Module 1 Introduction to Sociology

Lecture 3
The Individual and Society

Human beings are social animals. They live in social groups in communities and in society. Human life and society almost go together. Human beings cannot live without society. Human beings are biologically and psychologically equipped to live in groups, in society. Society has become an essential condition for human life to arise and to continue.

The relationship between individual and society is ultimately one of the profound of all the problems of social philosophy. It is both philosophical and sociological because it involves the question of practices on the one hand, and, norms and values on the other.

Human beings depend on society. It is in the society that an individual is surrounded and encompassed by culture, a societal force. It is in the society again that s/he has to conform to the norms, occupy statuses and become members of groups.

The question of the relationship between the individual and the society is the starting point of many discussions. There are two main theories regarding the relationship of the individual and society. They are the social contract theory and the organismic theory.

Social Contract Theory

The social contract theory throws light on the origin of the society. According to this theory, all human beings are born free and equal. Society came into existence because of the agreement entered into by the individuals. The classical representatives of this school of thought are Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes was of opinion that society came into being as a means for the protection of human beings against the consequences of their own nature. Human beings in the state of nature were in perpetual conflict with their neighbors on account of their essentially selfish nature. ‘The life of [human beings] was solitary poor, nasty, brutish and short’. Every human being was an enemy to every other human being.

Hobbes in his book Leviathan has made it clear that human beings found nothing but grief in the company of their fellows. Since the conditions in the state of nature were intolerable and human beings longed for peace, the people entered into a kind of social contract to ensure for themselves security and certainty of life and property.

By mutual agreement they decided to surrender their natural rights into the hands of a few or one with authority to command. The agreement was of each with all and of all with each other. The contract became binding on the whole community as perpetual social bond. Thus in order to protect themselves against the evil consequences of their own nature human beings organized themselves in society in order to live in peace with all.
John Locke

John Locke believed that human beings in the state of nature were enjoying an ideal liberty free from all sorts of rules and regulations. The state of nature was a state of peace, goodwill, mutual assistance and preservation. But there was no recognized system of law and justice. Hence the peaceful life was often upset by the corruption and viciousness of degenerate human beings. Human beings were forced to live in full of fears and continual dangers.

In order to escape from this and to gain certainty and security human beings made a contract to enter into civil society or the state. This contract Locke called social contract. This contract put an end to the state of nature and substituted it by civil society. The social contract was no more than a surrender of rights and powers so that the remaining rights of human beings would be protected and preserved. The contract was for limited and specific purposes and what was given up or surrendered to the whole community and not to a single individual or to an assembly of individuals. According to Locke, the social contract later on contributed to the governmental control. The governmental contract was made by the society when it established a government and selected a ruler to remove the inconveniences of ill-condition.

Jean Jacques Rousseau

Jean Jacques Rousseau, the French writer of the 18th century in his famous book *The Social Contract*, wrote that human beings in the state of nature were a noble savage who led a life of primitive simplicity and idyllic happiness. They were independent, contented, self-sufficient, healthy, fearless and good. It was only primitive instinct and sympathy which united them all. They knew neither right or wrong and were free from all notions of virtue and vice.

Human beings enjoyed a pure, unsophisticated, innocent life of perfect freedom and equality in the state of nature. But these conditions did not last long. Population increased and reason was dawned. Simplicity and idyllic happiness disappeared. Families were established, institution of property emerged and human equality ended. Human beings began to think in terms of private ownership.

When equality and happiness of the early state was lost, war, murder, conflicts became the order of the day. The escape from this was found in the formation of a civil society. Natural freedom gave place to civil freedom by a social contract. As a result of this contract a multitude of individuals became a collective unity, a civil society. Rousseau said that by virtue of this contract everyone while uniting herself/himself to all remains as free as before.

There was only one contract which was social as well as political. The individual surrendered herself/himself completely and unconditionally to the will of the body of which s/he became a member. The body so created was a moral and collective body and Rousseau called it the general will. The unique feature of the general will was that it represented collective good as distinguished from the private interests of its members.

Early law was more communal than individual and the unit of society was not the individual but the family. Society has moved from status to contract and not from contract to status as the theorists of the social contract argued. According to Sir Henry Maine contract is not the beginning of society but the end of it.
Organismic Theory of Society

This view, at least as ancient as the contract idea, conceives society as a biological system, a greater organism, alike in its structure and its functions. This theory can even be dated back to Plato and Aristotle.

Plato compared society and state to a magnified human being. He divided society into three classes of rulers, the warriors and artisans based upon the three faculties of the human soul that is wisdom, courage and desire. Aristotle drew a comparison between the symmetry of the state and symmetry of the body and firmly held that the individual is an intrinsic part of society.

The parallelism between an individual organism and social organism has been worked out to the minutest possible extent by Herbert Spencer during the recent times.

The organismic theory considers society to be a unity similar to that which characterizes a biological organism. The union of individuals forming the society has been described as similar to the union between the several parts of an animal body, wherein all parts are functionally related. Just as the body has a natural unity, so has a social group. The animal body is composed of cells, so is the society composed of individuals, and as is the “relation of the hand to the body or the leaf to the tree, so is the relation of human beings to society. Human beings exist in society and society in human beings”.

The ancient and medieval writers had merely drawn an analogy between the society and an organism. They held that the society resembled an organism. But the writers of the 19th century regarded society as an organism. They tried to analyze the structure and function of society in comparison with those of an organism.

Views of Herbert Spencer

English social philosopher Herbert Spencer has been the chief exponent of this theory. He said that society is an organism and it does not differ in essential principle from the other biological organisms. The attributes of an organism and the society, he maintained, are similar. Both exhibit the same process of development. The animal and social bodies, Spencer affirmed, begin as germs, all similar and simple in structure. As they grow and develop, they become unlike and complex in structure. Their process of development is the same, both moving from similarity and simplicity to dissimilarity and complexity. “As the lowest type of animal is all stomach, respiratory surface, or limb, so primitive society is all warriors, all hunter, all builder, or all tool-maker. As society grows in complexity, division of labour follows.

In each case there is mutual dependence of parts. Just as the hand depends on the arm and the arm on the body and head, so do the parts of social organism depend on each other. Every organism depends for its life and full performance of its functions on the proper coordination and interrelation of the units. As the diseased condition of one organ affects the health and proper functioning of other organs, similarly, individuals who form society are inseparably connected with one another for the realization of their best self. There is so much dependence of one on the other that the distress of one paralyses the rest of the society. The society and organism, it is pointed out, are subject to wear and tear and then replacement. (Just as cell
tissues and blood corpuscles in the animal organism, wear out and are replaced by new ones, in the same manner, old, infirm, and diseased persons die giving place to newly born persons).

**Spencer** gives striking structural analogies between society and organism. He says, society, too, has three systems corresponding to the (a) sustaining system, (b) the distributary system, and (c) the regulating system in an organism.

The sustaining system in an organism consists of mouth, gullet, stomach and intestines. It is by means of this system that food is digested and the whole organic machine is sustained. Society has its own sustaining system which refers to the productive system comprising the manufacturing districts and agricultural areas. The workers, i.e., the men who farm the soil, work the mines and factories and workshops are the alimentary organs of a society.

The distributors system in an organism consists of the blood vessels, heart, arteries and veins and they carry blood to all parts of the body. Means of communication and transport and along with them the wholesalers, retailers, bankers, railway and steamship men and others may correspond to the distributor or vascular system of an organism. Society’s Cells are individuals only. And what the arteries and veins mean to the human body, roads, railways, post and telegraph services, institutions and associations, mean to society.

Finally, the regulating system is the nerve-motor mechanism which regulates the whole body. Government in society regulates and controls the activities of the individuals. The professional men-doctors, lawyers, engineers, rulers, priests, the thinkers, in short, perform the functions of the brain and the nervous system. Further, as Spencer opined society also passes through the organic processes of birth, youth, maturity, old age and death.

In a nutshell, **Spencer** indicates that society resembles an organism in the following important respects.

(i) Society like organism grows or develops gradually. The human organism goes through the laws of development, maturation and decline. Similarly society also passes through some taws such as the laws of birth, growth and change or decay.

(ii) Both society and organism begin germs.

(iii) Society and organism both exhibit differential structure functions.

(iv) Both society and organism are composed of units. Society is composed of the individuals and thus, individuals are considered as the units of society. Similarly, organism is also composed of different organs such as eyes, ears, hands, legs, head etc., and these are regarded as the units of an organism.

(v) In both society and organism there exists close integration or interdependence of parts. Just as the different parts of the organism are mutually interdependence and on the whole, also the individuals in a dependant are mutually interdependent like the cells in an organism dependent in the whole.

**Murray** sums up the points of resemblance between a society and an individual organism as noted by Spencer in the following ways:

(a) Society as well as individual organism grows in size.

(b) They grow from comparatively a simple structure to that of an increasingly complex one.
(c) Increasing differentiation leads to increasing mutual dependence of the component parts. The life and normal functioning of each becomes dependent on the life of the whole.
(d) The life of the whole becomes independent and lasts longer than the life of the component.

However, Spencer is of the view that society differs from human organism in the following important respects:

(i) In organic growth, nature plays a dominant and organismic naturally grows. Social growth may be checked or stimulated by human beings themselves.
(ii) The units of a society are not fixed in their respective positions like those of the individual organism.
(iii) In an organism, consciousness is concentrated in the small part of the aggregate, that is, in the nervous system while in a society it is diffused throughout whole aggregate.

Relationship between the Individual and Society

According to Peter Berger, society not only controls our movements but shapes our identity, our thought and our emotions. The structures of society become the structures of our own consciousness. Society does not stop at the surface of our skins. We are entrapped by our own social nature.

Berger is of the opinion that the walls of our imprisonment were there before we appeared on the scene but they are ever rebuilt by ourselves. We are betrayed into the captivity ourselves. We are betrayed into the captivity with our own cooperation.

Berger emphasizes that it was there before we were born and it will be there after we are dead. Our lives are but episodes in its majestic march through time. In sum society is the walls of our imprisonment in history.

According to Emile Durkheim, society confronts us as an objective fact. Society is external to ourselves. It encompasses our entire life. The institutions of society pattern our actions and even shape our expectations. We are located in society not only in space but also in time. Our society is a historical entity that extends beyond the temporary life of any individual.

According to John Holmwood, Human beings are social animals and organize their activities in groups. The term “society” is used to describe a level of organization of groups that is relatively self-contained. However, the boundedness of groups is always relative and so sociologists may refer to human society, where the reference is to the interdependencies among all social groups, or to subgroups such as family society, where the reference is to the typical interactions among the individuals making up a grouping of close kin. Equally the term “society” may be used to indicate the wider activities of those under the authority of a particular state, for example, Indian society, British society, French society or German society.

The term “society” came into usage in the 18th century with the rise of European modernity and its distinctive public sphere of civil society and state. The relative openness of association and the range of cultivated activities available created a space for social
intercourse among the better-off, who would go out into “society”, meaning “high society”. This period coincided with the emergence of social theory and its differentiation from political theory, as writers became interested in the distinctiveness of modernity and its institutions. With the development of disciplinary social sciences and the formation of sociology as a distinct discipline, sociation and its differentiated forms were seen as the special object of sociology.

The German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies proposed a highly influential distinction between Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (association) to capture the difference between pre-modern and traditional types of societies. Gemeinschaft is characterized by ties of reciprocity and mutuality; customs predominate and they are largely rural. Gesellschaft is characterized by voluntary associations and exchange relationships; rational calculation predominates and such societies are urban and cosmopolitan.

Functionalist and associated structurally oriented sociologies provide an analytical definition of society. It is associated with the level of the social system. Each social system must meet functional imperatives (or structural principles) and societies are classified according to the degree of specialized institutional development around each function. Modern society is characterized by specialized and separated institutions of economy, polity, legal system and societal community (of voluntary association); each is a subsystem and the ensemble of subsystems makes up modern society.

In Marxism, where the mode of economic production is held to dominate, other institutions of law, politics and ideology are sometimes characterized as the social formation. The term “society” is rejected as obscuring the real determinations at work. In liberalism, which gives priority to the market economy, albeit seeing this as positive, there is also suspicion of the term “society”, on whose behalf the state might act in order to restrict the market. Feminists and postcolonial theorists have criticized the dominant sociological representations of society. For Feminists, the sociological concept of society neglects gendered relationships within the family and how these structure other social institutions. For postcolonial proponents, the idea of society as a relatively self-sufficient entity has meant the neglect of the colonial relationships integral to modernity.

References


**Questions**

1. How is the Social Contract theory different from the Organismic theory?
4. Discuss Herbert Spencer’s contribution to the Organismic theory.
5. Elucidate the functionalist understanding of the social system.
6. How is the functionalist understanding of the social system different from liberal, feminist and Marxist approaches to the social system?