

Social survey and its characteristics

For the month of
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Survey, Its Meaning and Definition—The term ‘Survey’ has been derived from ‘vecir’ or ‘veoir’ and ‘sur’ or ‘sor’ which means ‘over’ and ‘see’ respectively. ‘Survey’, therefore, literally means ‘seeing over’ a particular thing from a high place. But the term has come to acquire specific connotation. The term has a particular connotation for social science and for other sciences as well. In natural sciences, the term ‘survey’ is generally used for ‘measurement’ and in social sciences it connotes ‘a technique of collection of data or information through interview, questionnaire etc.’ Some scholars are of the view that the term ‘survey’ can be used only when a direct contact is made between the investigator and the informant or the subject. But in reality it is not so. It includes the collection of data through any method say interview, questionnaire, library or books etc.

Definition of Social Survey—Various social thinkers, philosophers and scholars have defined the term ‘social survey’ in different ways. Given below are a few definitions :

(1) Social Survey as defined by *Shelly M. Harrison*, “The Social survey is a comparative undertaking which applies scientific method to the study and treatment of current related social problems and conditions having definite geographical limit and bearing, plus such a spreading of facts, conclusion and recommendations as will make them as far as possible the common knowledge of the community and a force for intelligent co-ordinate action.”

(2) Social survey as defined by *Leon, Festinger and Deniel Katz*, “Many research problems require systematic collection of data.....through the use of personal interviews or other data gathering devices. These steps are usually called survey.....”

(Research Methods in the Behavioural Sciences)

(3) Social survey as defined by *Bogardus*, “A Social survey is the collection of data concerning the living and working conditions, broadly speaking of the people in a given community”.

(4) According to *Herman M. Morse*, “The survey is in brief, simply a method of analysis in scientific and orderly form for defined

purpose of given social situation or problem or population.”

(The Social Survey in Towns and Country Areas)

(5) According to *P. V. Young*, “.....Social surveys are concerned with (a) the formulation of a constructive programme of reform and amelioration, (b) current of immediate conditions of a social pathological nature which have definite geographical limits and definite social implications and social significance, and these conditions can be measured and compared with situations which can be accepted as a model.”

(6) *Mark Abrams* has defined Social survey as given below :
“The Social survey is a process by which quantitative facts are collected about the social aspects of a community’s position and activities.”

(7) *C. M. Mosar* has defined Social survey as given below :
“The sociology should look upon survey as a way and supremely useful one of exploring the fields of collecting data around as well as directly on the subject of study, so that the problem is brought into focus and points worth studying are suggested.”

(8) According to *A. F. Wells*, “Social survey is a fact-finding study dealing chiefly with working class poverty and with the nature and problems of community.”

Chief Characteristics of Social Survey—From the definitions given above, we find that the social survey has the following characteristics and qualities :

- (1) It is a co-operative and comparative study which deals with the immediate problems of the society. Through survey, it is not possible to go into the past problems or conditions.
- (2) It has a limited geographical scope. It means that survey or study through survey is confined to limited geographically localised fields.
- (3) It has a purpose of social reform or bringing about changes in the social conditions. It aims at preparing a constructive programme of social research through which the immediate or the existing evils may be removed.
- (4) It is a scientific method which is applied when other methods do not prove to be very effective for the collection of the data. It is applied to a limited group and in the entire population or the universal as it is termed. It is a combination of the scientific as well as practical purposes.
- (5) The facts collected through survey may form the basis of further social research on the matter. They result in formulation of a new hypothesis requiring further elaboration.

But it does not mean that social survey is done with this very object only.

- (6) Social survey is a concrete and direct study. In this study there is a living and direct contact between the investigator and the subject or the informant.
- (7) The attitude of the social survey is pathological and remedial. In other words, it means that through this method attempt is made to remedy the abnormalities.

Social Survey and Social Research—Social survey and social research have identical aims in many respects. Both of them deal with social phenomenon and employ similar techniques. Their objects in many respects are also similar but in spite of this, there are certain basic differences between the two. Some of the social thinkers and researchers confuse social survey and social research as one but there is vital difference between the two. Social survey is sometimes employed as a method of social research. It would be worthwhile to study the difference between the two. It can further be illustrated with the help of the chart given below :

Social Survey

1. *Specific concern.* Social survey is concerned with specific problems, persons, situations etc. Through social survey specific problems like practice of remarriage amongst Hindus may be studied.
2. *Practical.* Social survey has a practical object. Its object is to fulfil immediate needs and use the available knowledge for the purpose. For example, if through social survey, it has been possible to gather knowledge about indebtedness amongst factory worker's it shall be used to find out a way to solve this difficulty or problem.
3. *Utilitarian and Reformist in nature.* Social survey is conducted with practical outlook. Its object, as we have already seen, is to fulfil immediate needs and use knowledge for a practical purpose.

Social Research

1. *General and abstract.* Social research is concerned with general and abstract problems such as relationship between education and delinquency.
2. *Long term objective.* Social research is not concerned with immediate needs. Its object is long term research or broad principles and perspective for development of theories, principles and procedures. Basically social research is theoretical in nature.
3. *Addition to knowledge.* Social research, as we have already seen, is basically theoretical. Its task is to formulate new theories, discover new techniques and study them.

Objectives of Social Survey—Social survey, as we have already seen, has an immediate and practical objective. Its main task is to bring about certain reforms and do away with social evils. It has certain definite and concrete objectives. These objectives are contained in the factors that motivate social survey. According to *C. A. Moser* :

“A survey may be occasioned simply by a need for administrative facts of some aspect of public life; or be designed to investigate some-cause effect relationship or to throw fresh light on some aspect of sociological theory.”

From the definition given above, we find that social survey is motivated by certain objectives. Broadly speaking, these objectives are as follows :

- (1) Supply of information about any problem or collection of data related to various aspects of the society;
- (2) Study of the social problems;
- (3) Description and explanation of a phenomenon;
- (4) Attainment of useful knowledge; and
- (5) Test of hypothesis; and
- (6) Knowledge of cause and effect relationship.

(1) Supply of information on any problem or collection of data related to various aspects of the society—Social survey, as we have already seen, is utilitarian and practical in nature. Its object is to collect data related to certain aspects of the society. It is natural that these aspects shall be social. The data are related to the study of the problem of the group or the society and on the basis of that knowledge real assessment of the situation is made. That is what *Moser* has said : “The purpose of many surveys is simply to provide someone with an information. That someone may be a government department wanting to know how much people spend on food, a business concern interested to find out what detergents people are using, a Research institute studying the housing of old-age pensioners.”

(2) Study of the social problems—Social survey also studies the problems, particularly the pathological problems that hamper the social life and the social set-up. These problems have to be studied properly so that the reforms in the society and the requirements of the society may be met. Through social survey we study almost all the important social problems, because of which the society is affected and influenced. Priority is given to important problems and the lesser ones are taken up afterwards.

(3) Description and explanation of phenomenon—Social survey also aims at description and explanation of social phenomenon. After having collected the data about certain aspects of the society, the

investigator is in a better position to describe and explain a phenomenon. According to *Moser* : “To a social scientist, a survey may equally have a purely descriptive purpose as a way of studying social conditions, relationships and behaviour. No description of phenomenon would be accurate and complete unless we come face to face with it. Surveys help the researcher to come in direct contact with phenomenon under study and thus provide him with all the details that he needs.”

After the description, there is need for explanation. It is not aimed at proving or disproving anything, but it aims at collection of data with the object of explanation. This is what *Moser* has said in the following lines :

“Many enquiries are aimed at to explain rather than to describe. Their definition may be theoretical to test some hypothesis suggested by sociological theory or severely practical, to assist the influence of various factors which can be manipulated by public action upon some phenomenon but which ever be the case, the purpose is to explain the relationship between a number of variables.”

(4) Attainment of useful knowledge—Social survey is aimed at collection of useful knowledge about the problem. This is done with the object of making practical use of the knowledge collected. If solution of certain problem has to be found, useful knowledge has to be collected so that the solution may be possible. This can be done only through social survey.

(5) Test of hypothesis—Generally a survey is undertaken with the object of fulfilling certain objectives. This is why there is always a hypothesis about which we require specific information. This information is collected with the object of testing the hypothesis. Hypothesis can be proved or disproved only by collecting relevant data. A survey may be general or specific, academic or utilitarian, but it has to be based on certain hypothesis, whose veracity is tested on the basis of the collection of data. Social survey, therefore, is considered a useful mode of testing a hypothesis.

(6) Knowledge of cause and effect relationship—Every hypothesis is aimed at verification of certain theories that prove the relationship between certain causes and their effects. If we want to study the truancy amongst the children of the lower income group, we have to collect data in this regard and test the hypothesis that ‘truancy is very much guided by economic factors’. Then we have also to acquire knowledge about the cause and effect relationship. It means that bad economic conditions lead to truancy amongst boys and in order to study it, we have to acquire knowledge about cause and effect.

Subject-matter of Social Survey—Social survey is very important method of social sciences. It is used for various jobs. In social

survey, the data about the problem under study are gathered. It means that social survey has some subject-matter to deal with. Subject matter of the social survey depends upon the nature of the information gathered. Its subject-matter may be divided under the following heads :

(1) Demographic characteristics—In social surveys, the demographic characteristics are the characteristics of the population that form social group or a family and other social institutions are studied. In this subject-matter, family composition, marital status, age, fertility etc. are studied.

(2) Social environment—Under this class of the subject-matter, all those socio-economic factors that influence the life of the people are studied. Social environment includes home conditions, social conditions, vocations and occupations, cleanliness, sanitation etc. These socio-economic factors condition the actions or social action. If we want to study the human actions or the actions of the group, we have to know the social environments that influence the action of people. If we want to study the problem of truancy of delinquency, we have to gain full knowledge about social environment in which the individuals live and act.

(3) Social activities of the members of the society or community—In social survey the behaviour, the activities and other actions of the members of the community or society are studied. These activities include habits, general tendencies, standards of everyday behaviour, use of leisure, means of recreation, expenditure pattern, social mobility, method of exercising franchise etc.

(4) Opinion and attitudes—Under this head of the subject-matter of social studies, opinion and attitudes of the people towards various social economic factors and motives are studied. On the basis of this knowledge, it is possible to ask questions and acquire proper information. Study of opinions and attitudes helps us to know the general level of the knowledge of a class of people. This class of subject-matter also includes attitudes of the members in regard to social, economic or political incidents or events or institution or personality. This motive also determines particular type of behaviour.

Other Categories of Subject-matter—Apart from the subject-matters enumerated above, surveys may be undertaken to collect data about any other type of socio-economic, political or psychological field or problem. The data in regard to these problems are not readily available and so the method of social survey is resorted to do that, as a result of direct contact with the respondents it may be collected.