b. Positivism and its Critique
Syllabus

2. Sociology as Science:

Science, scientific method and critique
Major theoretical strands of research methodology.

Positivism and its critique
Fact value and objectivity
Non-positivist methodologies
Positivism

Aims at understanding the world as cause and effect relations that can be observed.

Draws from -

Empiricism (what is seen or observable)
Inductivism (supremacy of facts)
Naturalism (influence of external environment on actions)
Positivism

Positivism has influence of enlightenment ideologies

**Saint Simon** – Sociology as **Social Physics**
Advocated **Organic Analogy** to study Society

**Auguste Comte** - introduced positivism in Sociology
(Sociological Positivism- objects are real not by material presence but in terms of their effects also)

Sociology to be studied using methodologies like
Reductional Analysis, Causal Analysis, Comparative Analysis and Generalisations
Studying Socio as a Natural Science

**Book** – Course in Positive Philosophy, System of Positive Polity
Emile Durkheim
Positivism enriched by concept of social facts.
Even recording things which are not directly observable (like Customs, Belief Systems) but affect humans from outside. Used in DOL, Religion, Suicide.

Merton
Used in his study of Reference Group Behaviour. Collected data on American Soldiers to show Relative Deprivation.

Karl Marx
His works used data from history. He is a positivist yet not a positivist (While discussing Capitalism – positivist, Exploitation – Revolutionary, Communism – Romantic Philosopher)
Elements of positivism can be summarised as

1) Study of **observable** phenomena and collecting information for the same
   **Rejecting the study of internal side**

2) Use of **scientific methods** initially supposed to be similar to Natural Sciences
   But later more specific methods devised
   Example – **Durkheim’s** theory of suicide classical exhibition of positivist methodology conclusions drawn using multivariate analysis
   Also, Durkheim – Use of data on Suicide Rates, Religious membership

3) Stress on **Universal Theories**

4) Creation of **testable** knowledge, i.e., **reliability**

5) Emphasising absolute **objectivity**, **total value freedom**.
Criticism

Obsession for positivism has been lost but it provided initial motivation for sociology to establish.

Various problems

1) Interpretative School
   Weber, Dilthey
   Not possible to study human behavior using methods of natural sciences.

2) Sociology should be concerned with **SU of OR** (Subjective Understanding of Objective Reality)

3) Post Modernists
   Derrida, Foucault
   Reality can be studied in many ways.

4) Interactionist
   Mead, Cooley, Blumer
   Actions and **Interactions** result in Social Actions
5) Phenomenologist
Peter Berger, Schutz
Generalisations not possible.
Positivism is not concerned with Sociology but is concerned with making
Science out of Sociology
Social realities are made, dismantled and remade

6) Ethnomethodologists
Garfinkel
Reality be studied from People’s perspective and not Researcher’s perspective

7) Positivists themselves *divided* between use of Inductivism or deductivism
Criticism

8) Paul Feyerabend
Gave the idea of anti-methodology.

9) Alvin Gouldner
Reflexive Sociology
(individual reflects on his/her own actions)

10) Anthony Giddens
Theory of Structuration

11) RK Merton
Over emphasizing Universal theories
Instead use Middle-Ranged theories
Criticism

12) Gunnar Myrdal
Complete objectivity not desirable.

13) Intestability of various positivist theories. Like Parsons

14) Jurgen Habermas
Since humans study humans, thus, complete separation of facts and values not possible.

15) Max Horkheimer
Positivism is engaged in ‘objective anarchism’, an obsession to study everything objectively.