition, they form a **class-**

for-itself. Otherwise, earlier they were a **class-in-itself.** They begin to fight for their interests in a revolutionary struggle. Their victory transforms the very basis of society namely, the ownership of production. The resulting mode of production is more progressive than the preceding one.

In Marx's analysis of class conflict the major factor of class conflict is the institution of private ownership of the means of production. The recognition by the working class in a capitalist society, that it is the private ownership that is the major cause of exploitation in all societies, inspires them to a revolutionary struggle aimed at the abolition of private property itself.

32.5.2 Political Conflicts

As mentioned earlier, power is an important element. Social relationships can be organised around the acquisition, and distribution of political power. These spheres of human activity which constitute the political domain of a society. The major function of a political institution is the authoritative allocation of resources, and benefits that are available in the society as a whole. It is for this reason, that power may be sought after, but since the resources and benefits are scarce, there can be competition for acquiring the monopoly over these resources and benefits. The group which at the moment has control over the resources and benefits, will try to use them for its partisan interests, thereby denying it to the others. Political conflicts then can be seen as a demand made by diverse groups in a society to control the resources and benefits.

The struggle for political power takes place among social groupings, which have specific interests in a society. Political sociologists point out that the way one votes, depends upon the interests that are furthered by a political party. There are diverse interests in a society which, together make a claim on the political system for their furtherance. These interests are mainly economic, but can also be of other kinds such as religious, professional, etc. The political struggle then is a struggle between diverse interests.

In political conflict, the sociologists have identified three main grouping—the political party, the interest groups and pressure groups. The political party is an organisation whose aim is to acquire power in order to govern. Interest groups articulate the interests of a particular section of a society. The pressure groups are interest groups which not only articulate the interests of its members, but also tend to pressurise the government to act in such a manner as to further their specific interests. The trade unions, professional associations of teachers, doctors, lawyers, are examples of pressure groups. Interest groups and pressure groups act in the political arena, but they themselves do not want to govern. The major actors in the political domain who want to govern are the political parties. The political parties may be organised on different ideologies with different styles of functioning. They are usually organised around the furtherance of specific interests. In India, we have the Communist Party which champions the interests of the working class. The Lok Dal, is primarily concerned with peasantry, while the Muslim League tries to safeguard the interests of the Muslims. Political parties try to broaden their basis by incorporating as many interest groups as possible. For example the Congress Party although talks of establishing a socialist society, accommodates the interests of the capitalists, the rich trading class along with other sections of society. When a party comes to power in order to govern, it must acquire legitimacy, and the more the groups whose interests it furthers, the greater is the legitimacy that the ruling party is able to acquire. Political conflicts can also take place within systems of parties, especially in those societies where two or more parties have as much strength as the ruling party.

32.5.3 Communal/Ethnic Conflicts

These days, whenever, we open a newspaper, we find references to violent clashes between religious groups, between castes, between races, or between linguistic communities. We hear of conflicts between Muslims and the Hindus. Between high castes and the scheduled castes. There are conflicts between blacks and whites in South Africa, Great Britain and USA. Conflict exists between Sinhala speaking and Tamil speaking people in Sri Lanka and between Hindi speaking and non-Hindi speaking people in India.

Before we describe the main aspects of this type of conflict we must clarify the meaning of the terms “communal” and “ethnic”. A communal relationship is one in which the interests of the interacting members are identical. The concept draws our attention to, the binding force of a commonality of interests beliefs and sentiment. Ethnic is now commonly defined as relating to racially or culturally distinct categories of people. Ethnic groups refer to certain types of group membership which are based on national origin, religion, language or region, i.e., people who perceive themselves or are perceived by others, as sharing common origins or significant parts of a common culture. An ethnic group that faces prejudice and discrimination at the hands of the dominant group is often called a minority. For instance, the blacks are a minority in North America, and whites in South Africa.

Generally when we speak of communal or ethnic conflicts, we talk about the conflicts between two or more groups, where the membership depends upon some characteristic based on birth. This could be religion, colour, language or region. It must be pointed out here that in India when we refer to the communal dimensions, we refer generally to the religious identity of a community. In India we have had not only a long history of conflicts based on religion, but also on language or territorial origins.

While analysing communal or ethnic conflicts, social scientists have identified a variety of subjective as well as objective factors that are seen to affect the emergence, course and resolution of conflicts. Some believe that psychological factors like needs, satisfaction of needs, ethnocentric feelings, prejudicial attitudes feelings of frustration, hostility, aggression are very important in explaining this type of conflict. Sociologists believe that communal conflicts are one instance of the general phenomenon of a conflict relationship, and as such one has to look into the opposing interests of the two communities. In a society where resources are scarce, and where the democratic polity finds itself torn between the diversity of demands put on it by various sections of the society, conflicts are likely to emerge. In those societies where the distribution of resources is on the basis of individual activities, the opposition of interests usually takes the form of class conflict. In a society where the distribution of resources takes place in terms of groups based on ascribed status, the opposition of interests is likely to take a communal form. We often observe conflicts between landless labour, who belong to the category of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Backward Castes, and the land owners who more often than not, belong to the category of non-scheduled castes etc. In America and in South Africa, skin colour has been largely the basis upon which blacks have been assigned inferior status. Blacks in South Africa had been dispossessed of their resources and were victims of unfavourable discrimination, unequal treatment, violence and segregation. Both objective interests and subjective elements are strongly involved in communal and ethnic conflicts.

32.5.4 Factional Conflicts

Sociologists generally talk of factional conflicts in terms of the struggles that take place, in small communities like the village communities. A faction is an informal but

a clearly differentiated group of persons in a village, which encompasses members from different sections within it. It may be engaged in a conflict relationship with another such organised group. In the Indian context, the village communities are differentiated not only horizontally in terms of castes, but also fragmented vertically across caste in the struggle for domination. In India, we can find, that the faction has usually one person as a leader around whom the other members are mobilised. He usually belongs to one of the wealthy families of the village, owning a large amount of land. The other members of the faction are usually his kinsmen and those belonging to his own caste. However, members of other and lower castes are also associated with him in factional conflicts and they are, in many cases, persons who are economically dependent on him, such as the landless workers.

Desire for power, domination (economic and political) and prestige may be the goals of a faction. The emergence of factional conflict, is usually traceable to a specific episode in which one of the powerful persons of the community, feels slighted by another powerful member, and the feud continues over generations. Conflict is not centred on one issue; it may be found operating in many areas, Factional conflicts often take the form of violent physical conflicts. The feuds between eminent and powerful castes or families in Indian village continue over generations. With the coming up of the village self-government institutions in India, the factional conflicts are now usually channelised through these institutions. But it cannot be said that with the establishment of "Panchayat Raj" (self-government institutions) factional conflicts have been greatly reduced in Indian villages than before.

32.6 CONFLICT AS A CONDITION OF SOCIAL CHANGE

From the foregoing discussions, it is clear that conflict is an important element of social life, and can be seen as a condition in social change. In a society social order is necessary and order is the outcome of a complex interaction between force of inter-dependence, cooperation, conflict alliance, and cleavages between people. Some people and groups have more power than other people and groups in acquiring control over resources. Sources of power are not available to everyone equally. Social conflict can be seen as the outcome of this uneven distribution of power. People with the greatest power are able to realise their will and interests at the cost of those who have less power. Also in modern societies, people often have interests that are irreconcilable. This often leads to social conflict.

This does not mean that conflict can be looked only as a dividing factor in social life. Sociologists point out that conflict can be integrative. On the other hand cooperation and harmony may increase within a group which faces external threat. Issues get clarified, and settlement of disputes may satisfy everyone involved in the conflict, so that they may come together as friends.

Conflict as a condition in social change can be looked at from so many angles. Conflicts may lead to consolidation of units. They may also lead to new forms of social stratification or reinforce existing patterns of stratification in new ways. Inventories may be introduced as a result of conflict. For instance conflict between workers and owners/controllers of production, led to the social invention of trade union. Wars between societies led to the development of new techniques of warfare. It was the same phenomenon of war that led to the social invention regarding peace keeping institutions, namely United Nations.

The phenomenon of social conflict is closely interlinked with the phenomenon of social change, social order and social control. The conflict theorists insist that society can be best understood and analysed in terms of struggles and strife that occur over the control and acquisition of power, authority, wealth, prestige and other scarce and desirable resources in society.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: a) Use the space given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) According to Marx, the two classes of the haves and the have-nots are linked in terms of an exploitative relationship. Tick the correct box. Yes No

2) What do you mean by factional conflict? Use about three lines for your answer.

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3) What are the three major grouping involved in political conflicts? Use about three lines for your answers.

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4) What is a communal relationship? Use four lines for your answer.

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32.7 LET US SUM UP

Let us outline the important points we have discussed in this unit. We defined social conflict—at the simplest level it means opposition between two social categories. We outlined the nature of conflict from some important sociological contributions. We then examined in detail what Marx had to say about social conflict. He stressed on conflict in the economic sphere. We also outlined Weber’s views on conflict. We pointed out the functional and dysfunctional aspects of conflict. In the typology of conflicts we talked about class conflicts, political conflicts, communal/ethnic conflicts and factional conflicts. Lastly, we discussed the process of conflict as a condition of social change.

32.8 KEY WORDS

Ethnic : It relates to racially or culturally distinct categories of people.

Social conflict : A social relationship based on opposing interests.

Social stratification : A system of hierarchical relationships. It refers to the inequality in society as a result of unequal possession of material goods, wealth, power etc., by different groups of people.

32.9 FURTHER READINGS

Bottomore, T.B., 1987. *Sociology : A Guide to Problems and Literature*, Allen and Unwin: London.

Johnson, H. 1986. *Sociology : Systematic Introduction*, Allied Publishers: Bombay. (11th reprint).

32.10 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) No
- 2) Yes
- 3) The capitalist and the proletariat.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Like-mindedness between two group members.
- 2) Yes
- 3) Conflicting groups develop the feelings of animosity and suspicion towards each other. For example, the communal groups in India harbour such feelings.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Yes
- 2) Factional conflicts are the conflicts which take place within the village between small groups of persons. Basis of these conflicts may be social, economic or political.
- 3) The three major groupings are political parties, interest groups and pressure groups.
- 4) A communal relationship is based on the identity and interests of a community, whether based on religion, region, language or ethnic identity.