

# Weakening of 'Collective Conscience' in our Contemporary Social Life: Cases of Unrest and Anarchy in Public Institutions

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**ABSTRACT:** The death centenary of Emile Durkheim has been elapsed rather unnoticed and silently in 2017. As we all know that he was a great social philosopher and on many counts whose works have profoundly influenced our anthropological and sociological thinking/ imagination. Durkheim's whole gamut of work came up in a big way particularly in offering a number of valuable concepts, of which 'collective conscience' is a significant one. Conceptually it refers to the totality of cognitive, moral and religious elements which comprise the consciousness and/ or conscience of the social groups in the society. Now after a century of Durkheim's death there is a need to re-examine his concept of 'social conscience' in the light of our present day's experiences and encounters with some alarming social facts, which certainly indicate the fast diminishing 'collective consciousness' and near break down of 'organic solidarity' in our social life, and what precisely the present paper intends to share.

## INTRODUCTION

By using the classic works of Emile Durkheim as a theoretical platform, the present paper aims to discuss some social facts which may be identified as an indication of diminishing 'collective conscience' in our society. Considering 'social solidarity' as the feeling of reciprocal sympathy and responsibility among members of a group which promotes mutual support, we, in recent years, envisaged some counter tendencies towards a near break-down of 'organic solidarity' in several spheres of our everyday life. That has been basically emanated from mutual distrust and conflicting social interest. Such a contrasting development is gradually pushing the society towards a state of so called 'anomie', and which Durkheim identified as a social condition of 'normlessness' or the degradation of the normative structure of a given society. In such a state, individuals are left without

moral guidance in the pursuit of their goals. Therefore, in the contemporary Indian society, the major challenge is how to maintain a minimum of 'collective conscience'? The apprehension is, in absence of that, in future, it may lead to acute social disintegration in our society.

## COLLECTIVE CONSCIENCE: THE CONCEPT

Durkheim's central concept of 'collective conscience' of society is intimately associated with his concept of 'division of labour.' He was in view that a society wide collective conscience can only hold a segmental society together, a more differentiated society must be held together by a more differentiated consciousness whose focus would be occupational groups and the specialized norms issuing for them. With the coming of enlightenment, the collective conscience waned, became less extensive and weaker in its grips on the individual.

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Thus, the growth of individualization in Durkheim's view undermined the collective conscience. Such a transformation could be well observed in the transition to 'organic solidarity' and in the replacement of 'repressive' by 'restitutive' laws. Modern societies, Durkheim claimed, required the development of organic solidarity, in which beliefs and values emphasized individuality, and the differentiation of activities in institutions. Individuality here referred to a person's regular capacity for thinking and acting. To Durkheim individuality was part of modern society's collective consciousness.

A complex division of labour based on occupational specialization, diversification and cooperation accompanied the emergence of the specialized institutions where people performed different work activities or occupational roles in society in line of their respective talents. Durkheim viewed it in more positive terms and as a potential source of social cohesion capable to building individuals together through the performance of their specialized and independent work roles. He consequently saw 'morality' as a collective social fact. Rules of moral conduct, according to Durkheim, existed outside individuals and transcended personal likes and dislikes by being directed towards others in line with society's ideals and values concerning the common good. In this context, the function of morality is to bring about cohesion in society and inculcate love and sympathy among its members. Durkheim's conception of social origins of morality also provided a useful backdrop for introducing moral individualism as a solution to the problem of anomie.

According to Durkheim- for a society to exist, its actors have had to share some set of common values and sentiments, without which no society could survive for long. Collective conscience in this respect emphasized the primacy of society over the individuals and his or her dignity. It refers to a body of ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and practices shared by all members of a society and which determines the relations of individuals to one another and society. In particular, this is a society shared system of belief and values, which shapes and directs human behaviour. Durkheim stressed that even those systems with a highly developed organic solidarity still needed a common faith, a common collective conscience, if they were

not to disintegrate into heap of mutually antagonistic and self-seeking individuals.

Durkheim was in view that only if all members of a society were anchored to common sets of representations, to common assumptions about the world around them, could moral unity be assured. Without them, any society, whether primitive or modern, was bound to degenerate and decay. In such a case and particularly when social regulations break down, the controlling influence of society on individual propensities is no longer effective and individuals are left to their own devices. This state of condition Durkheim called 'anomie', a term that refers to a situation of relative normlessness in a whole society or in some of its component groups. It characterized an order in which individual desires are no longer regulated by common norms and where, as a consequence, individuals are left without any moral guidance in the pursuit of their goals. Durkheim thus conceived of anomie as the deregulation of the normative structure, that is, the failure of the collective moral order to restrain the overwhelming greed and unlimited aspirations on the part of the actors. Durkheim perceived so as he idealized social relations and treated them as relations of concord, solidarity, harmony, and cooperation.

The individual and society, Durkheim considered, were in relations of mutual dependence. The happiness and wellbeing of the individual, he suggested, depend on the state of society, and all the more so when social affairs were more regulated and consequently when individual's rights and freedom were guaranteed. In Durkheim's conception the state, which thinks and acts for all the rest of society, was the main agency fulfilling the function of 'collective mind' and defender of collective interests. In line with that he put forward the idea of special, particular moral codes regulating the behaviour of individuals as members of corresponding social groups, and developed the idea of the relativity of the moral requirements accepted in various professional circles.

#### DECLINING ORGANIC SOLIDARITY: THE CASES

In recent years we have noticed series of untoward incidences that perhaps reflect a kind of tendencies towards a near break down of 'organic solidarity' in certain areas of our institutional life. That

has been basically emanated from mutual distrust, immorality and conflicting social interests between antagonistic and self-seeking individuals. The following are a few cases in point.

At present, in our society, the faith in doctors itself is fast eroding and we can hardly deny it. For example, in West Bengal, we came across the incidences when mobs of angry families of patients had attacked private hospitals- like it happened in March, 2017 after a 16-year-old Saika Parvin died. That incident led the state government to introduce its own path-breaking 'Clinical Establishment Act 2017', to finally book erring private hospitals. "In Kolkata, we take it for granted that we'll be overcharged for everything," says a 17-year-old boy's father who had to pay nearly one lakh rupees for his son's appendix operation. In extreme cases, we hear about incensed families going in the rampage and we don't blame them at all. The private hospitals don't care that they are dealing with helpless sick people. Their whole idea is to squeeze them, dry of their money (Nayar, 2018). Thus the health has become a lucrative business and every other person has a horror story to share.

In another case three patients, including a two-and-a-half-year old girl, died on January 17, 2018 in three private hospitals in Kolkata city, triggering protest from relatives against medical negligence of these hospitals. Similarly, in February 17, 2018 violence rocked a city hospital located at E.M by pass after a group of angry relatives of a death patient alleged that the hospital authorities charged a hefty amount of fake medical bill around four lakh rupees showing the patient was alive for, two or three days in intensive care unit (ICU) and which was untrue. Two days later in another incident, family members of a 10-month old baby ransacked a private nursing home in Raiganj of North Dinajpur district, for alleged negligence after the child died undergoing treatment there. On January 23, 2018, protesting against the alleged delay an ambulance made just to shift a patient from the new hospital building to the old one, family members of a patient vandalized the super specialty hospital in Balurghat of South Dinajpur district in West Bengal. In the same month, on 15<sup>th</sup> relatives of a patient ransacked a private nursing home situated near the Alipurduar district hospital in North Bengal. They

destroyed the property and thrashed two staff of the nursing home alleging that the nursing staff has replaced their live new born baby with a dead one. More of a similar case, in December (2017) a live baby was declared dead in a Delhi based hospital was a clear indication of medical negligence and callousness. In all the above cases as occurred in the beginning of 2017, we noticed a kind of vandalism at health institutions against the charge of alleged unethical practices followed by the private and public hospitals at different scales. The victims and others as well, often go for rampage of the hospitals as they identify all such practices as 'immoral' on the part of the health service providers. The list of numerous 'unethical' and 'immoral' practices on the part of the hospital is too long for a recital here.

Like health sector, students' unrest has become a regular phenomenon in academic institutions. In recent years we noticed a tussle between the students (sometimes with their families) and the administration of the schools and colleges on diverse issues. Recently it had gone to an extreme when a rusticated student of 17 years of age of class eight of a private school in Haryana fired at principal and killed her in the spot with his father's licensed revolver on January 2017.

Vandalism at educational institutions spreading over from schools to universities is a common experience of today. In early January of 2017, students' agitations rocked the campus of Charuchandra College and Deshbandhu Girl's College in Kolkata as large number of students were barred from appearing in their final examination due to lack of required attendance. The agitated students allegedly ransacked the furniture and other properties of their colleges in protest. The principal of the college had to be escorted by the police out of college. In another case, a massive student unrest that began in January 27, 2018 continued to rock Calcutta University following a sharp dip in pass percentage in Part-I results at under graduate level, particularly in arts stream.

In October 2016, on the day prestigious Scottish Church College in Kolkata reopened and decided to suspend five students for their involvement in agitation that led to the shutting of the institute for five days, fresh unrest broke out at two other institutions. One of the 'trouble spots' in the city was

Acharya Jagadish Chandra College. In another incident some youth activists of a particular political party barged into Kolkata's premier Presidency University and damaged several parts of it, including the 100+ year old Beker laboratory of the physics department set by Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose in 1913. They also attacked several students and teachers in the university campus. Thus once while making comment on the consistent student unrest in Jadavpur University in Kolkata, West Bengal governor K.N.Tripathi, the then Chancellor of the same university as well, said with anguish that "The varsity is fast turning a 'centre of disturbance' and authorities should take stern action against it." Even the schools are not free from such vandalism and similar incidences. For instance, in early December of 2017, at the prominent Kolkata school where two teachers were arrested for sexually assaulting a four-year girl student, the agitated parents and their supporters clashed with the police in the school premises for a couple of day. The police had a hard time to tackle the angry mob to protect the property and the teachers of the school.

The above illustrations obviously make us anxious if we admit that 'The life of an institution depends not only on a distribution of rights and obligations but also on a bedrock of trust among its members' (Beteille, 2017). Within this particular framework Durkheim possibly developed his concept of 'social integration' that is the convergence of moral and mental elements in making social order. Any form of unrest on the part of its members out of mistrust might lead to the disruption in functioning of the important public institutions like hospitals, academic establishments and others. Durkheim's central concept of 'collective consciousness', in this respect particularly makes it clear that for a society to exist, its actors have had to share some set of common values and sentiments, without which no society could exist for long. Therefore, the rule is most likely a part of the common consciousness and where 'repressive' and 'restitutive' punishments are given for breach of social laws. Thus for instance, aimed at bringing about some kind of regulation to private health care sector, the Clinical Establishment Acts (CEA) as a central legislation was introduced in 2010. It has been adopted by some states, though there's still reluctance

about its provisions, making 'the testing of relationship between the law and social solidarity problematic' (Johnson *et al.*, 2017).

Unethical medical/ health care practices certainly go against the spirit of morality, the bedrock of collective conscience and particularly when the function of 'morality' is to bring about cohesion in society and inculcate love and sympathy among its members. Durkheim in this respect was in view that the obligation to act in accordance with moral rules comes from society not nature, as earlier enlightenment philosophers had supposed. He consequently identified morality as a collective social fact. Rules of moral conduct existed outside individuals and transcended personal likes and dislikes in line with society's ideals and values concerning the common good.

To Durkheim, occupational specialization is the core framework of 'division of labour' that creates pressures for mutual interdependence and increased willingness to accept the morality of mutual obligation. Without them any society is bound to disintegrate and decay. On the whole, Durkheim idealized social relations as relations of social solidarity and concord. The happiness and well-being of the individual, he suggested, dependent on the state of society, and all the more so when social affairs were more regulated and consequently when individual's rights and freedom were guaranteed. Against this formulation, we perhaps need to examine the contemporary unrests in academic and health care institutions in our society that counter the very spirit of 'collective conscience' and defy the process of convergence of moral and mental elements in maintaining social order. In fact, morality is a product of social order, and the punishment of deviance is a repercussion offered to the collective conscience. Thus following Durkheim, Smith uses *the test of violation* of rule of social behaviour: where the average member of society reacts with *outrage*, the rule is most likely part of common consciousness (Smith, 2014).

## CONCLUSIONS

In the individualistic modern society, the major problem is how to maintain that minimum of 'collective conscience' and without which organic solidarity would lead to social disintegration. Indeed, Durkheim

believed that the division of labour was not merely an economic phenomenon but a key potential source of social solidarity. The task of functional analysis is thus to clarify how institutions and other social phenomena constitute to the maintenance of the social whole, particularly when society is *sui generis*, and not simply an assemblage of individuals. So the individuals and society, as Durkheim perceived, were in relation of mutual dependence. Thus he argued that although individual autonomy was a necessary feature of the modern world, this needed to be balanced with organic solidarity that tempered egoism with altruism so on to individual wellbeing and social cohesion (Johnson *et al.*, 2017).

Durkheim considered 'anomie' from the aspect of social structure, explaining it by lack of coordination of social function from the growth and development of society. He also conceived of 'anomie' as a social condition of normlessness or the deregulation of the normative structure, that is, the failure of the collective moral order to restrain the overwhelming ambition, greed and unlimited aspirations. Because the growth of individualism albeit moral individualism undermined the 'collective conscience'.

Our recent experiences on unrest and anarchy in public institutions, particularly in health and academic establishments, are perhaps mere reflections of how the 'collective conscience' is getting weaker in its grip over the society. As we could hardly deny that any form of unethical and immoral practices at institutional level goes against the spirit of collective conscience. Because, according to Durkheim, the

function of morality is to bring about cohesion in society and inculcate love and sympathy among its members. Against this particular frame of reference, he developed the concept of 'social integration' that helped in maintaining social order. The diminishing state of collective conscience in our contemporary Indian society needs to be judged accordingly.

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