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# **UNIT 2 BASIC CONCEPTS IN SOCIOLOGY**

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## **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After you have read this unit we expect that you will be able to:

- explain the concept of society;
- describe the nature of social groups;
- discuss the concepts of status and role;
- explain the relation between culture and human behaviour;
- describe social change and social control; and
- discuss sociological methods.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit we introduce you to basic concepts in sociology. These concepts include that of society itself. The social group is discussed, as it is basic to society. We then discuss status and role, which are crucial concepts. This unit also introduces the concepts of social institution and sociological method. Further, we explain various aspects of culture including folkways and norms. The unit rounds off with explanations of social change and social control. This is an important unit for grasping some of the basic concepts of sociology.

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## 2.2 KEY SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

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Let us first see what is meant by concepts. A concept is a word or phrase, which is abstract from actual experience and which, more or less, means the same thing to all those familiar with it. A concept represents a class of phenomena. Thus, car is a concept, which signifies a vehicle of a particular kind. Once we are familiar with the concept of car, we do not always have to see it physically in order to know, what someone means by it. Similarly, a house or a table lamp are also concepts.

Concepts are necessary in every science since accuracy is achieved through them. Every scientific discipline is continuously developing a refined set of concepts, which, to those familiar with that discipline, will mean the same thing at all times. Sociology, too, has a large number of concepts, which are similarly understood by all sociologists. Here, we shall introduce you to some important sociological concepts. Many of these concepts, it will be noticed, are expressed in words or terms, which are of daily use. It is necessary to be careful with their sociological usage, because in sociology, these very terms are used in some special sense.

### 2.2.1 The Concept of Society

Society is viewed by sociologists as a chain of social relationships. A relationship is social, when it is determined by mutual awareness, that is, the behaviour of one individual influences the behaviour of another. For example, when a teacher enters the classroom, students stop making noise and stand up as a mark of respect for their teacher. This behaviour signifies the social relationship between the teacher and the taught. Thus, social relationships exist only when individuals behave towards one another in ways determined by their recognition of each other. This is why society is called a relational concept.

In other words, society is not a substantial concept. It does not denote a concrete reality, rather it refers to social relationships, which become institutionalised, when people relate to each other in well-established and familiar ways.

### 2.2.2 Types of Society

The predominant types of social relationships form the basis of classifying human society in various types. Most sociologists contrast the industrial society in which they live with all other types. Some sociologists, like Spencer and Durkheim, classified societies on the basis of their size or scale and other features, such as, the extent and degree of the division of labour, political organisation and social stratification, etc. Some scholars, like Karl Marx, distinguish them on the basis of their economic institutions. Thus, there are clearly many ways of classifying societies. Without going into complicated arguments at this stage of your introduction to sociology, it is necessary to realise that there is no ideal classification and no 'pure' example of various types of society.

In broad terms, taking the wider interests of sociology into consideration, we can divide societies into two types, namely; simple and complex. All primitive or tribal social

organisations are included among simple societies. The industrial societies with overlapping sets of social relationships are called complex societies.

### Activity 1

Reflect about the type of society you live in and write a short note of one page about your understanding of your society.

Compare your answer with those of other students at your study centre and discuss with your Academic Counsellor.

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## 2.3 SOCIAL GROUPS

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The concept of group is central to sociology. While in normal discourse, we regard any collection of two or more individuals to be a group, sociologically, individuals constituting a group must be conscious of a common belongingness, of sharing some common understanding, common interests and goals as well as accepting certain rights and obligations. In this sense, a family or a class can be called a group. A society or community can also be called a group.

### 2.3.1 Primary Groups

First coined by the sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929), a primary group is relatively small (though not all small groups are primary). Its members generally have face-to-face contact, and thus, have intimate and co-operative relationships, as well as strong loyalty. The relationships between the members are ends in themselves. There is a basic human need for face to face, intimate co-operative interaction with others. That is, members derive pleasure and enjoyment merely by associating with one another. They have no other particular ends or goals in view. The primary group comes to an end, when one or more members leave it; they cannot be substituted by others. The best example of a primary group is the family or the friendship, or 'peer' group, as sociologists call it.

### 2.3.2 Secondary Groups

Secondary groups, in several respects, are the opposite of primary groups. These are generally large size groups, though not always so. Members of the secondary group maintain relatively limited, formal and impersonal relationship with one another.

Unlike primary groups, secondary groups are specific or specialised interest groups. Generally, a well defined, division of labour characterises these groups. Member can be substituted and replaced, hence, a secondary group may continue irrespective of whether its original members continue to be its members or not. A cricket team, a music club, an army or a factory, and so on, are examples of secondary groups.

It is possible that within secondary groups, some members may come close to one another and develop primary relations and form a group of peers. Several sociological studies have shown that the presence of primary groups in armies, factories, and other secondary groups, have contributed to high level of morale, and more effective functioning.

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## 2.4 STATUS AND ROLE

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The variety of social relations in any society is obviously countless. Parenthood, marriage, friendships, neighbourliness, and similar examples, illustrate the enormous range of social relations, which sociologists examine and on the basis of which they try to understand society. Each social relation is conceived, for purposes of analysis and understanding, in terms of two components, namely, status and role.

Status, also referred to as social position by some writers, is the 'socially defined location or place', which an individual occupies in a system of interaction or society. Thus, in any interaction, none of the participants is without status. Indeed, no individual can interact with another, if his/her status, as well as that of the person or persons, is not clear in a given situation.

Thus, interaction in the family poses no problems because each member knows well the status he/she and others are occupying. This knowledge allows for a smooth flow and predictable interaction. But, when we encounter a stranger, we first of all want to know his or her status. Until this is known, we are not clear, how we should behave towards him or her. Thus, it is status and knowledge of status that facilitates patterned interaction.

### 2.4.1 Types of Status

Sociologists make a distinction between 'ascribed' and 'achieved' statuses. Positions, which one is born into or one acquires without one's own effort, are known as ascribed status. Mostly, kinship statuses come in this category. Achieved statuses are, in contrast, based on and defined by what people do or acquire through their own effort. Usually, people's occupational positions come in this category. Only in some cases, it is possible to have both ascribed and achieved aspects in the same status, a hereditary priest in an Indian village, for example, may be rejected if he fails to learn the required scriptures.

### 2.4.2 Multiple Statuses

It should also be clear that every individual occupies multiple statuses. Even a young infant is a son, a grandson, a brother, a nephew, and so on. As we grow up, we may get into even more status positions. Public figures and other important men, women simultaneously occupy several statuses. There is, however, one key status in terms of which the individual is ultimately identified and evaluated. In modern societies, one's occupation indicates one's key status.

### 2.4.3 The Concept of Role

We turn now to the concept of role. Role is the behavioural aspect of status; there can be no statuses without a corresponding role attached to it. Role is, thus, the dynamic aspect of status and consists of rights and duties attached to it. Thus, an individual occupying the status of a father, simultaneously, has some rights over his children, as well as, some responsibilities towards them. Statuses and roles are, thus, two sides of the same coin.

Role refers both to the actual behaviour of an individual occupying a particular status, as well as to a set of **expectations** regarding behaviour, shared by those involved in particular social relations. Thus, in the teacher-student relations, the teacher has an expectation as to how the student interacting with him will or should behave. The students, too, in turn, have their own set of expectations. Should either of them fail to act according to other's expectations, their relations are adversely affected. Since individuals, by and large, fulfil role expectation, society gains uniformity of behaviour.

This discussion indicates the significance of the concept of role. Indeed, it is one of the basic units of analysis of social order in human societies and later, in Block 7, more will be discussed about this concept.

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## 2.5 SOCIAL INSTITUTION

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Social institution can be defined as a 'broad goal-oriented behaviour, which is firmly established'. It becomes possible to understand and predict the behaviour of people

because of this established pattern of behaviour found in a society. The study of social institutions, therefore, includes groups, roles, norms, beliefs and practices in a particular area of social life.

Social institution provides the framework within which people in different societies and cultures live. It provides the very structure of society. People are born in a family, which is an institution. They are nurtured and socialised in this institution, which is governed by the values, norms and mores of that society. How the family and its members earn their living depends upon the economic institutions of their society. How they maintain order and administration depends on the political institutions of that society. How information and skills are passed from one generation to another, depends upon the educational institution of that society. Finally, how people explain their existence in society, from where they have come before birth and where they will go after death, i.e. the 'religious experience' is established by the religious institutions. Thus, all social institutions in a given society are inter-related. Family as an institution forms the pivot around which all other social institutions move as it provides the individual members to the society. Therefore, as Perry and Perry (1973 : pp. 300) mention, "its important to remember that institutions are simply abstract concepts of organised habits and standardised ways of doing things. We cannot see institutions, what we can see are families, schools, banks and so on." Culture is an essential aspect of all societies. You will learn more about it in the next section.

### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** i) Use the space provided below for your answers.

ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Define the concept of society, in eight lines.

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2) Show the difference between primary and secondary groups. Use about six lines.

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3) Distinguish between status and role. Write about five lines for your answer.

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## 2.6 CULTURE

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Besides society, role, status and institution, culture is another important theme that engages the attention of sociologists. Ordinarily, even those, who are not at all familiar with sociology, are familiar with the word ‘culture’. In our daily life, we may describe some people as very ‘cultured’. We give such a label if persons concerned are refined and polished in their behaviour and manner. But sociologists do not use the term ‘culture’ in this sense. They have their own, special understanding of it.

In sociological terms, culture can be defined as the total sum of human activities, which are learnt. It is passed on from generation to generation through membership of a particular society. As various learning processes in human societies involve systems of tools, communications and symbols, we can also say that the concept of culture refers to a system of tools, communications and symbols. People in order to learn new activities require tools, language and symbols.

Cultures in human societies differ from one another and also, change over time. One of the gains of studying sociology is that besides giving an idea of various cultures, it also helps to develop an understanding of other cultures than one’s own.

### 2.6.1 Culture and Human Behaviour

A little reflection will show that in similar situations, people of different cultures reveal differences in the way they meet these situations. For example, while greeting friends and relatives, at home or on the street, men in our society may shake hands with other men but as a rule, not with women. Similarly, notwithstanding great hunger, a vegetarian refuses non-vegetarian food. This is because culture influences our behaviour in given situations. Stated in sociological terms, culture is **normative**, that is, it provides standards of proper conduct, and also therefore, tells us, what is right or wrong. Concretely, these standards are provided to us by what are called **cultural norms**. Thus, while many college students smoke these days, they do not normally do so in the presence of their elders or teachers. In our culture, such an act is considered to be wrong, that is, contrary to our cultural norms. The content of the non-material culture of every society consists of a large number of norms. These norms are learnt and enforced by folkways and mores.

### 2.6.2 Folkways

There are behaviour patterns that govern most of our daily life and contacts with other people. Thus, rising up from seats, when teachers enter into classrooms, allowing women to purchase tickets without queuing, distribution of sweets after getting a job or a promotion, and so on, are examples of folkways. A number of folkways are simply acts of politeness.

In order that folkways may not be taken lightly, mechanisms such as praise, approval and acceptance exist to make individuals conform to them. Conversely, a word of criticism, frown, or sarcastic remark or laughter are modes of expressing disapproval of incorrect behaviour. Since most people desire that they should not look funny or be considered rude and uncouth by their group, they fall in line with what the group expects and desires. Therefore, most people conform to the folkways without even being aware that they are conforming, or that there are alternative ways of behaving.

### 2.6.3 Mores

These are norms that are considered to be more important by group, and even vital for its welfare. Violation of the mores evokes an emotional response and instead of the mere raising of eyebrow or ridicule, a strong group action follows. Thus, prohibition of the consumption of beef and alcoholic drinks are part of the mores of Hindu and Muslim societies, respectively. Any violation of these will not be tolerated. Mores are linked to cultural values.

It should now be clear that mores are norms of a higher order than folkways. There is an element of compulsion in them and they are linked to the dominant values of the culture. Mores clearly and definitely reflect the concepts of what is moral and immoral. This is seen from the fact that mores are generally expressed in terms of 'must behaviour' (for example, all married men and women must remain faithful to their spouses and must observe sexual fidelity) or, negatively, in terms of 'must-not' behaviour, for example, women should not expose their bodies.

### 2.6.4 Values

Values, the ultimate essence and spirit of cultures, are the underlying principles and ideas on the basis of which societies and individuals choose their goals. Values are also the criteria on which social and individual ends and means are judged and evaluated. Apart from goals, all conduct and behaviour whether for achieving these goals, or otherwise, are judged and evaluated in the framework of accepted values. Any action that is contrary to the cherished values of the group or society is condemned and punished. For example, in Indian society there is a value regarding junior persons' behaviour towards senior persons. Any deviance from accepted behaviour is always a subject of criticism.

Unlike norms, which are quite specific, values tend to be generalised ideals and somewhat abstract; nevertheless, they attract the total commitment of the society.

### 2.6.5 Sub-cultures

Another important point to bear in mind is, that in the case of complex and heterogeneous societies, like India, which are characterised by many religious, linguistic and other diversities, it is usual to have a number of sub-cultures within the framework of the larger overall cultures. Thus, in India, religious communities like Muslims, Christians or Sikhs or linguistic groups like Tamilians, Maharashtrians or Punjabis and so on, have their own sub-cultural characteristics that distinguish them from other communities or groups. But simultaneously, we also share certain core values like secularism, democracy and equality of all citizens, irrespective of our diversities, and these integrate us. But heterogeneous societies have constantly to keep emphasising and nurturing their more universal and cultural values so that they are not forsaken in favour of the sub-cultural values.

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## 2.7 SOCIAL CHANGE

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In tracing the origins of sociology, as well as in pointing out the concerns of early Sociologists, it had been indicated that the changes brought by the industrial revolution had a major role to play in the birth of modern sociology. Due to this, sociology and sociologists have never lost sight of the study of social change, and this interest has been major concern of the discipline throughout its entire history of about two hundred years.

Although, sociologists have been studying the process of social change for a long time, it is difficult to give a brief and precise definition. Social change refers to the process

by which alterations occur in society or social relations. Social change is a continuous process.

Social change can be caused by many factors. Increased population can bring about changes. Innovations—i.e., new ideas or an object can bring about new relationships. It is also possible that one society can borrow ideas or objects from other societies, which may cause variation in social relations.

Later on, you would be studying various theories of social change (evolution, cyclical, conflict, modernisation and development). The leading sociologists, who have been referred to in Unit 1, have their own ideas about how change occurs, which will be discussed later.

### 2.7.1 Agents of Change

An important question is the identity of agents of change. As mentioned earlier, any sub-units or institutions are instruments through which social change can be effected. Some of the institutions are more important than others—the economic, political and educational institutions are more central in effecting change. Religion can act as an agent of change as well as resistance to change.

Although, the society continuously undergoes change, it must be pointed out that there is usually resistance to change. New ideas and new behaviour patterns are not easily accepted. Even material innovations also take time to be accepted and diffused in any society (trains were considered in England as the work of the devil). Resistance is greater, when traditional values and beliefs are involved.

### 2.7.2 Rate of Change

Another question is with regard to the rate of change. In societies, which are industrialised and use sophisticated technology (which itself has brought about changes), the rate of change is more rapid than in pre-industrial societies. Another important fact to be kept in mind is that a great deal of change today is caused by planning. This is referred to as guided change, which is being undertaken in many developing countries. This would be discussed further in the unit on social development.

#### Activity 2

Within your family, ask your grand parents or their cousins about the kind of changes that they observe today in our society which were not present when they were children. Make a note of one page and discuss it with other students at your study centre.

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## 2.8 SOCIAL CONTROL

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Social control is a process to regulate behaviour within society. In a sense, social control is to discourage people from deviating from the established values and norms. Because of social control, people live up to what is expected of them. Social control is an aspect of all social institutions and thus, it is pervasive to social life on the whole.

Behaviour of people is controlled both by positive and negative sanctions. The aim of both these types of sanction is to encourage people to conform to the norms. Positive sanction can include praise, gifts and promotion whereas negative sanction can be punishment, demotion ridicule or boycott. Social control is not necessarily always successful. There are different approaches to the study of social control, these will be discussed in later units.

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## 2.9 SOCIOLOGICAL METHODS

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Sociologists have used many methods in studying society. In Unit 1, we have already discussed the scientific method and its characteristics. Although, sociologists may use different methods, the scientific approach is basic to all of them. The historical method involves the study of origins, development and transformation of social institutions. In this method, a sociologist uses information pertaining to one or more societies over a long period of time. The main approach is to try to get some insights from the past experiences with regard to social behaviour

In comparative method, data from different countries, different regions or different religions are gathered. An effort is made to see whether there are any common factors, which can explain patterns of behaviour.

The empirical method refers to collection of data from the field. The facts of social life are studied and described as they exist. The techniques used in this method are observation, survey, experimental, case studies.

These methods are not necessarily exclusive. There can be a combination of them. The purpose of all these methods, in a way, is to try to answer the questions: 'Why do people behave the way they do?' The sociological theories and concepts have emerged as a result of these studies.

### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** i) Use the space provided below for your answers.

ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Write a note in ten lines on social division in tribal societies.

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2) What is social control? Explain in about five lines.

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## 2.10 LET US SUM UP

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This unit has explained clearly some important concepts in sociology. They are in fact concepts which keep appearing in the following units. We hope you have grasped these concepts, such as, those of society, social group, status and role, social institutions, culture, and so on. These concepts are basic to a sociological study. Finally, we

explained the concepts of social change and social control. It would be advisable that this unit is understood well by the student for then it would help them better to understand the following units.

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## 2.11 FURTHER READINGS

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- 1) Ritzer, G. Kammeyer, K.C.W. and Yetman, N.R., 1979, *Sociology: Experiencing a Changing Society*. Allan and Bacon Ind.: Boston
- 2) Perry, J. & Perry E., 1973, *The Social Web An Introduction to Sociology*, Canfield Press, San Francisco.

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## 2.12 KEY WORDS

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- Culture** : The system of behaviour, customs, regulations that are learnt and socially acquired.
- Folkways** : Behaviour patterns that govern daily life and interactions, e.g. ways of addressing one another.
- Mores** : Ways of behaviour that are crucial for the welfare of a society, e.g. non-violence, fidelity, non-thieving and so on.
- Role** : In social life man and woman undertakes many responsibilities, e.g. husband, mother, son, etc. They are various roles.
- Status** : Consists of rights and duties of a person in any position. Each status has a role or set of actions attached to it, e.g. the teacher must teach.

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## 2.13 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Society is a relational concept. It does not refer to a concrete reality. It is viewed as a chain or a network of social relationships. A relationship becomes social only when individuals interact in ways determined by well-established and familiar recognition of each other. So, we can say that the concept of society refers to social relationships, which become institutionalised.
- 2) Primary groups are characterised by personalised relationships among their members. They are typically small and profoundly influence the members' behaviour. Secondary groups, on the other hand, are relatively larger and more impersonal. These groups are, generally, formed with a specific goal.
- 3) Within a set of social relationships among people, a place or a position is referred to by the term 'status'. Each status carries with it a generally expected behaviour. This behaviour is termed as 'role'. Role is, thus, the dynamic aspect of status.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Social change is a continuous process, which refers to changes occurring in society or social relations. Multiple factors, such as, increased population, innovations, natural disasters, political conflicts, etc., cause changes in society. Sub-units or institutions in society are instruments through which social change is effected. In pre-industrial societies, the rate of change is slower as compared to fast speed of change in industrial societies.
- 2) Social control refers to a regulatory process, which encourages people to conforming to established values and norms. Non-conformity is considered to be a deviant behaviour. Social control is exercised through the mechanism of positive and negative sanctions.