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B.A (Part II) Sociology (Hons.)

Theories of the Crowd Behaviour

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Gustave Le Bon

According to Le Bon men undergo a radical transformation in a crowd. The primitive irrational elements emerge and man loses his self-control and becomes a savage. Thus, belonging to a crowd makes a person lose his “conscious personality”. People, irrespective of their intelligence, character and occupation feel, think and act in the way in which the rest of the people in the group do.

He postulated the concept of “collective mind” to explain this transformation of man in a crowd. The members of a crowd are intellectually inferior and are easily swayed by images and slogans of the leader. They become capable of violent actions since the normal restraints are cast off and they become highly emotional.

Sigmund Freud

Freud said that the unity of the crowd is due to the libidinal ties. The leader plays the crucial role. There is affection between the leader and the followers. As a result of this there is identification and each member renounces his own super-ego and follows the leader.

All the members of the crowd behave as if they are under the hypnotic influence of the leader losing their respective individualities. Because the leader is the common ideal for all the members, each member of the group also identifies himself with the other members. So the unity in the group arises

out of these two sets of identifications. Violence becomes possible because each person is no longer checked by his own super-ego.

William McDougall

McDougall's theory of the behaviour of crowd is very similar to Le Bon's. He described the behaviour of the crowd as 'excessively emotional, impulsive, fickle, inconsistent, irresolute and extreme in action, displaying only the coarser emotions and the less refined sentiments; extremely suggestible, careless in deliberation, hasty in judgment, incapable of any but the simpler and imperfect forms of reasoning, easily swayed and led, lacking in self-consciousness and devoid of self-respect and of sense of responsibility. Hence, its behaviour is like that of an unruly child or it is like a wild beast.

He talks about the two central phenomena of crowd behaviour, namely, the intensification of emotion in a crowd and the lowering of intellectual level. He says, the individual under the influence of emotion loses the power of criticism and slips into the same emotion. The collective emotion becomes intensified by mutual interaction. The intensification of emotion and unpreparedness for opposing the authority of the crowd, in their turn, inhibit intellectual processes and the lowering of intellectual level in a crowd.

F. H. Allport

Allport explained crowd behaviour through the principle of social facilitation. According to this principle, a common stimulus prepares two individuals for the same response and when they are so prepared, the sight of one making that response releases and heightens that response in the other.

Ralph H. Turner

Turner formulated the “emergent norm” theory. While the theories of Le Bon, Freud and others are based on the structure of personality and the manner in which the individual is changed by the crowd, Turner employs the concepts derived from the study of small groups. Studies have clearly shown how when a group of people interact freely among themselves, they develop some common norms.

The emergent norm theory holds that the homogeneity of the crowd arises out of the interaction of members and the emergence of norms. The members behave according to these new norms and inhi-bit contrary behaviour. Thus, a member of the crowd behaves in the given way because he is mechanically infected by group emotion. Thus, this theory dispenses with the “contagion” hypothesis of crowd behaviour.

Thank You!

