**SOCIAL GROUPS: THE MEANING, CHARACTERISTICS, CLASSIFICATION AND OTHER DETAILS**

Man’s life is a group life to a large extent. If a person lives in society, he typically is also a member of a number of groups which may themselves be considered as existing in a society. A group is a number of people involved in a pattern of association with one another. Typical groups are a clique of friends, a political party, and a sports club.

The key to the nature of human grouping is the notion of association. Groups are created and maintained because they enable individual members to attain certain goals or interests which they hold in common. Our social behaviour and personalities are shaped by the groups to which we belong. Throughout his life, individual is a member of various groups, some are chosen by him, others are assigned to him at birth.

Groups constitute the complex pattern of the ‘social structure’. Groups are a part of society.

**Meaning of Social Groups:**

Two or more persons in interaction constitute a social group. It has common aim. In its strict sense, group is a collection of people interacting together in an orderly way on the basis of shared expectations about each other’s behaviour. As a result of this interaction, the members of a group, feel a common sense of belonging.

A group is a collection of individuals but all collectivities do not constitute a social group. A group is distinct from an aggregate (people waiting at railway station or bus stand) member of which do not interact with one another. The essence of the social group is not physical closeness or contact between the individuals but a consciousness of joint interaction.

This consciousness of interaction may be present even there is no personal contact between individuals. For example, we are members of a national group and think ourselves as nationals even though we are acquainted with only few people. “A social group, remarks Williams, “is a given aggregate of people playing interrelated roles and recognized by themselves or others as a unit of interaction.

The Sociological conception of group has come to mean as indicated by Mckee, ” a plurality of people as actors involved in a pattern of social interaction, conscious of sharing common understanding and of accepting some rights and obligations that accrue only to members.

According to Green, “A group is an aggregate of individuals which persist in time, which has one or more interests and activities in common and which is organised.”

According to Maclver and Page “Any collection of human beings who are brought into social relationship with one another”. Social relationships involve some degree of reciprocity and mutual awareness among the members of the group.

Thus, a social group consists of such members as have reciprocal relations. The members are bound by a sense of unity. Their interest is common, behaviour is similar. They are bound by the common consciousness of interaction. Viewed in this way, a family, a village, a nation, a political party or a trade union is a social group.

In short, a group means a group of associated members, reciprocally interacting on one another. Viewed in this way, all old men between fifty and sixty or men belonging to a particular income level are regarded as ‘ aggregates’ or ‘quasi-groups’. They may become groups when they are in interaction with one another and have a common purpose. People belonging to a particular income level may constitute a social group when they consider themselves to be a distinct unit with special interest.

There are large numbers of groups such as primary and secondary, voluntary and involuntary groups and so on. Sociologists have classified social groups on the basis of size, local distribution, permanence, degree of intimacy, type of organisation and quality of social interaction etc.

**Characteristics of Social Groups:**

**Following are the important characteristics of social group:**

**1. Mutual Awareness:**

The members of a social group must be mutually related to one another. A more aggregate of individuals cannot constitute a social group unless reciprocal awareness exist among them. Mutual attachment, is therefore, regarded as its important and distinctive feature. It forms an essential feature of a group.

**2. One or more Common Interests:**

Groups are mostly formed for the fulfillment of certain interests. The individuals who form a group should possess one or more than one common interests and ideals. It is for the realization of common interests that they meet together. Groups always originates, starts and proceed with a common interests.

**3. Sense of Unity:**

Each social group requires sense of unity and a feeling of sympathy for the development of a feeling or sense of belongingness. The members of a social group develop common loyalty or feeling of sympathy among themselves in all matters because of this sense of unity.

**4. We-feeling:**

A sense of we-feeling refers to the tendency on the part of the members to identify themselves with the group. They treat the members of their own group as friends and the members belonging to other groups as outsiders. They cooperate with those who belong to their groups and all of them protect their interests unitedly. We-feeling generates sympathy, loyalty and fosters cooperation among members.

**5. Similarity of Behaviour:**

For the fulfillment of common interest, the members of a group behave in a similar way. Social group represents collective behaviour. The-modes of behaviour of the members on a group are more or less similar.

**6. Group Norms:**

Each and every group has its own ideals and norms and the members are supposed to follow these. He who deviates from the existing group-norms is severely punished. These norms may be in the form of customs, folk ways, mores, traditions, laws etc. They may be written or unwritten. The group exercises some control over its members through the prevailing rules or norms.

**Classification of Groups:**

Different sociologists have classified groups in different ways. Social groups are not only innumerable but also diverse. It is not possible to study all the groups. A systematic study of groups needs a classification. Various thinkers have chosen many criteria or bases for the classification of social groups such as size, kind of contact, nature of interests, degree of organisation and degree of permanence etc. Some of these bases have received more attention than others.

**Dwight Sanderson** has classified groups into three types on the bases of structure such as **involuntary, voluntary and delegate** groups. An involuntary group is that to which man has no choice, which is based on kinship such as the family, tribe or clan. A voluntary group is one which a man joins of his volition or wishes. At any time he is free to withdraw his membership from this group. A delegate group is one to which a man joins as a representative of a number of people either elected or nominated by them. Parliament or Assembly is a delegate group.

**P.A. Sorokin**, an American sociologist, has divided groups into two major types – **the vertical and the horizontal**. The vertical group includes persons of different strata or statuses. But the horizontal group includes persons of the same status. A nation, for instance, is a vertical group, while a class represents horizontal grouping.

**F.H. Giddings** classifies groups into **genetic and congregate.** The genetic group is the family in which a man is born involuntarily. The congregate group is the voluntary group to which he joins voluntarily.

**George Hasen** has classified groups into four types on the basis of their relations to other groups. They are **unsocial, pseudo-social, antisocial and pro-social groups**. An unsocial group is one which largely lives to itself and for itself and does not participate in the larger society of which it is a part. It does not mix-up with other groups and remains aloof from them.

But it never goes against the interests of the larger group. A pseudo-social group participates in the larger group of which it is a part but mainly for its own gain and not for the greater good. An antisocial group is one, which acts against the interest of the larger group of which it is a part. A pro-social group is the reverse of the antisocial group. It works for the larger interest of the society of which it is a part.

**C.H. Cooley** classified groups on the basis of kind of contact into **primary and secondary groups**. In primary group, there is face-to-face, close and intimate relationship among the members such as in the family. But in a secondary group the relationship among the members are indirect, impersonal and superficial such a the political party, a city and trade union etc.

**W.G. Sumner** made a division of groups into **in-group and out-group.** The groups with which the individual identifies himself are his in-groups such as his family, tribe, college, occupation etc. All other groups to which he does not belong are his out-groups.

**Besides these above, the groups can be classified further into following categories:**

**(i) Disjunctive and overlapping groups.**

**(ii) Territorial and non-territorial groups.**

**(iii) Homogenous and Heterogeneous groups.**

**(iv) Permanent and Transitory groups.**

**(v) Contractual and non-contractual groups.**

**(vi) Open groups and closed groups.**

**Primary Group:**

The concept of primary group was introduced by Charles Horton Cooley, in his book “Social Organisation” published in 1909. Though Cooley has never used the term ‘secondary group’, but while .discussing the groups other than those of primary, some sociologists like K. Davis, Ogburn and Maclver have popularised other groups such as secondary groups. Hence, the classification of primary and secondary groups is made on the basis of the nature of social contact, the degree of intimacy, size and the degree of organisation etc.

The Primary group is the most simple and universal form of association. It is nucleus of all social organisation. It. is a small group in which a small number of persons come into direct contact with on another. They meet “face to face” for mutual help, companionships and discussion of common questions. They live in the presence and thought of one another. The primary group is a small group in which the members live together.

In the words of C.H. Cooley “By primary groups I mean those characterized by intimate face to face association and cooperation. They are primary, in several senses, but chiefly in that they are fundamental in framing the social nature and ideal, of the individual”. Such groups in Cooley’s phrase are “the nursery of human nature” where the essential.

Sentiments of group loyalty and concern for others could be learned. C.H. Cooley regards certain face-to-face associations or groups like the family, tribe, clan, play groups, the gossip groups, kinship groups, the community groups, etc, as primary groups. These groups are primary because they are always “first” from the point of view of time and importance. “It is the first and generally remains the chief focus of our social satisfactions”.

**Characteristics of a Primary Group:**

Primary Group possess certain essential traits. The following are the characteristics of Primary group.

**1. Closeness or Physical Proximity:**

Physical proximity or presence provides an opportunity for the development of intimate and close relations. In order that relations of the people may be close, it is necessary that their contacts also should be close.

Seeing and talking with each other makes exchange of ideas and thoughts easy. It is because the members of primary group meet and talk frequently that a good feeling and a sense of identify develop among them quickly. Prof. K. Davis remarked that physical proximity or face-to-face relation is not indispensable for establishing close contact or intimacy.

For example, we may have face-to-face relations with our barbers or laundrymen; there may not be intimacy or primary group relationship with them. On the other hand, we may establish contact with our close friends through the correspondence of letter even though we may not have seen for many years. Relationships among primary group members are based on intimacy not on contractual obligations.

**2. Smallness:**

Primary groups are smaller in size. The smaller the size of the group, the greater will be the intimacy among its members. Relationship can be intimate and personal only in a small group. It is a fact that intimacy declines as the size of the group increases. The limited size of the group facilitates the participation of all its members in its common activity. Better understanding and fellow felling among the members can be possible only when the group is small in size.

**3. Durability:**

Primary group is relatively, a permanent group. Intimacy between the members becomes deeper because they meet frequently and are closely associated with one another. The longer the duration of the acquaintance, the greater the intimacy. All the members of the primary group try to fulfill the condition of continuity or durability of relationship.

**4. Identity of Ends:**

Members of a primary group have similar attitudes, desires and objectives. They all work together for the fulfillment of their common end. Every member tries to promote the common welfare of his group. The experiences, pain and pleasure, success and failure, prosperity and adversity of an individual member are shared by all the members of the group.

The interests of one are the same as the interests of other. Kingsley Davis has rightly remarked “the child’s needs become the mother’s ends”. Such a complete and mutual identity of ends is seldom found.

**5. Relationship is an end in itself:**

The Primary relationship is regarded not as a means to an end but rather as an end itself. If the people make friends for specific purpose or means, we cannot regard their friendship as genuine. A genuine friendship or true love is not formed for a purpose. It is above the consideration of any selfish interest or interests. Friendship is a source of pleasure, it is intrinsically enjoyable. The primary relations are voluntary and spontaneous because they possess intrinsic value.

**6. Relationship is Personal:**

The primary relationship is a matter of persons. It exists because of them and it in sustained by them. It should be noted that this relationship comes to an end as soon as one of the partners disappears from the primary group. The personal relationship is non transferable and irreplaceable.

One individual cannot be substituted by another individual in the same relationship, for example, no one can take the place of our dead friend. The vacuum created by his death cannot be filled in, nor can anybody establish and continue the same kind of relationship with us after his death. If the particular person in whom our interest is centered disappears, the relationship also disappear. Such are the relationships between friends, husband and wife.

**(vii) Relationship is Inclusive:**

In the primary group, we face our fellows as total human beings. A person comes to know his fellow in all the details of his life, as a whole being. A person in the primary group is not merely a legal entity, an economic cipher or a technological Cog. He is all of these rolled into one. He is the complete concrete person.

It thus becomes clear that primary relationships are non-contractual, non-economic, non-political and non-specialised; they are personal, spontaneous, sentimental and inclusive.

**Importance of Primacy Group:**

The primary group is considered to be equally important both for the individual and society.

**Individual point of view:**

1.The primary group plays a commanding role in the development of human personality. It is fundamental in forming the social nature and ideal of the individual. It is regarded as a nursery of human nature. The development of “self’ – the core of personality depends on close, intimate and personal contacts.

2.It is in the primary group – the family – that the individual in his formative stages identifies himself with others and takes over their attitudes. In the family the child acquires all his fundamental habits-those of his bodily care, of speech, of obedience or disobedience, of right or wrong, of sympathy, of love and affection.

3.Similarly, in the primary group – the play group, the child learns to give and take with other children. The play group affords him early training in meeting his equals, learning to cooperate, to compete and to struggle. The primary groups, such as family or the play group, are preeminently the agencies of socialization. That is why the family is often said to be the foundation of society and the play group, the best school for the future citizen.

4.The primary groups not only satisfy the human needs but also provide a stimulus to each of its members in the pursuit of interest. The face-to-face association-ship or the close physical presence of others acts as a stimulus to each. One feels that he is not alone pursuing the interest but there are many others who along with him are devoted to the same pursuit. “Through participation of all, the interest gains a new objectivity”. This feeling stimulates one to keener efforts, by enlarging and enriching the character of the interest.

**Societal point of view:**

1.Primary groups are important not only from the individual’s point of view, they are equally important from societal point of view. Primary group acts a an agency of social control. It not only provides security to the members but also control their behaviour and regulate their relations.

2.The primary groups, such as the family or the play group, are preeminently the agencies of socialization. They transmit culture and in this respect they are irreplaceable. They help the individuals to acquire basic attitudes towards people, social institutions and the world around him.

3.The attitude of kindness, sympathy, love, tolerance, mutual help and sacrifice which provide the cementing force to social structure are developed in the primary groups. From such experiences and attitudes spring the desire for democracy and freedom.

4.The members are taught by the primary groups to work in the society according to their roles with efficiency. In this way, primary groups run the society smoothly and maintain its solidarity. “It is the first and generally remains the chief focus of our social satisfactions.”

**Secondary Group:**

The Secondary groups are of special significance in modern industrial society. They have become almost inevitable today. Their appearance is mainly due to the growing cultural complexity. Secondary groups may be defined as those associations which are characterized by impersonal or secondary relations and specialization of functions. K. Davis says that “The secondary groups can be roughly defined as the opposite of everything already said about primary groups.”

They are also called “special interest groups” or “self-interest groups”. The examples of secondary groups include a city, a nation, a political party, corporation, labour union, an army, a large crowd etc. These groups have no direct bearing on the members. Here members are too many and too scattered. Here human contacts are superficial, undefined and mechanical.

Different sociologists have defined secondary group in different ways. Some of the important definitions are given below.

According to C.H. Cooley, “Secondary groups are wholly lacking in intimacy of association and usually in most of the other primary and quasi-primary characteristics”.

As Ogburn and Nimkoff say, “The groups which provide experience lacking in intimacy are called secondary groups”.

According to Kingsley Davis, “Secondary groups can be roughly defined as the opposite of everything said about primary groups”.

Robert Bierstedt says, “Secondary groups are all those that they are not primary”.

**Characteristics:**

**The characteristics of secondary group are as follows:**

**1. Large in size:**

Secondary groups are relatively large in size. These groups comprise a very large number of persons. For example, a political party, a trade union, international associations, such as Rotary Club, Lions Club, the Red cross Society which consists of thousands of members scattered all over the world.

**2. Formality:**

The relations of members in a secondary group are of a formal type. It does not exercise primary influence over its members. Secondary groups exert influence on the members indirectly. They are controlled by formal rules and regulations. Informal means of social control are less effective in regulating the relation of members.

Formal social controls such as law, legislation, police, court etc. are very much important for the members. Moral control is only secondary. A formal authority is set up with designated powers in secondary groups. Here man is a legal and not a human entity.

**3. Impersonality:**

Secondary relations are impersonal in nature. In the large scale organisation, there are contacts and they may be face-to-face, but they are, as says K. Davis, of “the touch and go variety.” Here contacts are chiefly indirect. The two persons may never see each other. Relations among them are impersonal, because members are not very much interested in other members as ‘persons’.

They are more concerned with their self-centered goals than with other persons. There is no sentiment attaching to the contacts. It is not required that the parties know each other. For example, in the large scale factory organisation, the members are known to each other as the boss, the foreman, skilled workers, ordinary workers etc. The secondary relations are viewed as a means to an end and not an end in itself.

**4. Indirect Cooperation:**

Indirect cooperation is another characteristic of secondary groups. In it, members do different things interdependently. Ali contribute to the same result, but not in the same process. They do unlike things together. In the large scale organisation where division of labour is complex, the members have not only different functions but different powers, different degrees of participation, different rights and obligations.

**5. Voluntary Membership:**

The membership of most of the secondary groups is not compulsory but voluntary. Individuals are at liberty to join or to go away from the groups. It is not essential to become the member of Rotary International or Red Cross Society. However, there are some secondary groups like nation or the State whose membership is almost involuntary.

**6. Status depends upon Role:**

In secondary groups the status or position of every member depends on his role. The determination of his status is not influenced by ascription or by his birth or personal qualities but by the achievement or the role he plays. For example, the status of the President in a trade union depends upon the role he plays in the union and not upon his birth.

**Importance of Secondary Group:**

The secondary groups occupy a dominant place in modern civilised and industrial societies. Where life is relatively simple or where the number of people is small, the face to face group may be sufficient for most purposes. But as the society expands demanding more and more division of labour and specialization of functions, the large-scale secondary groups become necessary. The small communities have now given way to large communities.

**The followings are the advantages of secondary groups:**

**1. Efficiency:**

The secondary group helps its member to improve their efficiency in their specific field of activity and in consequences, they become experts. The emphasis is on getting the job done. Sentiment, emotion is subordinated to achievement. A formal authority is set up with the responsibility of managing the organisation efficiently. The secondary relationships are instrumental in accomplishing certain specific tasks. In this sense, they may be regarded as functional in character.

**2. Wider Outlook:**

The secondary group broadens the outlook of its members. It accommodates a large number of individuals and localities which widens the outlook of its members. It is more universal in its judgement than the primary group.

**3. Wider Opportunities:**

The secondary groups have opened channel, of opportunities. A large number of professions and occupations are opening the way for specialised careers. Secondary groups provide a greater chance to develop individual talents. The talented individual can nor rise from an unknown background to the highest position in business, industry, civil and technical services.

The functions of secondary groups are essential for our society if we wish to enjoy our current life styles. The people are becoming more and more dependent on these groups. The tremendous advances in material comfort and in life expectancy in modern world would be impossible without the rise or goal-directed secondary groups.