



Understanding Society: Cultural Analysis and Transformative Processes

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Citation: Sini. M (2023). Understanding Society: Cultural Analysis and Transformative Processes, Educational Administration: Theory and Practice, 29(4) 6187-6192

Doi: [10.53555/kuev.v29i4.11275](https://doi.org/10.53555/kuev.v29i4.11275)

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Anthropologists reckon that evolution is the natural process by which new forms originate. Like organic evolution, social evolution facilitated the growth of social institutions. Over centuries, the queries like how people make a living, how they interact with each other, how they organize their life, what about their belief system etc., were of great concern among scholars, especially among the anthropologists. There are certain factors that determine the patterns of subsistence in the society. Today the structure of the society has underwent change drastically from the earlier categories. As evolution is a gradual process of transformation, anthropologists accept that “from hunting gathering societies and agrarian societies to present industrial and post industrial society” transformation occurred in a natural way over centuries.

Keywords: Society, Social Evolution, Pre Industrial, Industrial, Post industrial societies

Concept of Society- An analysis

According to ancient Greek Philosopher, Aristotle, Man is by nature a social animal. It implies that without society he is nothing but animal. For his existence and to meet the needs, he/she has to live in the society. Society fulfills all his/her needs. The main “components of a society are its culture and social structure”. Social structures grow out of social situations and interactions among individuals. Human societies are characterized by the patterns of social relationships between individuals. Thus, society is a network of relations.

For social anthropologists, “society is an intangible entity. It is a mental construct which we realize in everyday life but we cannot see it. It is also an abstract system of social relationships. In society an individual is related to others through ties of kinship, marriage, family, neighbourhood, caste, occupation, religion, political party, and peers. In this way, an individual becomes part and parcel of several layers of groups through these different multiple relationships. These relationships are patterned. Therefore, Social- Cultural anthropologists define society as a pattern of social relationships formed through interactions of its members” (Pandey, 2017).

MacIver and Page (1949) defines that “society is a system of usages and procedures, authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions, of human behavior and of liberties. Society is a social group which is formed spontaneously, but at the same time society is universal”. Society includes every relation established between people and hence human existence is the fundamental aspect of society formation.

In this context, there are certain basic questions that the anthropologists raise regarding human existence. These are; How we originated? How we have changed? How we are changing still?

Anthropologists are interested to study human existence and survival that have developed overtime. They regard evolution as a natural process by which new forms of organisms evolved and organized. Human beings also evolved through this process. Like organic evolution, social evolution was also very complex and the organization into groups occurred gradually. The organization of human beings into a web of relations contributes to the formation of society. The patterns of human society differ from place to place and across cultures.

Gerhard and Lenski (1970) studied society in order to understand human behavior. Lenski focused on the social and cultural elements of society, social structure etc., in order to study society in an evolutionary perspective. According to Weber (1922), “modes of thought contribute to change and rationality of thought contributes to large scale organization”.

Humans create their interactions in many ways and that form the basis of society. Societies are the largest example of a group. Societies are classified based on the subsistence strategies into different types. Many anthropologists have contributed with their own models of social and biological evolution especially from late 19th century. One of the remarkable contributions was made by L H Morgan in his book, *Ancient Society* in 1877. According to Morgan, “human societies had evolved to civilization through the stages called savagery and barbarism”.

Civilization
Barbarism
Savagery

According to this view “each society is believed to progress through the same stages of development, from savagery to barbarism to civilization”. Several 19th century evolutionists also contributed to anthropology by providing first systematic methods for explaining human societies. However, during early 20th century, “historical particularism which was closely associated with Franz Boas” rejects this ranking and kind of progress and as per this, there is no simple or complex societies, but only societies. “Historical particularism rejected the cultural evolutionary model that had dominated anthropology until Boas”.

Historicism developed out of dissatisfaction with the theories of unilinear socio-cultural evolution (savagery-Barbarism- Civilization). Instead of unilinear model of evolution, this is an approach to understanding the nature of culture and cultural changes of specific group of people. That is, study based on particular geographical area in historical conditions. It emphasized that each culture had its own independent history.

Boas also emphasized on the importance of all sub-fields of anthropology in reconstructing history. As per his approach, ethnographic evidence must be used with linguistic evidence, archaeological and biological evidence. Later on, this approach came to known as the four field approach (Quadripartite) of anthropology. This approach makes anthropology unique from other disciplines in which it helps anthropologists to study culture and society in a holistic way.

Durkheim (1933) pictured “a continuum between simple and complex societies”. He described “simple premodern societies as held together by mechanical solidarity—common beliefs, values, and emotional ties. Furthermore, the division of labor is based largely on male/female distinctions and age groupings. Premodern societies tend to think the same way on important matters, and everyone fulfills his or her expected social positions”. Durkheim believed that “as societies advance, they make the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity”.

According to Durkheim, evolving societies change from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity”. He used “the concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity to describe social relationships within a society”. “Mechanical solidarity” means that “people share values and performs same tasks, in united way”. “Organic solidarity denotes impersonal social relationship in which relationships are based on need rather than on value”. Impersonal social relationships that rise from increased job specialization.

According to Durkheim, “societies in which social positions are specialized and interdependent are held together by organic solidarity. Pre industrial societies are held together by mechanical solidarity, people share the same values and perform the same tasks, and they become united in a common whole”. As the division of labour became more complex, gradually mechanic solidarity gave way to organic solidarity. Durkheim believed that individuals shall be considered within the context of the society in which they live.

During late 19th and early 20th centuries “diffusionists argued that all societies change as a result of cultural borrowings”. Diffusion is the cultural process in which culture trait, or material object or idea that spread or diffuses from one society to other.

Malinowski’s (1944) functionalist approach explores “how elements of society function to meet the needs of individual”.

Malinowski identified “three basic types of need.

1. Biological (Food, Shelter, Sex)
2. Instrumental (Education, Social Control)
3. Integrative (World view)”

Malinowski focused on the present rather than historical reconstruction. It focused on the role of culture traits and practices in the contemporary society.

However, structural functionalists emphasized on societal structure and institutions that interpret society as a whole. The institutions like economy, polity religion, family, marriage that perpetuate the survival of the society. Brown (1952) emphasized on “social functions rather than individual functions for the survival. As per structural functionalists, society is like a human body or other living organism. Each part of the society contributes to the whole”. That means, all the institutions function as a whole to maintain social stability. Structural functionalism focused on the organization of society and the relationship between social units, such as social institutions. Brown suggested that “society is a system of relationships and institutions are an orderly set of relationships whose function is to maintain the society as a system”.

A society consists of individuals who live together in a specific geographic area, who interact more with each other than they do with outsiders and cooperate for the attainment of common goals. Each society includes “key institutions— such as family, education, religion, politics, economics, and health—that meet basic human needs”. Members of a society share a common culture over time. The way people think and behave in any society is largely prescribed by its culture, which is learned, transmitted, and reshaped from generation to generation. All activities in the society, whether educating young members, preparing and eating dinner, selecting leaders for the group, finding a mate, or negotiating with other societies, are guided by cultural rules and expectations. In each society, culture provides the social rules for how individuals carry out necessary tasks.

“Societies are organized in particular patterns, patterns that are shaped by a range of factors, including the way people procure food, the availability of resources, contact with other societies, and cultural beliefs. For example, people can change from herding to farming only if they have the knowledge, skills, and desire to do so and only in environments that will support agriculture. As societies develop, changes take place in the social structures and relationships between people that characterize each type of society. For example, in industrialized societies, relationships between people typically must become more formal because people must interact with strangers and not just relatives. It is important to note that not all societies go through all stages. Some are jolted into the future by political events or changes in the global system, and some resist pressures to become modernized and continue to live in simpler social systems (https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/40402_3.pdf)”.

As per Anthropologists, human societies are mostly organized based on their primary means of subsistence, especially in pre industrial societies. Accordingly, the society can be broadly categorized into “Pre industrial, Industrial and Post industrial societies”.

Evolution of Society- “Pre industrial, Industrial and Post industrial societies”

Anthropologists have classified societies into “Pre industrial, Industrial and Post industrial” based on the mode of subsistence and nature of economy. On the basis of economic activity, pre industrial is categorized as hunting gathering, pastoral, horticulture, agriculture type etc.

Hunting and gathering societies

Anthropologists consider this as the earliest form of society. The members survive primarily by hunting wild animals and gathering wild fruits, tubers etc. Forest ecology favoured this type of subsistence. This society could support a small population due to nomadic life and limited resources.

Eg: !Kung San of Kalahari desert, Shompen and Onge of Andaman

“The !Kung are a typical hunter-gatherer society, in which people rely directly on the plants and animals in their habitat to live. People make their clothing, shelter, and tools from available materials and through trade with other nearby groups. People migrate seasonally to new food sources. Population size remains small as the numbers of births and deaths are balanced. Today, the hunter-gatherer lifestyle is becoming extinct. For example, much of the wild game on which the !Kung subsisted has been overhunted or is now protected on game preserves. The governments of South Africa and Botswana have attempted to settle such groups on reservations, and contacts with macro-level societies, by choice and by force, have forever changed the !Kung way of life and that of other hunting-and-gathering societies (https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/40402_3.pdf)”.

Characteristics

- Small population size
- Nomadic: Move around constantly in search of food
- Kin based relationship

Pastoral societies

A social group, whose way of life is based on domestication of animals. Pastoralist could support a much larger population. Pastoralism was for a long time a very flourishing adaptation to grassland. Wealth and status in these societies are typically based on the number of one's herd. The pastoral societies usually domesticate sheep, Buffalo, Camels, Reindeer, Cattle or Goats.

Eg: Toda of Nilgiri, Nuer of Sudan

Characteristics

- Relatively larger population size
- Seasonal nomads or settled

Horticultural societies

Horticulture societies mainly depend on domestication of plants. Horticulture is different from agriculture because it is done on smaller scale. In horticulture people make mixed cropping pattern and depend on small plots of land rather than in agriculture.

Horticulturalists use “digging sticks and wooden hoes to cultivate tree crops. They also maintain plants such as yams, beans, taro, squash, or corn”. Horticultural societies make their living by cultivating food and have some control over its production.

Eg: Cherokee Indians

Characteristics

- Relatively larger population size
- More involvement of women
- Mainly based on hand tools

Agriculture Societies

In contrast to horticulture, agriculture is growing food plants like grains, millets, tubers, fruits, vegetables etc. Agriculture is a more intensive form of food production and involves irrigation, fertilizers etc. Agriculture transformed the humans drastically in their way of life.

Eg: Munda, Oraon in Jharkhand, Kurichiyan of Wayand

Characteristics

- Large population size
- Settled life
- Permanent agriculture land for cultivation
- Land and labour well demarcated
- More involvement of men

Industrial Societies

Industrial society refers to a society driven by the use of technology and machines to enable mass production. Industrial economy is centered on the production of manufactured goods. Industrialisation has brought concentration of population in urban areas. Urbanisation is the result of industrialization. Industrialization favoured business, labour and commerce. Specialisations in occupations were also the feature of industrialized societies. Competition was another attribute developed in the industrialized societies.

Agricultural Society	Land
Industrial Society	Capital
Information Society	Knowledge

Characteristics

- Growth of larger societies
- Urbanisation
- Large scale division of labour
- Heterogenous culture
- Industry based economy
- Division of labour based on expertise

Post industrial or Information society

“After World War II, starting in the 1950s, the transition from industrial to postindustrial society began in the United States, Western Europe (especially Germany), and Japan. This shift was characterized by movement from human labor to automated production and from a predominance of manufacturing jobs to a growth in service jobs, such as computer operators, bankers, scientists, teachers, public relations workers, stockbrokers, and sales people. This is the stage of society's development in which the service sector

generates more wealth than the manufacturing sector of the economy (https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/40402_3.pdf). The economy is centered on providing information and services. Service industries comprise of sectors like education, health, banking, legal, research, government etc.

Characteristics

- Emergence and growth of multiple networks
- Information network
- Social interdependence based on network of specialized roles
- Technically and professionally qualified workers

Post industrial society is mainly information society. This is a stage in a society's development during which the economy transitions occurred from one that primarily provides goods to one that primarily provides services. Post industrialized societies of the information age make linkages and interconnections between the people from all societies around the world.

From these, it is clear that a society is a population characterized by patterns of relationships between individuals that may have distinctive culture and institutions, or, more broadly, an economic, social and industrial infrastructure in which a varied multitude of people or peoples are a part. Though society is an abstract concept, it is different from the transitory or temporary gatherings of the people. It is a consistent entity and is permanent.

Basic features of Society

Common interests
Interrelationship
Interdependence
Co-operation
Common Geographical territory

Categorization of units of Society

Small/ local groups	Based on group characteristics
Ethnic groups	Based on Ethnic characteristics
National society	Based on national attributes
Global society	Based on global culture

Society can be categorized into different types. Based on the national characteristics and geography, it can be categorized as Indian society, American Society, Philippine society etc. Some of the characteristics of the Indian society are unique in many respects. Village system, Joint family system and agrarian life make Indian society different from other societies.

Society is a group of people with a common territory and culture, interacting with one another. The interactions among members are the prime aspect that makes networks among people. Increased global dependence and communication in the global era made the society globally connected across boundaries and that has created the concept of 'globalised society'. It brings people, cultures, economy into proximity and its influence on individuals all over the world has created a new social structure and relationship. The network society is the result of globalized knowledge, communication and development.

Conclusion

Society is a social group which is formed spontaneously, but at the same time society is universal. Society includes every relation established between people and hence human existence is the fundamental aspect of society formation. It is analyzed that the concept of society is an abstract one, and it is not a static occurrence. There are different societies that have emerged over time, and the patterns of relationships in these societies are entirely different. The characteristic features of various societies are also entirely different.

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