

BASIC SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

All sciences have their technical terminologies, their own sets of concepts and professional words. Such terminologies are indispensable, for they reduce the vagueness, the ambiguity and the confusion.

Basic sociological Concepts are:

- **Society**

"Society may be regarded as the most general term referring to the whole complex of relations of man to his fellows."

Society is mainly defined in two angles:

1. In abstract terms, as a network of relationships between people or between groups.
2. In concrete terms, as a collection of people or an organisation of persons.

In abstract terms: If society is viewed as web of social relationships, it is distinct from physical entity which we can see and perceive through senses. Social relationships are invisible and abstract.

Society involves both likeness and difference. If people are all exactly alike, merely alike, their relationships would be limited. There would be little give-and-take and little reciprocity. If all men thought alike, felt alike, and acted alike, if they had the same standards and same interests, if they all accepted the same customs and echoed the same opinions without questioning and without variation, civilisation could never have advanced and culture would have remained rudimentary. Thus, society needs difference also for its existence and continuance. We can illustrate this point through the most familiar example of family. The family rests upon the biological differences between the sexes. There are natural differences of aptitude, of capacity, of interest. For they all involve relationships 'in which differences complement one another, in which exchange take place. Likeness and difference are logical opposites but for understanding likeness, comprehension of its relation to the other, is necessary.

Cooperation and conflict are universal elements in human life. Society is based on cooperation but because of internal differences, there is also conflict among its members.

Society provides a system of stratification of statuses and classes that each individual has a relatively stable and recognisable position in the social structure.

In concrete term: When society is viewed from the point of view of persons who constitute it, it takes the shape of 'a society' instead of society in general terms. A society is the largest number of human beings who interact to satisfy their social needs and who share a common culture. "A society may be defined as a network of interconnected major groups viewed as a unit and sharing a common culture".

- **Community**

In common parlance, the word 'community' is used for a collection of people who do related kinds of work, such as the "teachers community" or the "doctors community". It is also used to denote a collection of people who share something in common as the 'Hindu community' the 'Parsi community' or the 'Christian community, without necessarily living in a particular area. Sometimes, it is used to describe a supposedly coherent group, such as 'international community'. Such loose use of the word 'community' is always misleading and indicates just to amorphous mass.

Whereas in concrete term it is defined in two forms:

In organic conception: It places emphasis primarily on belongingness; close personal contacts and identity of interests as the chief characteristics of community.

In ecological conception: It is a collectivity the members which share a common territorial base of operations for daily activities. This geographical conception of community involves the idea of a definite and permanent occupation of a given territory. But community is not a mere geographical expression. The relations among the people resident within an area must be such as to constitute those people as a community. There must be some degree of mutuality, organisation and consensus, some interaction and communication.

Summarizing the ideas of different writers, the characteristics of community may be stated as under:

- a) A grouping of people.
- b) A delimited geographical area or locality (not much applicable to modern communities).
- c) A common culture and a social system which organises their activities.
- d) Consciousness among the members about their unity and a sense of belongingness (we feeling).
- e) Act collectively in an organised manner.
- f) A division of labour into specialised and interdependent functions.

The following three elements are relevant as a basis of a community. A community exists;

- (1) When a set of households is relatively concentrated in delimited geographical area;
- (2) Their residents exhibit a substantial degree of integrated social interaction; and
- (3) They have a sense of common membership, of belonging together, which is not based exclusively on ties of consanguinity.

Thus, the essence of community is a sense of common bond; the sharing of an identity, membership in a group, holding some things physical or spiritual, in common esteem, coupled with the acknowledgement of rights and obligations with reference to all others so identified.

- **Association**

There are three ways in which men may pursue their ends or interests:

- (1) Independently, each following his own way without thought of his fellows and their actions. But this is an unsocial way wherever one live together. Moreover, some interests cannot, be achieved independently.
- (2) They may seek them through conflict with one another. But this is opposed to the very existence of society.
- (3) They may pursue their ends in company, on some cooperative basis, so that each is in some degree and manner contributing to the ends of his fellows.

When individuals come together for realising some specific end(s), they are said to have formed an association.

Associations are deliberately formed groups such as political parties and trade unions, while institutions are system of norms, such as education or religion. When we consider something as an organised group, it is an association, but when we consider it as a form of procedure or a system of behaviour, it is an institution.

Association denotes membership, whereas institution denotes a mode or means of service.

While institution and association are separate concepts, they are not entirely detached from each other. If we create associations, we have to create rules and procedures also to run those associations. These rules and procedures are distinctively institution.

Institutions form the foundation of society and supply the basic prerequisites of group life: the reproduction and the socialisation of children (family); the affirmation of values and an approach to non-empirical questions (religion), the transmission of cultural heritage, knowledge, and skills from one generation to the next (education); the production and distribution of goods and services (economy); and social leadership and the protection of individuals from one another and from forces outside the society (politics). Besides these there are also many other important institutions, which perform various functions needed for the maintenance of society.

- **Social Structure**

Social structure is a term applied to the particular arrangement of interrelated institutions, agencies and social patterns as well as status and roles which each person assumes in the group.

On the basis of above definitions, the following characteristics of social structure may be delineated:

- Social structure is not monolithic whole but made up of parts and sub-parts. It is not mere sum of its parts but there is a definite arrangement between parts. These parts cannot be explained outside the structure.
- It is an abstract and intangible phenomenon.
- As individuals are units of associations and institutions, so these institutions and associations (groups) are the units of social structure.
- These institutions and associations are interrelated in a particular arrangement and this arrangement creates the pattern of social structure.
- It refers to the external aspect of society which is relatively stable as compared to the internal (functional) aspect of society.
- It is not static but dynamic yet there is not much change in its basic form. It is relatively permanent through time.
- There is a systematic and orderly relationship between parts which gives a special shape to its outer form.
- Statuses and roles along with norms and values that govern social roles form the main constituents in the formation of social structure.
- There is a functional unity among the units of structure.

- **Culture**

In general (widest sense) terms, a culture can be said to include all the human phenomena in a society that are not the products of biological inheritance. Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The characteristics are:

- It is shared by the members of a society;
- It is learned and acquired, not inborn or instinctive;

- c) Its elements are interrelated, constituting a complex whole;
- d) It is transmitted from generation to generation or historically derived;
- e) It is made or created;
- f) It is material and non-material both, whether it is something concrete like a chair, a fan or a car or abstract like a belief or superstition;
- g) It has adaptability;
- h) It is both super-individual and super-organic (its formation and continuity do not depend on any one individual); and
- i) It is composed of ethos (formal appearance of culture) and eidos (cognitive process of culture).

A culture is a system of behaviour shared by the members of a society.

- **Social Norms**

Norms are guidelines which direct our conduct in particular situation. They are similar to rules and regulations in being prescriptive, although they lack the formal status of rules.

These rules or social expectations (norms) specify how people should and should not behave in various situations.

Norms can be classified in many ways but the most important distinction, as stated earlier, is between prescriptive and proscriptive norms. A prescriptive norm is positive in form and spells out forms of behaviour which role-players are expected to follow. A proscriptive norm is one which directs a role-player to avoid or abstain from certain type of activity. The later tend to be more inflexible in that behaviour is defined as either compliant or deviant, whereas prescriptive norms involve behavioural degrees of conformity.

Social norms, in the sense of shared standards, have great power to motivate behaviour. Societies exist because through the internalisation of norms, human agents monitor their behaviour in anticipation of sanctions, i.e., reward and punishment from other social actors. Social norms perform the following main functions:

- a) They direct, regulate and control human behaviour. The process by which norms and other behavioural regulators are transformed into personality elements is called socialisation.
- b) They help in satisfying our social needs.
- c) They help in establishing social order by mitigating tensions and conflicts in society.
- d) They act as measuring scale to evaluate social behaviour.
- e) They act as ideals and objectives in certain situations.
- f) They help in predicting behaviour.

- **Social Sanctions**

All social norms are accompanied by social sanctions. Any system of social control depends on sanctions. Sanctions may be both positive and negative. In folk wisdom, it is known as the "carrot and the stick principle". When our actions meet normative expectations or conform to wider expectations, we are generally rewarded (or subject to a positive sanction); failure to meet such expectations leads to punishment

(punishing the various forms of deviance) known as negative sanction. Not all norms carry the same sanctions because not all norms are of equal importance in a culture. Rewards are explicit and definite expressions of group approval. The thing given as reward may be wholly immaterial. Penalties (punishments) are always coercive. They may vary in severity from death or violence against the person, imprisonment, deprivation of some sort, the infliction of pain, or mutilation, loss of liberty or civil privileges, social disapproval like avoidance, ostracism, jeering, or the use of unfriendly nicknames. There is a considerable variation in different societies that who is supposed to apply the sanctions. The list of possible sanctions in social interaction is huge, as is the range of their severity.

Sanctions can be informal, such as approving or disapproving glance or verbal abuse and formal such as a fine or reward given by an official body or some kind of legal restraint. Sanctions are there to reinforce both formal and informal social norms. Sanctions may also be divided into external and internal. External sanctions are those which are applied by others to the actor or whose acts they disapprove, whereas internal sanctions are applied by the actor to himself. A person who has done wrong in other's eyes has also done wrong in his own and experiences accordingly unpleasant feeling of guilt, shame, remorse, or self-accusation. Social control depends more on internal sanctions than external ones.

- **Folkways**

The folkways are simple habits of action common to the members of the group; they are the ways of the folks that are somewhat standardised and have some degree of traditional sanction for their persistence. In simple terms, folkways are the customary, normal and habitual ways of the group to meet certain needs or solving day-to-day problems. The time of meals, the number of meals per day, the manner of taking meals-lunch or dinner, the kind of food used, the manner of its preparations, the manner of speech and dress, forms of etiquette and the numerous other facts of daily life are some of the examples of customary practices to which individuals conform in their personal habits. Any routine activity in itself is a habit from the point of view of the individual person but when it becomes general among the communicating folk, it is known as folkway, i.e., a habit of a group.

The major characteristics of folkways are as under:

- Folkways arise spontaneously out of the fundamental fact that man must act in order to live. They generally arise unconsciously in a group such as shaking hands, tipping the hat, calling on strangers and without planned or rational thought.
- Folkways develop out of group experience. They are passed down from generation to generation through interaction.
- They change as culture changes or when we enter different situations.
- Folkways are the weakest norms, which are most often violated but least likely to carry any severe punishment. Violations of folkways bring only mild censure in 'the form of some smiles, glances, or occasional comments from others.
- Folkways are not looked on by most people as moral matters. They are deemed the 'right' way and 'normal'. People accept most of them unquestionably.
- Folkways differ from mores in that they are less severely sanctioned and are not abstract principles.
- Folkways (customs) may and sometimes do become burdensome. They sometimes extract more energy than they conserve.
- Every society have some/many folkways. Even the most primitive society will have a few hundred folkways. In modern industrial societies they become even more numerous and involved.

Folkways are the basis of culture. They give us better understanding about a particular culture.

- **Customs**

Customs are established ways of thinking and acting in societies. Alex Inkeles (1965) defined it as "Custom is any standardised and more or less specialised set of actions, which is routinely carried out according to a generally accepted pattern in a group life". In brief, it denotes established patterns of behaviour. It refers both to the routines of daily life and to the distinctive features which mark off one culture from another.

Unlike mores, customs are not evaluative. For instance, generally, Indians (Hindus) expect youngsters to bow and touch the feet of their parents, teachers and elders, but this expectation is typically not one of 'ought'. The point is that although individuals expect particular types of conduct in some situations, they may not condemn those who act contrarily. So customs are not norms, if norms are defined only in terms of evaluation of conduct, that is, to the exclusion of expectations.

Development of science, rational attitudes towards events and persons have helped in weakening the old customs. People have become less bound by customs; they are now more individualistic, more direct. Society has become more complex, democratic, competitive and information-oriented. Moreover, the general increase in literacy and extension of communication means have provided better ways for understanding human behavior.

- **Mores**

Mores are the strongest of the social norms, which relate to the basic moral judgements of a society. They tell us to do certain things, such as pay proper respect to our parents and teachers. Mores are not deliberately invented or thought of or worked out by some people in the society. They emerge gradually out of the customary practices of the people, largely without conscious choice or intention. In the long run, the origin of such group ways or customary practices is forgotten and the conviction arises that they are useful and necessary to the welfare of the group and contrary ways of acting are inimical to the welfare.

Like folkways, mores are also learned either consciously or unconsciously. They are taught to the young as a set of sacred things or verse (mantra). They are nearly synonymous with morals. Wherever the mores are firmly established obedience is automatic. Violations of mores inspire intense reactions, and some type of punishment inevitably follows. The punishment may involve expulsion from the group, harsh imprisonment, or in some cases even death.

- **Values**

Values are general principles to regulate our day-to-day behaviour. They not only give direction to our behaviour but are also ideals and objectives in themselves. Values deal not so much with what is, but with what ought to be in other words, they express moral imperatives. They are the expression of the ultimate ends, goals or purposes of social action. Our values are the basis of our judgments about what is desirable, beautiful, proper, correct, important, worthwhile and good as well as what is undesirable, ugly, incorrect, improper and bad.

The main functions of values are as follows:

- a) Values play an important role in the integration and fulfilment of man's basic impulses and desires in a stable and consistent manner appropriate for his living.
- b) They are generic experiences in social action made up of both individual and social responses and attitudes.
- c) They build up societies and integrate social relations.

- d) They mould the ideal dimensions of personality and range and depth of culture.
- e) They influence people's behaviour and serve as criteria for evaluating the actions of others.
- f) They have a great role to play in the conduct of social life.
- g) They help in creating norms to guide day-to-day behaviour.

Social norms are standards, rules, guides and expectations for actual behaviour, whereas values are abstract conceptions of what are important and worthwhile.

- **Socialization**

Socialization is learning to participate in social roles. It refers to the way the people learn the habits, attitudes, self-conception, group norms and universes of discourse that enable them to interact with other people in their society, and enact different social roles.

The process of socialization has been conceptualized in three ways mentioned as under:

- a) It is a process of learning (formal and informal both).
- b) It is a process of personality formation and the development of self.
- c) It is a process of internalization of social norms (expectations), values, moral codes and ideals of society.

Objective view: It emphasises how society interacts and influences the individual. From this point of view, "socialisation is that process by which society transmits its culture from one generation to the next and adapts the individual to the accepted and approved ways of organised social life". Thus, socialisation is necessary if society is to continue and function effectively. It develops the skills and disciplines needed by the individual.

Subjective view: How the individual responds to the society is another view of socialisation process. This view places emphasis on the learning aspect of socialisation. The individual learns the folkways, mores, laws, and other features of culture, as well as the skills and other necessary habits, which enable him to become a functioning member of the society in which he lives. From this point of view, "socialisation is a process which goes on in the individual while he is adapting from the people".

The socialisation is mainly aimed at the development of self and the formation of personality. The concept of self refers to the individual as subject (as the source of action and self-reflection), whereas the term 'personality' refers to the individual as object (the object of external evaluation). It is the process through which an individual is moulded into an effective participant of society. The following are the main objectives of socialization:

- a) It inculcates basic disciplines ranging from toilet habits to the method of science. It helps in the learning of self-control.
- b) It develops skills and capacities needed to fit into the society.
- c) It teaches social roles (responsibilities) and their supporting attitudes.
- d) It instills aspirations and satisfies needs of the individual.
- e) It helps in the transmission of culture from generation to generation.
- f) It develops a sense of identity and the capacity for independent thought and action, for example learning of language.
- g) It develops conscience which is one important characteristic product of this process.