Approaches to Social Problems:

Social problems have been analyzed scientifically. We will examine some of the theoretical approaches which present universal explanations for all types of social problems.

1. Social Disorganization Approach:

Social disorganization is a condition of a society, community or group in which there is a breakdown of social control, or of a social order, or of formal and informal norms that define permissible behaviour. It is char-   acterized by the lack of co-operation, common values, unity, discipline and predictability.

Warren (1949:83-87) has described it as a condition involving:

(a) Lack of consensus (disagreement about group purposes),

(b) Lack of integration of institutions (often working at cross purposes), and

(c) Inadequate means of social control (preventing individuals from playing their individual roles due to confusion).

Elliott and Merrill (1950:20) have defined it as a process by which relationships between members of a group are broken or dissolved. Social disorganization occurs when there is a change in the equilib-   rium of forces, a breakdown of the social structure so that the former pat-   terns no longer apply, and the accepted forms of social control no longer function effectively.

This disruptive condition of society, which is evi-   denced by normlessness, role conflict, social conflicts, and demoralization, increases social problems. For example, increasing in-   dustrialization, spread of education, and women taking up paid work have affected the relations between husband and wife, and between par-   ents and children.

Many of the old norms which governed the intra-family and inter-family relations seem to have broken down. Many people feel frustrated and unhappy. This is the condition of social disor-   ganization, in which changes in the basic conditions of life, causing breakdown of traditional norms, have resulted in widespread discontent-   ment and disillusionment. In other words, change has disrupted the organization of the formal system of behaviour. Talking of social disor-   ganization in slum life, Whyte (1955:268) has referred to deviant or non-approved group organization in slums.

However, according to one school of thought, the state of social dis-   organization does not always create social problems. For example, during Hitler's regime, Germany was not a disorganized society nor dur-   ing Stalin's regime, was the Soviet Union in a state of disorganization; yet many conditions in these countries were shocking "deviations from the social ideal, demanding social action", that is, there were social problems.

Reacting to this view, some scholars say that even if the social disorganization theory may not explain all social problems, it does ex- plain some of the social problems, for example, mental illness may not be a symptom of a disorganized society but corruption in the society does lead to the malfunctioning of institutions, lack of perfect consensus and the evasion of social control by some citizens.

In employing the social disorganization approach to social problems (Horton and Leslie, 1970:33), one looks to factors like: What were the traditional norms and practices? What were the major changes that made them ineffective? What are the old rules which have broken down par- tially or completely? What is the nature and direction of social change? Who are the disgruntled groups and what solutions do they propose? How various do proposed solutions fit in with the trend of social change? What may become the accepted rules in the future?

2. Cultural Lag Approach:

Culture lag is a situation in which some parts of a culture change at a faster rate than other related parts resulting in the disruption of integra- tion and equilibrium of the culture; for example, the material culture changes more rapidly than the non-material culture in industrial societies through rapid advances in science and technology (Ogburn, 1966).

The theory of culture lag, in particular holds that in modern societies there has been a tendency for change in the political, educational, family and religious institutions to fall behind technological changes. It is thus easy to see how culture lag can create social problems. Even after rapid indus- trialization in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and in the first quarter of the twentieth century, some people were so influenced by the rigid restrictions of the caste system that they refused to work with mem- bers of other castes in the industries and preferred to remain unemployed and poor.

The first quarter of the twentieth century, thus, remained a pe- riod of culture lag. It took more than a generation to adapt ourselves to technological development in agriculture and industry. Our social insti- tutions, thus, retained the traditional flavour whereas technology advanced in the world. Though the culture lag theory explains some of the social problems (like AIDS, population explosion, etc.), it does not explain all social problems. It, therefore, cannot be accepted as a universal explanation of all social problems.

3. Value Conflict Approach:

A value is a generalized principle of behaviour to which the members of a group feel a strong, emotionally-toned positive commitment and which provides a standard for judging specific acts and goals. Each member of the group is expected to remain committed to the values accepted by the group. Values, thus, provide the generalized standards of behaviour. Ex- amples of values are equality, justice, communal harmony, patriotism, mobility, collectivism, compromise, sacrifice, adjustment and so forth. Because of the strong emotional feeling attached to values and because they serve as standards for judging concrete goals or actions, they are often

regarded as absolute (Theodorson, 1969: 456).

Different groups have different systems of values. Incompatibility between the values of two or more groups to the extent that the role per-formance of individuals is interfered with is called 'value conflict'. This state of conflict may last only a short while or it may be a persistent problem.

For example, conflict in values of workers and employers leads to industrial unrest, strikes and lockouts; or conflict in values between land owners and landless labourers leads to agrarian unrest or agricul-tural labourers' movements; or the liberal businessmen may believe in encouraging hard work, thrift, honesty and ambition and may reward these virtues financially, but on the other hand, the conservatives may differ profoundly with this view and may believe in the profit motive and individual initiative. Liberals and conservatives thus differ not only on matters of policies but more profoundly on those of values.

The value conflict theorists like Waller, Fuller, Cuber and Harper hold that clashes in value system are of basic importance in the origin and development of social problems. Waller (1936:924) has referred to the conflict between 'organizational' and 'humanitarian' values. The former favour private property and individualism, while the latter are vo-taries of remedying the misfortunes of others. But this theoretical approach is too vague.

The pro-pounders have not explained their views in concrete details. It is true that our current values overemphasize money and material possessions and this attitude encourages corruption, smuggling, drug trafficking, black-marketing, and taking of bribes but problems like white-collar crime cannot be re-duced to a conflict of values.

The problem of divorce may be the result of value conflict but all family problems cannot be explained merely in terms of disagreements between husband and wife or parents and children. Agreement on common values helps in maintaining harmo-nious interpersonal relations in family or outside it but it is not the only thing needed for family stability or group success.

Thus, the value conflict theory may be useful in some areas like economics, in the analy-sis of social problems, but it certainly cannot be accepted as a universal explanation. On applying the value conflict approach, questions which are gener-ally asked (Horton and Leslie, 1970:40) are: What are the values that are in conflict? How deep is the value conflict? What groups in the society hold to each of the competing values? How powerful are they? Which values are more consistent with other larger values such as democracy and freedom? What value sacrifices would each solution require? Are some problems insoluble at present because of certain irreconcilable value conflicts?

4. Personal Deviation Approach:

Deviation is non-conformity to social norms. It is different from abnor-mal behaviour because the latter connotes psychological illness rather than social maladjustment or conflict. Thus,

people who deviate from social norms are not necessarily mentally ill. In the social disorganization approach to social problems, one looks to the rules that have broken down and the changes that have taken place because of the breaking of the rules. In personal deviation approach, one looks to the motivation and behaviour of the deviants who are instru-   mental in causing the problems.

Two factors that need explanation in the personal deviation approach are:

(i) How does personal deviancy de-   velop?

(ii) What types of personal deviation are frequently involved in social problems?

Personal deviancy develops because of either:

(a) An in-   dividual's inability to follow generally accepted norms, or

(b) An individual's failure to accept generally accepted norms.

The first is caused because of a person's emotional, social or biological deficiency, that is, some persons are so constituted biologically, emotionally, or so-   cially that they are incapable of adhering consistently to generally accepted standards. The socially deficient do not truly violate norms; rather they manifest an inability to learn and follow the norms. The cause of emotional deficiency is bio-psychological. These deviants that constitute social problems and also contribute to problems often require medical, psychiatric and environmental or social therapies.

On the other hand, an individual's failure to accept social norms has something to do with deficiency in socialization. These individuals, though have learnt the norms and values like honesty, truthfulness, integrity, justice and co-   operation, they cannot put them into practice.

They remain disposed to telling lies, cheating, exploiting, and defaming others when it suits their pur-   poses. Their deviance does not produce any guilt-feeling or shame in them. They may change sides abruptly and completely on a social issue if it serves their purpose. They care little whether social problems exist and whether they are solved or not so long the situation can be used for their vested interest.

Horton and Leslie (1970:35-36) have referred to three types of per-   sonal deviations:

(i) Deviation that results from conformity to norms of diverse reference groups. Because of cultural variability, most people are exposed to different sets of norms that may be in conflict with one an-   other. For example, a person may belong to one religion or caste but his professional role may literally force him to deviate from the norms of his religion/caste. Similarly, a clerk as well as an officer may accept bribe because it serves economic interests,

(ii) Deviation that results from the existence of deviant sub-cultures, for example, the criminal norms in slum areas of large cities,

(iii) Outright deviation from generally ac-cepted norms. Deliberately hiding one's income while, filling income tax returns provides a good example of this type of deviation.

In applying the personal deviation approach to social problems, the questions asked (Horton and Leslie, 1970:37) are: What deviant per-sons/groups are involved? Are deviants themselves the problem or they help creating the problem? What deviant sub-cultures are involved? What alternatives are there for dealing with the deviants?

5. Anomie Approach:

This approach was propounded by Merton. Anomie is a condition char-acterized by the relative absence or weakening or confusion of norms and values in a society or a group. The concept of anomie was originally developed by Durkheim to explain division of labour and suicide but it was Merton who used this concept 41 years after the publication of Durkheim's book Suicide to explain deviant behaviour in terms of functioning of social and cultural structures in the society (Merton, 1938:672-73). Anomie involves a breakdown in the cultural structure, occurring particularly when there is disjunction between cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accordance with them.

Anomie is the counterpart of the idea of social solidarity. Just as so-cial solidarity is a state of collective ideological integration, anomie is a state of confusion, insecurity and normlessness. According to Merton, the disjunction between goals and means and the consequent strain leads to the weakening of men's commitment to the culturally prescribed goals or institutionalized means, that is, to a state of anomie.

Merton maintains that people adapt themselves to this disjunction either by re-jecting the cultural goals or the institutionalized means or both. He gives four varieties of deviant behaviour. Merton, thus, locates the sources of strain not in the characteristics of individuals but in the culture and/or social structure.

He says, "the social problem arises not from people fail-ing to live up to the requirements of their social statuses but from the faulty organization of these statuses into a reasonably coherent social system" (Merton and Nisbet, 1971:823). However, Merton's theory is incomplete and inadequate. All social problems cannot be perceived as the result of the responses to strains or mode of adaptation and adjustment.