

Society -- A Basic Introduction

The term society is most fundamental to sociology. It is derived from the Latin word socius which means companionship or friendship. Companionship means sociability. According to George Simmel it is this element of sociability which defines the true essence of society. It indicates that man always lives in the company of other people. Man is a social animal said Aristotle centuries ago. Man needs society for his living, working and enjoying life. Society has become an essential condition for human life to continue. We can define society as a group of people who share a common culture, occupy a particular territorial area and feel themselves to constitute a unified and distinct entity. It is the mutual interactions and interrelations of individuals and groups.

Definitions of Society

August Comte the father of sociology saw society as a social organism possessing a harmony of structure and function. Emile Durkheim the founding father of the modern sociology treated society as a reality in its own right. According to Talcott Parsons Society is a total complex of human relationships in so far as they grow out of the action in terms of means-end relationship intrinsic or symbolic. G.H Mead conceived society as an exchange of gestures which involves the use of symbols. Morris Ginsberg defines society as a collection of individuals united by certain relations or mode of behavior which mark them off from others who do not enter into these relations or who differ from them in behavior. Cole sees Society as the complex of organized associations and institutions with a community. According to Maclver and Page society is a system of usages and procedures of authority and mutual aid of many groupings and divisions, of controls of human behavior and liberties. This ever changing complex system which is called society is a web of social relationship.

Types of Societies

Writers have classified societies into various categories Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft of Tonnies, mechanical and organic solidarities of Durkheim, status and contract of Maine, and militant and industrial societies of Spencer. All these thinkers have broadly divided society into pre-industrial and post-industrial societies. Sociologists like Comte based their classification of societies on intellectual development. Most of them concede the evolutionary nature of society- one type leading to the other. One more way of dividing societies is that of Marx. His classification of society is based on the institutional framework of society as determined by a group of people who control the means of production. Marx distinguishes five principal types of societies: primitive, Asiatic,

ancient, feudal and capitalist.

Following these classifications, sociologists often refer to societies as primitive or modern non-literate or literate. A more recent kind of classification which is also used while distinguishing societies into types is the one between open and closed societies. A closed society is the one which is a traditional and simple society or a totalitarian State tends to resist change, while an open society admits change.

None of these classifications is accurate; for every major type have number of sub-types. One type like the capitalist can be of various kinds like carboniferous type, finance capital, and the modern neo-colonial or multi-national type. Further, it is to be borne in mind that the chief task of a sociologist is not that of identifying societies but finding out whether a particular kind of society has the potential to nurture, defend and survive. Such a study alone can reveal the sociological aspects of societies and thereby facilitating understanding of societies as they are, and, if need be, activate the required changes. In other words, sociology based on values relies on objective analysis of societies.

However, in recent years there have been several studies of what are variously called irrigation civilization or hydraulic societies. These studies have been related to the general study of bureaucracy, but little has yet been done in the way of large scale comparative work of various complex organized societies. It is not enough, however, to characterize pre-British India as an irrigation civilization with a centralized bureaucracy and a village system of production. The unity and stability of Indian society depended also upon two other factors, caste and religion. There, the aspect of caste to be emphasized is not so much its rigid hierarchical character and the way in which it divided groups from each other, as its integrating function, closely connected with religion.

M.N. Srinivas, in a discussion of Indian social structure, observes that caste guarantees autonomy to a community into relation with numerous other communities all going to form a hierarchy. The importance of such an institution is obvious in a vast country like India which has been the meeting place of many different cultures in the past and which has always had considerable regional diversity. While the autonomy of a sub-caste was preserved it was also brought into relation with others and the hierarchy was also a scale of generally agreed values.



The work of K. Wittfogel suggests that many important similarities can be found, in ancient Egypt, in Byzantium and elsewhere especially in the social functions of the priests and in the elements and caste revealed in detailed regulation of the division of labor. Each human group develops its own social and political structure in terms of its own culture and history. There broad types of social structures may be distinguished. First, the tribal society represented by the social structures of African tribes second, the agrarian social structure represented by the traditional Indian society. And the third, the industrial social structure represented by the industrially advanced countries Europe and U.S.A. Sociologists also speak of yet another type, called post industrial society, which is emerging out of the industrial society.