CONCEPT OF SOCIETY

Introduction

The term "society" which came from the Latin word *societas* generally designates persons belonging to a specific in-group. In anthropology, the term is used to refer not only to a group of people but also to the complex pattern of the norms of interaction that arise among them. Men express their nature by creating and recreating an organisation which guides and controls their behaviour in several ways. “This organisation, society, liberates and limits the activities of men, sets up standards for them to follow and maintain: whatever the imperfections and tyrannies it has exhibited in human history, it is a necessary condition of every fulfilment of life”. (Maclver and Page, 1987). Society exists only where social beings behave toward one another in ways determined by their recognition of one another. The more complex a society is, the more varied the social relationships are. Society, however, is not restricted to humans alone. Animals also live societies. The features of either a human society or an animal society are a certain level of association, a level closer and more intricate than a mere aggregation but looser and less complex than an organism. Further, the units they bring together on this level are not cells or organs but individuals. However, the society in which man lives has been distinguished from that of animals due to its government by culture. Man’s social life is governed by culture and family is often regarded as the first form of society.

Definition

Different scholars have defined society in various ways. The definitions given by them are either functional or structural. From the functional point of view, society is defined as a complex of groups in reciprocal relationship, interacting upon one another, enabling human organisms to carry on their life-activities and helping each person to fulfil his wishes and accomplish his interests in association with his fellows. From the structural point of view, society is the total social heritage of folkways, mores and institutions; of habits, sentiments and ideals. The following two definitions view society from its functional and structural aspects respectively.

According to Maclver, “Society is a system of usages and procedures, of authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions, of controls of human behaviour and of liberties. This ever-changing complex system we call society. It is the web of social relationships”.

According to Giddings, “Society is the union itself, the organisation, the sum of formal relations in which associating individuals are bound together”.

Characteristics of society

Society is viewed as a process as well as a structure which are complementary to each other. It exists only where social beings behave toward one another in ways determined by their recognition of one another. It is conceived as a structure, that is, a recognisable network of inter-relating institutions. The notion that societies are structured depends upon their reproduction over time. Society is not a static and peacefully evolving structure, but the tentative solution to the conflicts arising out of antagonistic social relation of production. Social scientists see society as being made possible by the shared understanding of its members. The implication here is that
society has been constituted and reconstituted in social interaction. Each interaction episode contains within it the possibility of innovation and change. Society is characterized by likeness, abstract nature, permanency, difference, inter dependence, co operation, conflict, competition, accommodation and assimilation, sociability etc.

i. Likeness: Likeness is an essential prerequisite of society. The sense of likeness in early society was focussed on kinship while in modern societies it is focussed on the principle of nationality.

ii. Abstract: Society embodies the social relationship among the individuals. It means that it is not something which can be seen, observed, touched or scented but an abstract feeling which cement the fellow human beings with one another. It is an abstract organisation which prevails wherever there is existence of social relationships.

iii. Permanent organisation: Society is entirely different from the temporary gatherings of people or crowd. It is a coherent permanent organisation. It is not born with any temporary objective to achieve but it exists and will continue to exist as long as human beings inhabit this planet.

iv. Difference: A society based exclusively on likeness and uniformity is bound to be loose in social ties. There are natural differences of aptitude, interest and capacity. These differences are necessary for society as likeness will result in little reciprocity and little give and take.

v. Inter-dependence: Inter-dependence is indispensable among human beings and this leads to establishment of relationships which is essential to constitute society.

vi. Co-operation: No society can exist without co-operation. It inculcates the feeling of mutual help among the members.

vii. Conflict: Conflict is a major component of society. It expresses itself in numerous ways and in various degrees. Conflicts create a sense of insecurity and this leads to search of strategies to manage them so that the members live in harmony.

viii. Competition: Competition among members cannot be controlled as every member has an urge to attain any object or objects which are limited in supply.

ix. Accommodation and assimilation: Accommodation and assimilation facilitate the functioning of the society.

x. Sociability: Man cannot live without society.

**Society, Aggregation and Organism**

To know more about society, it is necessary to distinguish it from aggregation on one hand and an organism on the other. Murray stated that an aggregation “consists of individuals collected together merely because of their passive subjection to the same external conditions”. It is an accidental collection brought about by some external factors like flood or any natural condition. Such collection lacks mutual responsiveness and social relationship and dissolves as soon as the external stimulus disappears. The demarcating line between society and aggregate is difficult to draw when the society has a weak element of mutual awareness.

An organism is a system of relationships between cells which has a unity and structure of its own. The cells live and die while the organism continues to live through a history of growth, maturity, decay and death. It has fundamental needs of nutrition, protection and reproduction. A society is also a system of relations with relations between organisms, not between cells. It is a composite of parts each having a form and function. Due to these similarities, society has sometimes been compared to an organism. However, the analogy is not perfect as the cells of the organism are too rigidly fixed in their mutual relations, too completely subordinated to the organism and too specialized to be compared to members of a society.
What is the uniqueness of Human society?

Human beings undoubtedly live in societies which is a complex affair requiring an elaborate division of labour. Though human beings are structurally homogeneous, no human is born with anatomical characteristics suited to their caste functions. Persons are trained for specific tasks only through culture and castes are created by cultural modifications. In human society there exists continuous sexuality and a constant association of the sexes for reproduction which is again regulated by culture. Man has the capacity to learn and accumulate attitudes and knowledge which are transmitted from one generation to the next through culture. Cultural learning speeds up the process of learning under a system of symbolic communication. Writing extends the effectiveness of symbolic communication. Each generation adds to the cultural heritage on the basis of its own peculiar experience. But as different human groups possess different cultures, a struggle for survival on the cultural level cannot be undermined. A process of natural selection on a societal level has resulted in specialization and accumulation of culture in human history though this accumulation does not always result in steady progress. There may be decay and retrogression. A socially determined division of labour allows different persons to acquire different parts of the cultural heritage. The elements of facts and attitude toward the facts determine what ought to be and ought not to be, thus making a distinction between legitimacy and illegitimacy as between mating and marriage. Human beings are responsive to the judgements of others as their minds and personalities are formed by the transmission of attitudes and ideas. He seeks the esteem of his fellows. Thus human society has not only a factual order but also a moral order. These two causally interdependent orders give rise to a system of normatively sanctioned power called authority through which illegitimacy and factual order are suppressed and legitimacy and moral order motivated.

Based on the technology used by a human group to provide needs for themselves, human society can be classified as simple such as hunter-gatherer societies, nomadic pastoral societies, horticulturalist or simple farming societies and complex such as intensive agricultural societies or civilizations. The term ‘preliterate’ has been widely used as a synonym for the so called ‘primitive’ societies due to the absence of the system of writing. However, social relationships exist among members of such societies and as these relationships form the basis of human society, they being simple or complex, literate or preliterate have little to do in understanding human society.

Conclusion

Society being a web of social relationships, it is fundamental to understand the network of these relationships which exist among a group of individuals. Each member is important and the role he plays in the group remains important. No society can exist without a proper organisation of its parts. Individuals comprise these parts. Hence it is essential to train individuals to perform their tasks to the satisfaction of his fellows in order to help the society persist despite setbacks from time to time.