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# UNIT 5 UNDERSTANDING SOURCES OF CONFLICT

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Conflict is a relationship between two or more individuals and groups who have or think that they have incompatible goals and needs. The incompatibility may thus be real or perceived and may be over material and/or symbolic resources. Most people perceive conflict as a negative term and ascribe negative connotations to it. However, inherently conflict is neither negative nor positive. Some of its aspects may be either positive or negative.

Conflict has positive aspects when it directs attention to the injustices that need to be addressed, when it promotes much needed change in organisations and systems, and especially when it leads to creative problem solving. The negative aspects of conflict are the destructive behaviour (violence leading to loss of life and property), the pain and trauma that is a result of the violence, and the wastage of resources that would have been

better spent on creative activities. Therefore it is the negative aspect of conflict that can and should be avoided but conflict *per se* is a fact of life, inevitable, natural, unavoidable and often creative. Gandhi too saw conflict as both positive and desirable. Therefore, it is better to work on the resolution of conflict rather than avoid it or keep suffering as a result of it. To facilitate conflict resolution, the first and foremost important step is to understand and analyse the causes and sources of conflict.

### **Aims and Objectives**

After going through this Unit, you will understand:

- The causes of conflict;
- Appreciate the debate on whether conflict is intrinsic to human beings or it is a product of socio-cultural conditions; and
- And identify the specific sources of conflict.

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## **5.2 CAUSES OF CONFLICT**

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There are different ways of examining the nature of a conflict and identifying the factors that give rise to it. Even though one precipitating event may lead to an open confrontation, most conflicts arise from a complex and multiple set of factors that may include the history shared by people across the divide, the social, political, economic and cultural dynamics, the nature of the issues at stake etc. Thus a distinction needs to be made between

1. The proximate or immediate causes
2. The underlying causes

### **5.2.1 Proximate Causes**

Proximate causes are those events, which may trigger violence for example, the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria in June 1914, which was the immediate cause of the beginning of the First World War.

### **5.2.2 Underlying Causes**

Underlying causes are the fundamental and long-term causes, which create conditions in which immediate triggers of conflict occur. The immediate and underlying causes are interconnected but in conflict resolution more attention needs to be paid to identifying the underlying and root causes if we want to work towards sustainable peace. Theoretical explanations of the underlying causes of conflict focus on either the human agency or the social structural conditions. Theories under each of these categories are a reflection of the 'nature versus nurture' debate: whether human beings are primarily affected by genes or by social interactions.

#### **5.3.2.1 Human Nature and Conflict**

Theories focusing on the agency-based explanation seek to answer questions such as is conflict inherent in human beings? Are human beings genetically programmed for violence? These theories locate the causes of conflict at the level of the individual or collective agency, based on human behaviour.

- i. One set of theories argues that aggressive behaviour is innate and biologically programmed in the human species. Thomas Hobbes believed that human beings are selfish by nature and “that humanity is characterized by careless, and indeed relentless, thirst for power.” Edmund Burke “saw humanity as inherently conflictual.” Sigmund Freud contends that aggression “is carried out in the name of self-preservation, and is inherent to humans.” Aggression helps human beings to protect and enhance their existence. However, Gandhi was in a different league altogether as he believed in the essential goodness of human beings. He had a very positive view of human nature and believed that humans could respond to “the call of the spirit” and rise above selfishness and violence.
- ii. Another explanation of the agency-based theory is psychoanalytical. This theory argues that early differentiation among human beings between ‘self’ and ‘other’ manifests itself in a deep psychological need for enemies.
- iii. The socio-psychological perspective focuses on processes of group formation and differentiation, mainly the role that images, (mis) perceptions, stereotyping, and dehumanisation play in the decision-making, which leads to violent conflict.
- iv. The psycho-cultural viewpoint provides accounts of conflict behaviour in terms of culturally shared images and perceptions of the external world.

### **5.3.2.2 Society and Conflict**

Conflict occurs in human interactions that take place within the context of the family, the community and the society. When individuals or groups believe that the family/society does not meet their interests, they try to change the social and familial norms and structures by force, which often leads to situations of violent conflict. Thus socio-structural theories argue that aggression is not innate but its expression depends on factors external to the individual.

Structural theories lay emphasis on the organisation of society that creates the causes and conditions for conflict. Unjust social structures and institutions play a significant role in creating and perpetuating social conflicts. Social structures and institutions often favour some groups of people / communities and by extension disfavour others. This emerges as an important source of violent conflict.

- i. Albert Bandura argued that there are three primary sources of human aggression: familial settings, sub-cultural context and symbolic modeling.
  - a) Social learning takes place first and foremost in the family and human beings learn appropriate behaviour within family settings. Bandura argues that families that have conflicts all the time are most likely to have conflictual children. Thus violent families produce violent offspring. Additionally, American psychiatrist, James Gilligan, known for his work with some of the most “violent criminals” living in America’s prisons, put forth the theory that childhood abuse creates violent personalities. Gilligan pointed out that most of the “criminals” living in American prisons had had a brutal childhood- many had been beaten, sexually assaulted, prostituted or neglected to a life-threatening degree by their parents. He thus concluded that childhood abuse and neglect can create violent personalities that will then manifest violent behaviour in social institutions.

- b) Subcultures are another source of social learning leading to aggression. Bandura argues: “The highest rates of aggressive behaviour are found in environments where aggressive models abound and where aggressiveness is regarded as a highly valued attribute.” However, all people raised in violent environments may not be violent because “many people may simply aspire not to be violent.” Bandura does suggest, though, that there is a strong capacity to instruct a group in the ways of violence. He makes his point in suggesting that the military is an excellent example of making otherwise relatively non-violent persons violent.
  - c) Another major source of social learning is symbolic sources such as television. “Television transmits pictures of violence, impressions of violence and even the symbolic culture of violence. We learn how to cope with ‘reality’ through television, and are susceptible to its messages. This is especially true among the young of society.”
- ii. The non-fulfillment of basic human needs is another cause of conflict. John Burton propounded the basic human needs theory. Needs refer to basic human requirements for the continuation and propagation of life: material (food, shelter, health care, employment- freedom from want), cultural (right to religion, language) and social needs (respect, dignity and freedom from fear). The need for life to be perceived as being predictable and safe is extremely important. These needs are non-negotiable and universal and their satisfaction is essential for human development and social stability. These universal needs must be satisfied if protracted social conflicts are to be resolved. Thus the primary source of human behaviour is the satisfaction of human needs; however, these needs have to be satisfied within the social context. If the universal needs are not met in socially accepted ways, individuals/communities resort to violence in order to meet these needs.
  - iii. Gandhi had a need-based conception of society and conflict. In his view, conflict is the result of structural denial of human needs. The creation of new structures is necessary for the satisfaction of human needs. This would require a method of struggle that satisfies three conditions: destruction of need-denying structures, creation of need-satisfying structures and respecting the needs of the conflicting parties during the struggle. The Gandhian approach to conflict resolution, i.e., Satyagraha was an attempt to satisfy all three conditions. Thus satisfaction of needs was central to conflict resolution.
  - iv. An additional set of theories draw on critical social theory particularly the feminist and post-structuralist perspectives. These emphasise the central importance of social discourse- the language we use, the social practices we engage in- these generate exclusionist identities (us/them, insider/outsider).
  - v. Karl Marx located conflict in the economic structure. Marx’s theory of class conflict argues that social institutions and structures reflect the material reality of society. The economic structure (economic determinism) has dominated over politics in the development of human history (historical materialism). As long as capitalists control the means of production, they would also wield power over social structures, making them inherently unjust towards the working class giving rise to conflicts between the capitalists and the proletariat (working class).
  - vi. However, Antonio Gramsci, a neo-Marxist, rejected the excessive emphasis on economic determinism. He introduced the theory of “ideological hegemony”. This

theory takes into account not only the control of means of production by the ruling capitalist class, but it also encompasses a whole range of values, attitudes, beliefs, cultural norms and legal precepts which serve to justify the interests of the dominant class. Thus, it is the ideological hegemony of the ruling class that when challenged by the masses, gives rise to conflict.

- vii. Johan Galtung, in his theory of structural violence, asserts that violence is built into unequal, unjust and unrepresentative social structures. Social structures, systems and institutions deprive some people of their rights and the ability to satisfy their basic human needs; they discriminate between groups, communities and nations to the point of threatening lives and livelihoods and prevent human beings from realising their full potential.

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## **5.3 SOURCES OF CONFLICT**

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From the underlying causes, we now move to the specific sources of conflicts, sometimes also referred to as issues involved in a conflict or issues at stake in a conflict.

### **5.3.1 Information**

Lack of information, misinformation and different interpretations of information can lead to conflict. Disputants may not have sufficient information or even the same information about a given situation. In other instances, groups and individuals may interpret the same data or information in differing ways or they may assign different levels of importance to the same data. Control and manipulation of information is a major weapon in conflict situations.

### **5.3.2 Miscommunication**

Ineffective communication is another source of conflict. Even if there are no basic incompatibilities between groups and individuals, miscommunication and misunderstanding can lead to conflict. Moreover, stakeholders may have different perceptions about the facts in a situation and until they are clarified, there can be no resolution. Self-centredness, selective perception, emotional bias and prejudices lead to differing perceptions between the stakeholders of a conflict. Lack of skill in communicating one's viewpoint in a clear and respectful manner often results in confusion, hurt and anger, all of which fuel the conflict further. Whether the conflict has objective sources or has arisen due to perceptual or communication problems, the people involved experience it as very real.

### **5.3.3 Resources**

This relates to conflict over material resources such as land, money or objects, which are evidently identifiable and can be negotiated. Historically, disputes over access to and control of territory, material, economic and scarce natural resources have been one of the dominant sources of conflict. One major element in the colonial empire building of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century was the competition for resources and defence of national economic interests which were defined in territorial terms. Here each faction wanted to grab as much as it could; its behaviour and emotions were directed towards maximising gain. In extreme cases, disputants may resort to military action or the threat of it to gain or defend access to resources perceived as vital for survival, for example, the developed Western countries attach a great deal of importance to maintaining their access to oil supplies in the West Asian region and are prepared to undertake extreme measures to do so.

In the twenty-first century, demands for land, fresh water and other natural resources are growing rapidly due to increase in population as well as consumption. But these resources are limited and Gandhi had very aptly said, “Earth provides enough to satisfy every [person’s] need but not for every [person’s] greed.” Besides, environmental degradation has further complicated the situation and the consequences are being felt the world over. In India, the shortage of water has given rise to several conflicts at the local and regional level.

### **5.3.4 Relationships**

Relationships are an important facet of human life. Gandhi was in fact always keen to cooperate with the opponent to build relationships, which would form the basis for a sound post-conflict life. As human beings, we have personal (family) and social (community) and/or organisational (business) relationships. In these relationships, people have disagreements over a variety of issues, which is very normal. However, sometimes the interdependence created by these relationships introduces a destructive dimension to these differences, for example, a wife is repeatedly subjected to abuse and domestic violence but is unable to walk out of the relationship because (apart from other social and cultural pressures) she may be economically dependent on her husband, who is aware of this interdependence and uses it to his advantage.

### **5.3.5 Interests and Needs**

Non-fulfillment of interests and needs are a major source of conflict. The non-fulfillment of these needs may be either a reality or just a perception. In fact, important needs for identity, respect or participation are often at the heart of conflicts that ostensibly seem to be a contest for material things. Conflicts usually arise because of the denial of following needs:

- Unfulfilled needs for economic resources or the perception that economic resources are not distributed fairly;
- Unfulfilled needs for safety, respect and participation in social life or a perception of unjust relationships and humiliation; and
- Unfulfilled needs for identity, culture, religious values or a perception that these are threatened.

When the needs of individuals, communities and nations are denied in the above-mentioned areas, it leads to structural violence. Vertical structural violence can operate in the following arenas insulting the respective needs:

- Repression – political – the insulted need is freedom;
- Exploitation – economic – the insulted need is well-being; and
- Alienation – cultural – the insulted need is identity.

For Gandhi, exploitation was the essence of violence. He saw violence as anything that impeded individual self-realisation and that violence could be either direct or structural in nature. Dehumanisation is a case in point.

### **5.3.6 Structures**

Structures- both social and organisational- determine who has access to power and

resources, who has the authority to make decisions and who is afforded respect. Conflicts about or within structures often involve issues of justice and competing goals.

### 5.3.7 Power

Power can mean different things – legitimacy, authority, force, or the ability to coerce. It is a vital ingredient in conflict situations; conflicts either centre on the search for more power or a fear of losing the same. However, power is intangible; it cannot be counted. But power does not exist in a vacuum; it is present in, and based on, relationships. Besides, one should look at resources as a key area that determines the actual location of power or the need for power.

Power conflicts can occur between individuals, groups or nations, when one or both sides choose to take a power approach to the relationship and wish to maintain or maximise the amount of influence that they exert in the relationship and the social setting. It is impossible for one side to be stronger without the other being weaker, at least in terms of direct influence over each other. Thus, a power struggle ensues which usually ends in victory for one side and defeat for the other, or in a ‘stand-off’ with a continuing state of tension.

Power can be either hard (coercive) or soft (persuasive). Hard power consists of the ability to command and enforce while soft power comprises of the ability to bring about cooperation, provide legitimacy and inspire. In violent conflict situations, hard power dominates, as armies and militias grapple for victory. On the other hand, soft power is essential for peacemaking and peace-building. Power should necessarily be accompanied by accountability; otherwise it tends to give rise to more conflicts. Being accountable would mean finding ways to report to others and being open to be questioned by others.

Gandhi had a very different notion of power- one that is humane and constructive- and “that can transform and not destroy.” He was keenly aware of the difference between *power-over* and *power-with*, and his own conceptions of society and conflict were firmly rooted in the latter.

### 5.3.8 Governance

Governance relates to decisions that define expectations, grant power or verify performance. It is concerned with the way in which society is governed, the distribution of authority and resources within it, and the legitimacy of these in the eyes of the members of society. Governance, basically, is a process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented or (not implemented). In simple terms, ‘governance’ is what a ‘government’ does. Politics provides the means by which the governance process operates.

‘Good governance’ is an indeterminate term used in development literature to describe how public institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources in order to guarantee the realisation of human rights. According to the United Nations, good governance has eight characteristics: consensus-oriented, participatory, following Rule of Law, effective and efficient, accountable, transparent, responsive, equitable and inclusive.

Good governance is considered to be integral to economic growth, the eradication of poverty and hunger, and sustainable development. It makes violent conflict less likely. If governments reflect the values and satisfy the needs of those over whom they exercise authority, they will be legitimised. When the legitimacy is lacking or there is a doubt about

its existence, the demands for social change can result in political turmoil and social unrest. If these demands are suppressed or ignored, violent conflict may arise. In contemporary times, the major governance issues relate to greater autonomy (political, economic and/or cultural), representative forms of government and equitable distribution of resources.

### **5.3.9 Rights**

Denial or violation of rights and the struggle for elimination of these violations are at the heart of many conflicts. Civil and political rights are often called ‘first generation rights’ and include rights of the individual in society to life, liberty and freedom of opinion and expression. Gandhi had always stressed on the centrality of the individual and felt that society could not be built on a denial of individual freedom. Economic, social and cultural rights are known as ‘second generation rights’ that comprise of rights to basic necessities such as food, shelter, health and education. The ‘third generation rights’ refers to collective rights like those of minorities and marginalised groups. Human rights are thus necessary for individuals to lead a dignified life.

Some of the major Human Rights Conventions are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948; Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966; Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966; Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979; Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, 1984; Convention on Rights of the Child, 1989.

Rights may theoretically be guaranteed by the constitution of a state but in practice may not be accessible to the marginalised or they may be intimidated by powerful people from claiming their rights. Ultimately, the repeated denial of rights may lead to violent conflict. Thus while analysing conflicts, it is necessary to look at structural violence and explore the position and perception of stakeholders with regard to rights and freedoms.

### **5.3.10 Culture**

Culture is an important factor in social conflict. It is learnt from the family, community, school, and media; it is not something human beings are born with. Culture determines the way individuals and groups act, the manner in which they relate to others and the way they think about and perceive events happening around them. Thus it is necessary to understand the cultural contexts of the individuals and groups involved in a conflict especially in situations where the contending sides are from different cultures. In fact, Marc Ross argues that there is a ‘culture of conflict’, which he defines as “a society’s configuration of norms, practices and institutions that affect what people enter into disputes about, with whom they fight, how disputes evolve, and how they are likely to end.”

### **5.3.11 Ideology**

Ideology is mostly used in reference to the public world of politics. Political ideologies such as Fascism, Nazism, and Marxism involve a set of fundamental beliefs about economic organisation or governance of society. One of the most famous ideological conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the one between the Capitalist Bloc and the Communist Bloc popularly termed as the Cold War, which manifested in ways such as the formation of economic and military blocs, and proxy wars between client-states at the regional and local level. The Cold War ended with the disintegration of the former Soviet Union and withering away of the Communist Bloc.



### 5.3.12 Religion

Religion refers generally to the private world of spirituality. It is particularly relevant to conflict because it may contain strong claims to exclusivity; the faithful are considered to constitute distinct, exclusive communities. Besides, religious belief can become a motivation in political action, and can be used by leaders for selfish political ends or as means towards those ends. Moreover, scriptures have at various points in history been interpreted and misinterpreted to justify slavery, racism and women's subordination.

Conflict between religions has occurred throughout history but in the contemporary period some of the major religions of the world are witness to a surge in fundamentalist elements. Fundamentalists have attempted to extend their sphere of influence from places of worship to the state and the society as a whole leading to escalation of conflicts not only between religions but also within the moderate and extremist sections within religions as well as with the state and society at large.

However, religion need not always be a source of conflict; it can also be a resource for peace.

### 5.3.13 Identity

The oft-asked question of the Cold War era, 'what is your ideology' has been replaced in the post-Cold War era by the question 'who are you'. People are increasingly conscious of 'who they are' and asserting their cultural and social identity. They are realigning themselves on the basis of ancestry, religion, language, values and institutions, and are rejecting distant and alien rule. This is an indication of the growing importance of identity consciousness in the post-Cold War era.

Identity is used to describe a person's sense of self and the relation of the self to the world. It is a basic human need that provides meaning and a sense of security as well as predictability for the individual and the group within a given social context. Without a strong sense of "who we are" and how we can "be" and continue to exist and feel safe in our surroundings, our relationship of the self or group to the world is threatened.

Personal identity and dignity were very important to Gandhi. He argued that the loss of self-respect had to be avoided because without self-respect and inner security one cannot reach the road leading to self-realisation or start on the road to nonviolence.

There are multiple identities- as broad as 'woman' or 'man' or a member of collectives such as ethnic, religious, or racial groups or as narrow as a member of one particular family. Identities concern people's existential needs and values. They can be inclusive as well as exclusive; they can endure for generations or change with shifting situations (in response to threats, which may be either real or perceived, forcing people to adopt labels because identity markers such as ethnicity and religion may be exploited for selfish ends). Some identities are more important than others depending on how one perceives one's identity but also depending on place, times and circumstances. Some identities are nested within each other, usually compatibly, for example, an individual can identify with both Rajasthan (one's state) and India (one's country).

However, some identities may compete with each other, as in the case of former Yugoslavia. In the 1950s and 1960s of the former Yugoslavia, many people felt pride in having stood up to the Soviet Union in 1948 and creating a new economic system. But the scenario changed in the 1990s, when most people in the former Yugoslavia started

feeling that their identities as Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Muslims, or Bosnians were much more important than their Yugoslav identity. The process of disintegration of the former Yugoslavia into several small states (such as Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina) was precipitated apart from other reasons due to large-scale ethnic killings and ‘ethnic cleansing’.

With the rise in identity consciousness, religion, language and ethnicity are increasingly serving as faultlines for conflict. In contemporary times, ethnicity is seen as one of the most important elements of identity and the underlying cause of most ongoing conflicts. However, it must be clarified that many conflicts that are labeled as ‘ethnic’, suggesting that ethnicity is the cause. In reality ethnicity has been used there as a ‘method’ by which people have been mobilised in support of a particular leader or movement. This happens when a group or community first feels insecure or afraid and is then persuaded that a particular group or leader can offer them safety.

### **5.3.14 Values**

Values are dear to individuals and groups – these are the beliefs that shape their identity and faith perspectives that give meaning to their lives. Incompatibility in ways of life and ideologies such as preferences, principles and practices that people believe in can lead to value conflicts. When states, groups and individuals assert the rightness and superiority of their way of life and their political-economic system vis-à-vis other states, groups and individuals, values can then become a major component in such conflicts. Values are often seen as a part of one’s identity; and thus, challenge to values is often seen as a threat to identity, resulting in defensive reactions by individuals and groups since they assume that resolution of the conflict will require a change in values.

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## **5.4 SUMMARY**

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In conclusion, it can be said that violent conflict is not caused by biological factors alone but rather is a result of the interaction between biological, psychological and social determinants. Gandhi too saw conflict as built into social structures and not into people. There are several specific sources of conflict that appear in the polity, the society, the economy and the cultural life of modern human beings. Most modern conflicts do not involve just one source but a combination of sources and this is what makes them complex. Complex conflicts can be broken down into manageable parts by identifying and analysing the specific sources of conflict. Moreover, there can be overlap between the different issues involved in a conflict. Additionally, a conflict may involve several issues in differing degrees, which may change over time. The issues, which led to the origin of the conflict and its violent expression, may not necessarily be those that make a conflict an intractable one.

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## **5.5 TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

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1. What is the difference between proximate and underlying causes of conflict?
2. What is the ‘nature versus nurture’ debate? Elaborate.
3. Discuss some of the major theoretical expositions with regard to conflict being inherent in human beings.

4. 'Conflict is not intrinsic to human beings; its expression depends on factors external to the individual'. Elucidate.
5. What are some of the major sources of conflict in the contemporary world? Discuss one source in detail and give examples for the same.
6. What is governance? How does it become a source of conflict?
7. Define identity. How and why is it related to most contemporary conflicts?

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## **SUGGESTED READINGS**

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