

## **SOC 201: Classical Sociological Theory**

### **Unit-3: European and American Phenomenological theory in Sociology:**

#### **(a) The Chicago School: G.H. Mead and Symbolic Interactionism;**

Mead is the most important thinker in the history of symbolic interactionism and his book "Mind, Self and Society" is the most important single work in that tradition. The names of William James, C.H.Cooley and John Dewey figure prominently in the development of interactionism, but Mead brought their related concepts together into a coherent theoretical perspective that linked the emergence of the mind, the social self and the structure of society to the process of social interaction. Mead always gives priority to the social world in understanding social experience. To Mead, the social whole precedes the individual mind both logically and temporally. He maintains that the social group comes first and it leads to the development of self-conscious mental states. Mead considers the act to be the most 'primitive unit' in his theory. In analysing the act, Mead comes closest to the behaviorist's approach and focuses on stimulus and response.

Mead identified four basic stages of act which are dialectically interrelated.:

- 1) Impulse- The actor's reaction to stimulation.
- 2) Perception-The actor searches for, and reacts to, stimuli that relate to the impulse.
- 3) Manipulation-The actor takes action with regard of the object.
- 4) Consummation-Taking action to satisfy the original impulse.

Mead's focus is on the development of the "self." Mead traces the genesis of the self through the play and game stages of childhood. The self has two phases-the "I," which is the unpredictable and creative aspect of the self, and the "me," which is the organized set of attitudes of others assumed by the actor. Mead is considered to be one of the originators of the field of symbolic interactionism.

#### **Gestures**

While the act involves only one person, social act involves two or more persons. The gesture is, in Mead's view, the basic mechanism in the social act. As he defines them, "gestures are movements of the first organism which act as the first stimuli calling forth the (socially) appropriate responses of the second organism".

**Significant symbol:** A significant symbol is a kind of gesture that only humans can make. Gestures become significant symbols when they arouse

in the individual who is making them the same kind of response (it need not be identical) they are supposed to elicit from those to whom the gestures are addressed. Only when we have significant symbols can we truly have communication.

Significant symbols also make possible symbolic interactionism. That is people can interact with one another not just through gestures but also through significant symbols.

### **Mind, self and society:**

Mind is not defined by Mead as a process and not a thing, as an inner conversation with one's self, is not found within the individual, it is not intracranial but is a social phenomena. Mead also looks at mind in pragmatic way. That is, the mind involves thought processes oriented towards problem solving. The real world is rife with problems and it is the function of the mind to try to solve those problems and permit people to operate more effectively in the world.

Much of Mead's thinking in general, and especially on the mind involves his ideas on the critically important concept of the SELF. The self arises with development and through social activity and social relationship. The self is dialectically related to mind. On the one hand, Mead argues that the body is not a self and becomes a self only when a mind has developed. On the other hand, the self, along with its reflexiveness, is essential to the development of mind. It is impossible to separate mind and self, because the self is a mental process. The general mechanism for the development of the self is reflexivity, or the ability to put ourselves unconsciously into other's places and to act as they act.

**Play stage:** It is the first stage. During this stage, the children learn to take attitude of particular others to themselves. However, they lack a more general and organized sense of themselves.

**Game stage:** It is the next stage in which the self develops in full sense. In the game stage, the child must take the role of everyone else involved in the game.

The game stage yields one of Mead's best known concepts, generalized others, which represents the attitude of entire community. Taking the role of generalized others allows for the possibility of abstract thinking and objectivity.

Mead termed this process of using symbols or language covertly imaginative rehearsal revealing his conception of mind as a process rather than as a structure. Much of Mead's analysis focuses not so much on the mind of nature organisms but on how this capacity first develops in individuals. Unless mind emerges in infants, neither society nor self can exist. In

accordance with principles of behaviourism, Darwinism and Pragmatism, Mead stressed that mind arises out of a selective process in which an infant's initially wide repertoire of random gestures are narrowed as some gestures bring favourable reactions from those upon whom the infant is dependent for survival. With this development, gestures now denote the same objects and carry dispositions for all the parties to an interaction. Gestures that have such common meanings are termed by Mead Conventional Gestures. By reading and then interpreting correctly conventional gestures, individuals are able to imaginatively rehearse alternative lines of action that will facilitate adjustment to others. Thus by being able to put oneself in another's place, or to take the role of the other to use Mead's concept, the covert rehearsal of action can take on a new level of efficiency since actors can better gauge the consequences of their actions for others and thereby increase the probability of cooperative interaction.

For Mead, the self is far more than an internalisation of components of social structure and culture. It is more centrally a social process and a process of self interaction in which the human actor indicates to himself matters that confront him in the situations in which he acts, and organises his action through his interpretation of such matters. Mead makes a distinction between gesture and symbol. Gesture is a social act that operates as a stimulus for the response of another organism engage in the same act. Symbol is a significant gesture which conveys a meaning to which only human beings can respond. Only man is truly using symbol. Symbol making animal, i.e, animal symbolism. Symbolic interaction as meaningful communication occurs primarily through the capacity of individuals to take the role of the actor or simply role taking.

Mead identified two phases of the self, which he labels the "I" and the "Me". The "I" is the immediate response of an individual to others. It is the incalculable, unpredictable and creative aspect of the self. "Me" is the "organized set of attitudes of other which one himself assumes". In other words, "Me" is the adoption of the generalized other.

Mead used the term society to mean the ongoing social processes that precedes both the mind and the self. Given its importance in shaping the mind and self, society is clearly of central importance to Mead. At another level, society to Mead represents the organized set of responses that are taken over by the individual in the form of the "Me". Thus, in this sense, individuals carry society around them, giving them the ability, through self criticism, to control themselves.