Weekly Question Discussion
(Sociology)
(Chapter-3 Paper-1)
Phenomenological perspectives in sociology reject many of the assumptions of positivism. Comment.

Answer

Structure

- What is Positivism?
- Its assumptions
- What is Phenomenology?
- Its aspects
- Rejection of positivism by phenomenologists
- Conclusion

What is Positivism?

- Auguste Comte introduced positivism in Sociology.
- (Sociological Positivism- objects are real not by material presence but in terms of their effects also).
- To him, positivism was a philosophy of science, a framework for understanding history, a source of morality, and a solution to the social and political problems of his day.
- Positivism aims at understanding the world as cause and effect relations that can be observed. It draws from –
  - Empiricism (what is seen or observable)
  - Inductivism (supremacy of facts)
  - Naturalism (influence of external environment on actions)
- Positivism is based upon an empiricist rejection of value judgements and argues that science must be confined to the “is” rather than the “ought.”
- Positivism can be traced back to the empiricism of Hume, but in the nineteenth century it was developed by Comte (1798–1857) who sought to integrate all sciences into an overarching system of what he called ‘positive philosophy’.
- A positivist perspective is based on assumptions that the scientist, or social scientist in this case, is capable of suppressing his or her own views, values and experiences so effectively that objectivity can be achieved.

Assumptions of Positivism

- Belief in science.
- Emphasis on observable ‘facts’
- The principles of positivism postulated that researchers could study reality. The positivist paradigm asserted that reality was ordered, rational, and logical.
- Consequently, positivists assumed objectivity measured knowledge and was independent of human interaction. It assumed that the behavior of man, like the behavior of matter, can be objectively measured.
- Furthermore, quantitative research negated human subjectivity through strictly controlled collection and data
analysis methods.

- It argues that factors which are not directly observable, such as meanings, feelings and purposes, are not particularly important and can be misleading.

What is Phenomenology?

- Phenomenology is a research approach aimed at the study of the variability of human experience of social phenomenon. A key concern of the phenomenologist is to capture a subject’s immediate pre-reflexive experience of a phenomenon that is before it is conceptualized, theorized, categorized, or reflected upon.

- Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German mathematician, founded the philosophical movement of phenomenology. Husserl believed that phenomenology suspended all suppositions, was related to consciousness, and was based on the meaning of the individual’s experience.

- Notable Phenomenologists – Peter Berger, Schutz

Aspects

- The objective of phenomenology is to describe the barest contents of human experience, “the things themselves.” The body is the access to the world and the means by which experience occurs. Lived experience is layered with meanings, and description in phenomenology aims to peel away the layers.

- Phenomenology can provide social researchers with a deeper understanding of the meaning of social phenomena. It can relate the meaning of, say, ‘desires’ to a larger ‘totality of involvements.’

- Phenomenology is required to fully explicate the concepts which the positivists take for granted in order to measure them.

Rejection of positivism by phenomenologists

- The naturalistic paradigm, the countermovement of the positivist paradigm, presumed that reality was not fixed but based on individual and subjective realities. The philosophy of phenomenology allied closely with the naturalistic paradigm.

- Phenomenologists assumed that knowledge was achieved through interactions between researchers and participants. Therefore, phenomenological research was considered subjective, inductive, and dynamic.

- Phenomenology will be seen to play the role of constantly modifying the ‘discoveries’ of positivism:
  - According to Edmund Husserl, objectivity or mind is never value-free or disembodied. All objectivity is value-laden or occurs as worldly, social, cultural. This view contrasts with the positivist notion that objectivity is the sole reality, and value-free.
  - Further, Husserl believed in mind-body continuum, hence rejecting two extremes: thinking alone or objectivism, and mere embodiment or subjectivism.
  - Phenomenologists argue that the subject matter of the social and natural sciences is fundamentally different. As a result, the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences are inappropriate to the study of man.

- While natural sciences deal with matter and to understand and explain the behaviour of matter, it is sufficient to observe it from the outside.

- Unlike matter, man has consciousness- thoughts, feelings, meanings, intentions and an awareness of being. Man cannot simply observe action from the outside and impose an external logic upon it. He must interpret the internal logic which directs the actions of the actor.

- A lot of sociologists argue that the positivist approach tends to portray man as a passive responder to external
stimuli rather than an active creator of his own society. Man is pictured as reacting to the various forces and pressures, to economic infrastructures and the requirements of social systems.

- Peter Berger argues that society has often been viewed as a puppet theatre with its members portrayed as ‘little puppets jumping about on the ends of their invisible strings, cheerfully acting out the parts that have been assigned to them.’

- However, from a phenomenological perspective man does not merely react and respond to an external society, he is not simply acted upon, he acts. In his interaction with others he creates his own meanings and constructs his own reality and therefore directs his own actions.

- The phenomenologists attack an ontological basis which the positivists do not believe exists.

- Phenomenologists claim that acceptance of the basis of their theories entails rejection of causal explanation.

- Alfred Schutz comes from the perspective of applied phenomenology. He considers sociology as the study of “lived history,” or human institutions within which we find chronological or day to day history. He points out that human beings see, hear, and move within value parameters. Social structures comprise “lived history,” and are the context within which “chronological history” makes sense.

**Conclusion**

- Phenomenology might be able to teach us general truths about the social structure, but positivism has the advantage of giving us precise information when we need it most, and, even phenomenology can benefit from the positivist method.

- Finally, both models take similar approaches to their description of the nature of the progress. It is by a continual emancipation from prejudice or falsehood that progress takes place.