Society and Community in Sociology

Meaning, Characteristics & Key Differences

Introduction

Sociology, as the scientific study of human society, focuses on understanding social relationships, shared cultures, and collective life. Among its foundational concepts, **Society** and **Community** are two key building blocks of human social organization. Although they appear quite similar, they differ in scale, structure, and emotional belongingness.

For sociology aspirants preparing for **UPSC, UGC-NET JRF, and State PSCs**, having conceptual clarity about society and community is essential. This article explains their meaning, characteristics, and differences with support from well-known sociological definitions.

What is Society? – Meaning and Explanation

A **society** is a large system of social relationships formed by individuals who interact with each other and share a common territory and culture. It includes both **cooperation and conflict**, ensuring that social life continues in an organized manner.

Key Sociological Definitions of Society

- **MacIver & Page:**
  "Society is a web of social relationships."

- **Emile Durkheim:**
  "Society is not a mere sum of individuals, but a reality sui generis."

- **Max Weber:**
  "Society is an association of individuals sharing common interests and institutions."

- **Talcott Parsons:**
  "Society is a social system made of interrelated parts functioning to maintain equilibrium."

- **G.H. Mead:**
  "Society is the interaction of minds."

- **Kingsley Davis:**
  "Society refers to a group of people living together with a shared culture."

Characteristic Features of Society

1. **Collective Interaction:** Society involves interactions among individuals who share a common territory and are connected through social relationships and institutions. (Interaction + interdependence among members)

2. **Complexity:** Societies are often characterized by complexity, with diverse social structures, roles, norms, and institutions that shape individual behavior and collective life. (Large and complex social system)

3. **Social Order:** Societies maintain social order through the establishment of norms, laws, and institutions that regulate behavior and resolve conflicts. (Regulated by norms, values, and institutions)

4. **Division of Labor:** Societies typically exhibit a division of labor, where individuals specialize in different roles and occupations to meet the diverse needs of the community. (Has both cooperation and conflict)

5. **Cultural Diversity:** Societies encompass a range of cultural practices, beliefs, and values, reflecting the diversity of its members and their historical and geographical contexts.

6. Self-sufficient and continuous

7. Exists even without emotional attachment

What is Community? – Meaning and Explanation

A **community** is a smaller social group within a society where people live together, share common interests, and develop strong **emotional bonds** and a **sense of belonging**.

Key Sociological Definitions of Community

- **Ferdinand Tönnies (Gemeinschaft):**
  Community represents **intimate and personal relationships** based on shared values and traditions.

- **Robert Park:**
  "Community is a network of social relationships within a locality, bound by common interests."

- **Georg Simmel:**
  Community is where individuals are deeply integrated in collective unity.

Characteristic Features of Community

1. **Shared Identity:** Communities are characterized by a sense of shared identity and belongingness among its members, often based on common cultural, ethnic, religious, or geographical ties.

2. **Social Cohesion:** Communities foster social cohesion and solidarity through interpersonal relationships, mutual support, and collective activities that reinforce a sense of community spirit.

3. **Localized Interaction:** Communities are typically localized, with members residing in close proximity to one another, facilitating frequent face-to-face interactions and social bonds.

4. **Community Sentiment:** Community members often exhibit a strong emotional attachment and loyalty to their community, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual obligation.

5. **Shared Resources:** Communities often share common resources, facilities, and services, which contribute to the well-being and functioning of the community as a whole.

Key Differences Between Society and Community

1. **Scale:**

   o Society encompasses a larger group of people interacting within a broader territory.

   o Community refers to a smaller, more localized group of individuals sharing common characteristics and residing in close proximity.

2. **Scope of Interaction:**

- o In society, interactions among individuals can be impersonal and may not always involve strong social ties.

- o Community interactions are often characterized by strong interpersonal relationships and a sense of shared identity and belongingness.

3. **Level of Complexity:**

- o Societies tend to be more complex, with diverse social structures, institutions, and norms governing behavior.

- o Communities are relatively simpler, with fewer formal structures and norms, often relying on informal social mechanisms for cohesion.

4. **Cultural Diversity:**

- o Societies encompass a wide range of cultural, ethnic, and social diversity, reflecting the complexity of its members and their interactions.

- o Communities may exhibit cultural homogeneity or diversity, depending on the shared characteristics and composition of its members.

5. **Geographical Scope:**

- o Societies can span across regions, countries, or even continents, encompassing diverse populations and territories.

- o Communities are typically localized to specific neighborhoods, villages, or towns, with members residing in close proximity to one another.

6. **Sense of Belonging:**

- o In society, individuals may have a weaker sense of belongingness to the larger group, as interactions can be more impersonal and diverse.

- o Communities foster a strong sense of belongingness and solidarity among its members, often based on shared experiences, values, or traditions.

7. **Functionality:**

o Societies serve broader functions such as governance, economic organization, and cultural transmission, with formal institutions playing a significant role.

o Communities often focus on meeting the social, cultural, and emotional needs of its members, relying on informal networks and communal activities.

Quick Revision Table

Feature	Explanation
People + Interaction + Territory	Society exists wherever people interact within a geographical boundary
Complexity	Different roles, norms, and institutions regulate social behavior
Social Order	Laws, values, and norms maintain stability
Division of Labour	Occupational specialization for societal needs
Cultural Diversity	Variety of beliefs, values, traditions, and lifestyles
Self-sufficiency	Fulfills major human needs (economic, political, cultural)
Secondary relationships	Relationships may be formal and indirect
Continuity over generations	Society persists even when individuals change

Characteristics of Community

Feature	Explanation
Localized Group	Lives within a specific area such as a village, town, or neighborhood
Community Sentiment	"We-feeling" and emotional attachment among members
Shared Identity & Culture	Common traditions, customs, and lifestyle

Primary Relationships	Face-to-face and personal interactions
Social Cohesion	Unity, mutual help, and strong social support systems
Shared Resources	Common spaces, institutions, and collective welfare

Key Differences Between Society and Community

Basis	Society	Community
Size	Broad, large-scale	Smaller and localized
Nature of Relationships	Mostly formal and secondary	Personal and primary
Territory	May or may not have territorial limits	Always territorially rooted
Emotional Bond	Optional	Strong sense of belonging
Complexity	Highly complex with multiple institutions	Less complex and simple
Social Composition	High cultural diversity	May have shared cultural traits
Function	Political, economic, cultural organization	Social and emotional support
Dependence	Self-sustaining	Part of larger society

Relationship Between Society and Community

Society and community are **interdependent**:

Society	Community
Larger social structure containing many communities	Exists only within the framework of society
Ensures order and institutions	Provides identity and emotional security
Macro-level organization	Micro-level social grouping

Example for clarity
→ If the **World** is considered a society, **India** becomes a community
→ If **India** is society, **Uttar Pradesh** becomes a community
→ If **UP** is society, **Mathura** becomes a community

Summary

Society	Community
Macro social system	Micro social group
Includes conflict + cooperation	Primarily unity and cohesion
Indirect/Secondary relations	Direct/Primary relations
Governed by institutions	Governed by shared sentiments

In short, **every community is a part of a society**, but every society is not a community.

Conclusion

Society and community form the core structure of human social life. Society provides the **framework of institutions and roles**, while community offers **emotional bonding and solidarity**. Understanding both concepts helps us analyze how humans organize themselves from local groups to global networks.

For sociology learners and civil service aspirants, mastering these concepts provides a strong foundation for studying **social structures, cultural systems, social change, and rural–urban dynamics**.