
UNIT 25 CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Structure

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25.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- distinguish social structure from social organisation;
- state and describe the meaning of the concept of social structure put forward by the structural-functionalists;
- describe the structuralists' point of view regarding social structure;
- explain the Marxist understanding of social structure; and
- establish the relationship between social structure and social change.

25.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will discuss about social structure. This is a broader and more general concept than other concepts discussed in this block. Generally speaking, anything whether an object or an idea has a structure. It is only through the enduring aspects of a structure that we comprehend its existence. Similarly, we can say that each society in the world has a structure, which can be called its social structure. We can

understand a society through the permanent and enduring aspects of its structure. Put in this way, social structure appears to be a very broad and simple concept. But, while studying a particular social structure, sociologists have differed widely in their interpretation and use of this concept.

It is due to these disparities in perspectives, that discussion on social structure has become conceptually complex and confusing. This need not be so. We maintain that at a simple level, the idea of social structure is basically quite elementary. It helps us to describe the permanent and enduring aspects of social relationships. As such it is a very useful tool to understand social reality.

In this unit you will learn about various interpretations and uses, of this basic concept in sociological thought. We begin with a broad definition of the concept. It has, generally, been understood by the structural—functionalist school of thought as the network of permanent and enduring aspects of social relationships. These relationships are distinct from individual relationships.

When two individuals have a relationship where each expects something from the other, their behaviour is predictable and social. Social behaviour is, thus, an expected and organised behaviour. It is defined by the social norms and given sanction by society. Different sociologists and social anthropologists have defined this concept in various ways. Its use and applicability, this concept is understood in different ways in Britain, France, and in North America. There may be some exceptions, but generally in North America the “Culture” aspect of social structure is given more emphasis. British sociologists like Radcliffe-Brown and his followers give more emphasis to the ‘relational’ aspect. In France, the concept is understood in terms of models, discussed by Levi Strauss. We will discuss more elaborately about these distinctions, as well as, the development of this concept in the next section.

25.2 THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The word structure meant originally, the construction of a building. Gradually, structure began to imply inter-relationships between the parts of any whole. It also began to be used in anatomical studies. The concept of social structure became popular amongst the sociologists and social anthropologists, in the decade following World War II. During that period it became so fashionable to use this term, that it came to be applied to “almost any ordered arrangement of social phenomenon” (see Leach 1968 : 482).

It is essential to look at the different ways, in which sociologists and social anthropologists, have applied this concept. In this process you will learn how it was understood by the structural-functionalists, the structuralists, and the Marxists – the three main schools of sociological thought. But before proceeding to these three views of social structure, let us also look at the difference between social structure and social organisation. We also briefly mention how some scholars used the notion of social structure in terms of social groups and roles.

25.2.1 Social Structure and Social Organisation

The term “social organisation” has often been used interchangeably for “social structure”. Some scholars, like Raymond Firth, have clearly distinguished between both these terms. In his book, *Elements of Social Organisation* (1956), Firth has made this distinction very clear. He regards both these terms as only heuristic devices or tools rather than precise concepts. According to him, social organisation is concerned with the choices and decisions involved in actual social relations; while

the concept of social structure deals with the more fundamental social relations, which give a society its basic form, and which provide limits to the range of action organisationally possible within it.

Firth says that in the aspect of structure, the continuity principle of society is found, while in the aspect of organisation is to be found the variation, or change principle. The latter aspect allows evaluation of situations with the scope for individual choice.

He studied the social structure, and organisation of small communities, such as the Tikopians of Solomon Islands. He described a human community as “a body of people sharing in common activities and bound by multiple relationships in such a way that the aims of any individual can be achieved only by participation in action with others”. This definition of the term “community” subsumes the *spatial* aspect, which is that the people who form the community generally occupy a common territory. Therefore, they are in direct contact with each other, and their relationship is of more emotional and intimate nature, than those found in the complex societies.

According to Firth (1956 : 41) the structure and organisation of the community life possess certain constituents which are essential for social existence within a community. These constituents are : social alignment, social controls, social media, and social standards.

25.2.2 Social Structure and Social Groups

There are some scholars who use the term social structure for only persistent social groups in society like nation, tribe, clan, etc. One of them is E.E. Evans-Pritchard. His theory of social structure arose as a reaction to Radcliffe-Brown’s understanding of social structure. In fact, it was Evans-Pritchard who first brought about the shift from pure structure-functionalism to structuralism in social anthropological studies of societies.

In his book, *The Nuer* (1940), he has dealt with these persistent and permanent groups, whose individual membership keeps on changing, but whose structural form remains approximately the same throughout time. His definition of social structure differs from Radcliffe-Brown’s, in the sense that he is not concerned with the social behaviour of person to person. He has concentrated his attention in his study of the Nuer of Sudan, on the relationship of the homestead with the wider group of the village. The village he studies in relation to the tertiary group-composed of few villages; the tertiary group with the secondary group-composed of several tertiary groups, the secondary group with the primary group-composed of several tertiary groups, the secondary group with the primary group-composed of several secondary groups; and so on, till the whole tribe is included. In this segmentary social structure, clans, lineages, consanguineal and affinal kins, etc. form major components.

Thus, Evans-Pritchard’s conception of social structure has the family or the homestead (as in the case of the Nuer society) as its basic unit, rather than the individuals.

Activity 1

Take a plain sheet of paper. Using the triangle Δ for male and circle O for female of each generation, draw the network of relationships of each of your family member with others in your wider kinship circle. Link members of other families in your neighbourhood as well. Write a short note of two pages on your “Family and social structure”. Compare your answer with those of others at your study centre.

25.2.3 Social Structure and the Concept of Social Roles

Fred Eggan, an American anthropologist, describes that the component or units of social structure, are around the interpersonal relations which ‘become part of the social structure in the form of status positions’ occupied by individuals. He was not the only one who has defined social structure in terms of social status and position occupied by individuals in society.

One of the major theories of social structure has been outlined by Nadel in his book, *The Theory of Social Structure* (1969). He, too, has defined social structure in terms of the roles played by the individual actors in society and their consequent social status. Nadel (1969 : 5) says : “We arrive at the structure of a society through abstracting from the concrete population and its behaviour the pattern or network (or “system”) of relationships obtaining between actors in their capacity of playing roles relative to one another”. His definition of roles is far more specific than the one given by most other sociologists.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

- 1) What is the main difference, according to Firth between social organisation and social structure. Use five lines for your answer.

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- 2) What is the basic unit of social structure in the study of the Nuer tribes by E.Evans-Pritchard? Use one line for your answer.

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- 3) Who defined social structure in terms of social status and position occupied by individuals in society? Use one line for your answer.

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25.3 THREE MAJOR VIEWS OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Now, we look at the three major views of social structure, as propounded by structural-functionalist school, structuralist school and Marxist school.

25.3.1 The Structural Functionalist Point of View

Social structure is one of the core concepts, in the structural-functionalist approach, to the study of society. This approach is founded on the analogy between a society and an organism, which gained credence when it was presented in a scientific way, modelled on the natural science methods of biology. We will discuss here three sociologists from this school.

- i) Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was one of the initiators of this approach, and was also one of the first sociologists to use the term. He was quite fascinated

by the biological analogy : between society and organism, and between social evolution and biological evolution. But in spite of this fascination, he did not make the term “structure of society” very clear.

For him, a society is made up of different parts, all of which have to work in order to remain healthy, meet the demands of the environment and to survive. Just like an organism, the society adjusts and adapts itself to the demands and pressures of social change in order to survive. Unlike the case of animals the “parts” in society are not eyes, ears or a nose but certain social arrangements which are indispensable to the life of the society, since they ensure the discharge of vital functions in society.

Spencer introduced the concept of social structure but did not develop it further. Many of his ideas regarding the study of society have become redundant, yet his ideas on concepts like “structure” and “function” are still popular (see Cuff and Payne 1984 : 28-30)

- ii) Although Durkheim has not directly talked about the term social structure, the understanding of some sort of a social structure is implicit in his writings. He applied the natural science methods, especially of biology, to the study of society. In his book, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, he has clearly stated that “social facts”, are distinct from individual facts. They are, external to the individual and exercise constraint over his or her conduct. For example, laws of a society are “social facts” or the coinage of society is a “social fact”. These are external to all the individual members of the society and at the same time exercise constraint on them.

For Durkheim, social order is a moral order. Society is not just the sum total of all its members but it is a reality *sui generis*, i.e., an emergent reality. It includes the collective values shared by the members of the society in general. According to him all social relationships give rise to expectations of patterns of conduct. In the process of developing the social relationships human beings develop common ways of looking at reality, of evaluating, feeling, thinking and behaving in society. This common way of behaving, acting and perceiving reality leads to the development of a common pattern of values and norms. It gives rise to certain expectations from members of the society and puts constraint on them. The result of this common way of social behaviour, of sharing the collective values, etc. leads to the emergence of the “collective consciousness” in society. We may say that for Durkheim to study the collective consciousness in a society was akin to discussing its social structure. But like Herbert Spencer, he too, did not clearly spell out this concept.

- iii) Radcliffe-Brown defined social structure far more precisely than Durkheim, who was the source of many of his major ideas. However, it was from Herbert Spencer that he borrowed the organic analogy which has shaped his ideas on social structure and his structure-functionalist approach to the study of society.

Radcliffe-Brown (1952 : 11) defined social structure as “an arrangement of parts or components related to one another in some sort of a larger unity”. It is “an arrangement of persons in relationships institutionally defined and regulated”. He has described the “institutionally defined and regulated” relationship as that between the King and his subject, between husband and wife, etc. Thus relationships within society are ordered by various mores and norms.

a) **Social Morphology and Social Physiology**

He has related the concept of social structure to the concept of social function. Concept of function, according to him is the “contribution which a partial activity makes to the total activity of which it is a part” (Radcliffe-Brown 1952 : 181). This concept involves the notion of a structure consisting of a set of relations amongst unit entities. The continuity of the structure is maintained by a life-process made up of the activities of the constituent units. He called the structural aspect of society *Social Morphology*, and the functional aspect of society *Social Physiology*. Thus, for Radcliffe-Brown social structure consists of a network, of person to person relations, and when we study social structure we are concerned with the set of actually existing relations at a given point of time.

b) **Dyadic Relations and Social Structure**

Radcliffe-Brown’s definition (1952 : 191) deals with all social relations of person to person which he calls dyadic relations, such as, between a father and son, or a mother’s brother and his sister’s son. He says that in an Australian tribe the whole social structure, is based on a network of person to person type of relations, which are established through genealogical connections. He includes under social structure, the differentiation of individuals and classes by their social role, for example, the differential social positions of master and servant, of ruler and the ruled, etc.

He distinguished between structure as an actually existing concrete reality empirically given and structural form. Just like the cells of an organism die out and are renewed, so also the individual members of society die and are replaced by new people born. Yet, the form of body remains same and so does the form of the social structure. Even during wars and revolutions, not all the framework of society is destroyed. For example, family institution is not only found universally but persists in all societies in spite of all changes.

c) **Spatial Aspect of Social Structure**

Society as an object of study is difficult to conceive of. According to Radcliffe-Brown (1952 : 193), we do not often find a society or community which is absolutely isolated and having no contact with the outside world. In the contemporary period, we find the network of social relations extending throughout the world, having no clear-cut boundary as such. Thus, for example in the case of India we do not know whether India as a whole is “a society” or whether the several religious groups, linguistic groups, tribal groups, etc. are distinct societies. Therefore, we have to define, first of all, the unit of study and compare it with other units of suitable size to study the structural system as it appears in and around that region. This is the *spatial aspect* of social structure which can vary from a village or family to a whole nation or the world, depending upon the unit of study.

d) **Social Structure and Social Laws**

Law, economic institution, education, moral ideas, values, etc. are the complex mechanisms by which a social structure exists and persists.

Most of the primitive institutions, values and belief appear in quite a new light if seen in relations to the social structure. For example, the 'Potlach' system of the Indians of the north-west America, appeared to the Canadian politicians as a wasteful foolishness. But for the social anthropologist it was a machinery for maintaining the social structure of lineages, clans and moieties, with which was combined an arrangement of rank defined by privileges. There are many other customs which appear ridiculous, but which perform tension removing functions in simple societies.

Law is the mechanism by which the social structure is maintained, social relations between persons and social groups are defined, restored and maintained. The system of law of a society can only be fully understood if it is studied in relation to the social structure and vice versa.

e) **Interests and Values in Society**

The study of social structure leads immediately to the study of interests or values in terms of which social relations are defined. "A social relation", according to Radcliffe-Brown (1952 : 194) "exists between two or more individuals when there is some adjustment of their respective interests by convergence of interests, or by limitation of conflicts that might arise from divergence of interests".

A social relation is not just similarity of interests, but is also based on mutual interests of persons in one another. The social solidarity results when two or more people have same goals and they cooperate with each other to achieve those goals.

f) **Social Structure and Social Institutions**

The study of social structure leads to the understanding of the network of social roles and, therefore, of social behaviour. Society reacts through its sanctions, in a positive or a negative way, to social behaviour. Sanctions maintain a given standard of social life. This include social laws, besides the norms, values, customs etc. of the society. The norms of society function through the social institutions of the society. Radcliffe-Brown (1952 : 10) has defined social institution as a social group which observes certain norms of conduct. The institution of a society, therefore, provides social ordering to interactions of persons in social relationship. This has two aspects, one is in terms of the social structure where it provides the norms to relationships, as within a family. The other aspect is the group or class, in which persons interact briefly or casually. An example of the first case, is the behaviour of a father in the family, of a doctor in the clinic, etc. The second case is that of the behaviour of a neighbour, a friend, etc.

Thus, according to Radcliffe-Brown, institutions, being standardised modes of behaviour, constitute the machinery by which a social structure maintains its existence and continuity.

In spite of his extensive explanations regarding the concept of social structure, Radcliffe-Brown has been accused of being too general. Amongst others, Raymond Firth criticised his analysis of social structure "for not making a distinction between the ephemeral, i.e., short-lived and enduring elements in social activity and also for making it impossible to distinguish the idea of the structure of the society from that of the totality of the society itself" (see Bottomore 1962: 109).

Other major contributions within the structural-functionalist school to the theory of social structure have been given by such sociologists and anthropologists as P.G. Murdock, Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Metton. Murdock used the term “social structure” as the very title of his book in which he has studied the institution of family in several tribes by using Human Relations Area Files, located at Yale University in the USA. He was the first person to collect these files and they remained his principal research tool in all his other works, as well.

Talcott Parsons defines social structure as a natural persistent system which maintains its continuity despite internal changes from time to time, in the same way as the organism does in reality. By natural persistent system, we mean that it has a life of its own. For him, social system is a much wider concept, including both the functional and structural aspect than just social structure.

Merton has also talked about the concept of social structure. Like many structural-functionalists social structure for him is the interrelation of social positions and roles.

25.3.2 The Structuralist Point of View

Claude Levi-Strauss of France is one of the major structuralists, who has given a distinct meaning to the concept of social structure. According to him the term “social structure” has nothing to do with empirical reality but it should deal with models which are built after it. Thus, Levi-Strauss (1953 : 524) says that social structure “can by no means be reduced to the ensemble of social relations to be described in a given society.”

This model building on the basis of existing social relations will help one to clarify the difference between the two closely-related concepts of *social structure and social relations*.

He says that it will be enough to state that social relations, consist of the raw materials out of which the models making up the social structure are built. Therefore, he believes that social structure cannot claim a field of its own among others, in the study of societies. It is rather a method to be applied to any kind of social studies. It is similar to the structural analysis which is current in other disciplines like linguistics, literature, political science, etc. (see Levi-Strauss 1953 : 525-553).

Applying the structuralist method, Louis Dumont (1970) in the study of caste system in India, shows that it is based on the fundamental social principle of hierarchy. He says that the principle of hierarchy, is the core of the caste system, and is opposed to the principle of equality. In this system, man as the member of society is given more importance than the individual. Here the concepts of the individual, freedom, and equality of mankind are relatively less important.

These ideals of individualism, freedom and equality are negated by the three basic features of caste system, such as heredity, hierarchy and endogamy. Like Levi-Strauss, Louis Dumont too has used the kinship system, to explain many of his views regarding the structuralist approach.

25.3.3 The Marxist Point of View

The Marxist theories regarding the concept of social structure are free from the bias of organic analogy of the structure functionalists Karl Marx (1877) has written about the relations of production as constituting “the economic structure, the real basis on which is erected a judicial and political super-structure and to which correspond the forms of the determined social conscience”. In this explanation Marx has used the term structure, not in the biological sense, but in the sense of a building or construction.

But his notion of structure cannot be clearly distinguished from the other related concepts.

Edmund Leach (1968 : 482-88) a British social anthropologist, says that “in Marx’s work there are references made to political, juridical, religious, and philosophical system. But here the term “system” is almost indistinguishable from the above uses of “structure”, “superstructure”, and “form”. In both Marxist and non-Marxist literature, lately, sociologists have added such variants as “infrastructure”, “macrostructure”, “microstructure” etc.

Marx had viewed the historical development of societies in terms of stages such as the primitive, ancient, feudal, capitalist and, finally communist according to their distinctive modes of production. This historical development is governed by the law of “dialectical materialism” about which you will learn more in elective course 3. In each stage of social development, society is divided into social classes on the basis of ownership or non-ownership of property. The owners as a class, have a dominant position in society and they exploit the class of non-owners. The owners are in minority in all societies while the non-owners are in majority. Yet the owners as a class are able to exploit the masses by extracting surplus value of their labour. This exploitation goes on till the masses become united and the ‘seeds of revolution’ becomes ripe. When a revolution occurs, the mode of production changes.

According to Marx, societies will develop till the stage of communism where there will not be any classes; where society will be based on equality in all respects. This view gives an ideal picture of society and is not yet found in reality. Even the Russian and Chinese societies, which are generally referred to as socialist societies, do not reach up to this ideal.

Most of the Marxist sociologists, both in India and abroad, use the concept of class in studying the structure and process of a society.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) Define Radcliffe-Brown’s concept of social structure. Give an example. Use about five lines.

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2) What is the spatial aspect of social structure? Explain in about five lines.

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- 3) According to Levi-Strauss, social structure can be reduced to the ensemble of social relations in a given society. Tick the correct box.

 True

 False

25.4 SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Social structure, in all societies and at all times, experiences change. Change is an essential aspect of all societies, and it is brought about by the process of social evolution, in all societies. Several social anthropologists and sociologists have attempted to study the process of social evolution in societies, which brings about change in the structure and the functioning of societies. Here we are going to discuss some of these processes of change, as explained by some sociological thinkers.

25.4.1 Social Differentiation in Societies

There have been many ways in which social thinkers have explained social differentiation in societies. Social differentiation means the process in which the various parts; i.e., social groups and institutions of society become more complex, and each of them performs some specialised tasks. Some of these thinkers are:

- i) **Henry Maine** has made a distinction between the societies based on *social status* and those based on *social contract*. According to him traditional societies, like Indian society, were based on the relations of social status, where the prestige and ascriptive criteria, determine the status of the person in society. The caste system, especially the *jajmani* system, found within the caste system in India, depicts the relations of social status.

Jajmani system in India was based on the patron-client relationship, where each caste had certain rights and obligations towards the other. In this relationship prestige element, and a sense of obligation of the patron to protect his clients; formed a significant feature. It was above all an economic system which took care of the distribution of agricultural and material goods produced within the society and exchange of services rendered.

In contrast to this society, the society having social contract type of relationship, gives, importance to the role of the individual. Here achievement is more important than ascriptive criteria. All exchanges of goods and services are based on rational grounds of profit. Social values of prestige, of obligations, etc. do not count in this type of relationship. This type of relationship is found in modern, complex societies where all formal exchange are contractual.

- ii) **Emile Durkheim** (1964) has described the nature of social solidarity in two types of societies, depending on the division of labour present in it. Thus, he says that mechanical solidarity is found in pre-industrial societies. In these societies there are relatively little social differentiation in the sense that division of labour in these societies is based on criteria of age, sex, etc. rather than specialised skills. Here solidarity is based on similarities between the members of society. They have more scope for face-to-face contact and share values, beliefs and social norms. Even the roles performed within the society are shared to a great degree. In these societies the “collective conscience” which includes the moral values and belief aspect of society is very strong. Therefore, in these societies, according to Durkheim laws of repressive kind are practised which are based on the idea of punishing the criminal for hurting the “collective conscience”.

In the industrial societies based on *organic solidarity* society is based on differences. All the parts of the society performs a different function which contributes to the life of the total society. Thus, division of labour in these societies is more complicated. Unlike the societies having “mechanical solidarity” these societies are based on restitutive laws which emphasises the reform of the criminal. Here we find numerous occupational roles and social differentiation is based on several criteria’s of occupation, income, power, prestige, age, sex, etc.

25.4.2 Evolution versus Revolution

The concept of social evolution is derived from Darwins’ theory of biological evolution. It implies order, change and progress. It has been used to refer to certain definite stages, through which all societies were supposed to have passed, from a simple to a more complex form. Thus, social evolution like biological evolution, refers to gradual change in which change is measured in terms of greater complex, refers to gradual change in which change is measured in terms of greater complexity of structure. Evolution is a one way process; but in societies we find that sometimes change can be from complex to simple, as well. For example, it has been seen in some places, that a major trading centre or city became a small village, within a period of time, due to economic and political factors. Some of the major social evolutionists are Morgan, Spencer, Henry Maine, etc.

Social revolution implies total transformation of the structure of society, as has been explicated by Karl Marx. According to him the mode of production of a society changes after a revolution, and with it the “super-structure”, (which includes all values, beliefs, all socio-political institutions etc.) also changes. Unlike evolution, revolution is quick and often violent. It could be a non- violent revolution also; such as the one brought about by Mahatma Gandhi during the Nationalist Movement in India. But revolution is never gradual. It is immediately perceptible to the members of the society.

However, the functionalists believe that no society can be totally transformed. Some institutions, like marriage, family, etc. survive all social transformations. These are some of the views regarding evolution, as against revolution, in relation to the structure of society.

25.4.3 Social Structure and Anomie

Emile Durkheim for the first time used the concept of anomie in his book. *The Division of Labour in Society* (1964). He defined anomie as the state of normlessness in society. He said that members of society need certain social conditions for social participation, in which they can attain happiness. If these social conditions are not present the members of that society loose the necessary social integration and become anomie. These necessary social conditions are those where the conduct of men and women is governed by norms, which are integrated and not conflicting in the society. The individual members of the society, should be morally involved with other people in the society.

Robert K. Merton’s use of the term anomie varies from Durkheims’, in the sense that he has defined anomie, on the basis of the gap between the cultural goals in society, and the norms or the available institutional means to attain them. He says that conformity in society is achieved when both the cultural goals and available norms are accepted by the members of the society.

Check Your Progress 3

- Note:** a) Use the space given for your answer .
b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) Describe mechanical solidarity. Use about six lines.

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2) Give an example to show the difference between social evolution and revolution. Use about two lines.

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3) What is anomie? Distinguish between Durkheim’s definition and Robert K. Merton’s definition of anomie. Use about seven lines.

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25.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have explained the history and development of the concept of social structure amongst some of the major schools of sociological thought. We have first discussed the structural-functionalist’s view of social structure as described by Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, etc. It has been shown that the concept of social structure is at the core of their understanding of society.

We have discussed the structuralists point of view. The way Claude Levi-Strauss has defined social structure and made a distinction between this concept and the concept of social relations. His concept is only a model of the actually existing social relations in a society. We have also discussed here the application of structuralist approach by Louis Dumont to study the caste system in India.

We have described the Marxist point of view of social structure which is implicit in the terminology used like “superstructure”, “infrastructure” etc. In this unit we have also described the relations between social structure and social change, including the process of social differentiation in society. We have also discussed here the relationship between social structure and anomie.

25.6 KEY WORDS

- Affinal** : The relationships which are acquired through marriage, such as, wife's brother, husband's sister, etc.
- Analogy** : Similarity or correspondence between two things or ideas.
- Consanguineal** : The relationships which one has through the blood ties, such as, of mother and child, or brothers and sisters, etc.
- Constraint** : Any kind of restraint or compulsion felt by an individual.
- Genealogical** : Any link which corresponds to the descent traced continuously from an ancestor.
- Heuristic devices** : The means to provide aid in solving problems.
- Indispensable** : Something which is essential and cannot be substituted.
- Methodology** : It is the body of methods, tools and techniques of studying society, as in the case of a student of sociology.
- Morphology** : It is the study of forms or structure of animals, plants or the society as in our case.
- Physiology** : It is the study of the life-process or functioning of animals, plants or the society.
- Potlatch** : The practice of holding feasts among the American North-West tribals was known as the institution of potlatch, which is cited as an example of to show how giving of goods to the extent of physically destroying them was linked with the particular tribal group's claims to a higher status.
- Segmentary** : Anything which is divided into different parts or sections.

25.7 FURTHER READINGS

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Leach, Edmund, 1968. *Social Structure*. In David I. Sills (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. Macmillan Company and The Free Press : New York.

Levi-Strauss, C., 1953. *Social Structure*. In A.L. Kroeber. (ed.) *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopedic Inventory*, pp. 524-553. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London.

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R., 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Societies*. Cohen and West Limited : London.

25.8 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) According to Firth, social structure is concerned with the more basic social relations which give a society its basic structure, while social organisation deals with the choices and decisions involved in actual relations.

- 2) The homestead is the basic unit of social structure in Evans-Pritchard's study of the Nuer tribe.
- 3) Both Fred Eggan and S.F. Nadel defined social structure in terms of social status and roles of the individuals in society.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Radcliffe-Brown has defined social structure as "an arrangement of persons, in relationships institutionally defined and regulated". These institutionally defined and regulated network of relationships are of the kind, such as, of mother and father in a family; of a judge in the court, etc.
- 2) The spatial aspect of social structure defines the limit or the size of the society to be studied. It provides the unit of study which can be compared with other units of similar size to arrive at the structural system of that society.
- 3) False

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Mechanical solidarity is the solidarity found in pre-industrial societies. It is the solidarity of likeness or similarities. In such societies social differentiation is minimal and division of labour is based on criteria's of age, sex, etc. Here the collective conscience of the society is very strong.
- 2) Social evolution is a gradual, slow progress while revolution is relatively short and swift change in the structure of society.
- 3) Anomie is the virtual normlessness in society. According to Durkheim when the normative structure of the society breaks down the integration of the individual in the society becomes weak. This leads to anomie in society. For Merton, anomie occurs when there is a gap between the culturally defined goals and the socially available means to acquire them.



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UNIT 26 SOCIAL ROLES

Structure

- 26.0 Objectives
- 26.1 Introduction
- 26.2 The Concept of Role
 - 26.2.1 Role as a Dynamic Aspect of Status
 - 26.2.2 Refinement of the Concept of Role
- 26.3 Classification of Roles
 - 26.3.1 Ascribed and Achieved Roles
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- 26.8 Key Words
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26.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the concept of role;
- describe various models of classifying roles;
- identify roles in simple and complex societies;
- discuss the notions of the multiple roles and role-set;
- describe role signs and role changing;
- explain role conflict and role strain; and
- discuss how role theory can be used in sociological research.

26.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we have covered the concept of role as a dynamic aspect of status. This unit follows the one on social structure. We have indicated how roles have been classified. We also describe roles in both simple and complex system. Next, the dimensions of role are taken up. These include a discussion of multiple roles and role set, role signs and role changing, role conflict and role structure. Finally, we examine the use of role theory.

26.2 THE CONCEPT OF ROLE

In everyday usage the word role is used for the part an actor undertakes in a theatrical production, or in a motion picture. Suppose an actor or actress is assigned a part (role) in a play or motion picture. He or she is now supposed to play the role in a convincing manner. To make the playing of the part successful, the actor or actress, must be able to really understand the role, he or she is playing. This includes portraying the feelings. It also includes portraying the responsibilities, and the gestures that go with the role. The dress and speech must also conform to the role. That is, there must be a certain degree of naturalness and consistency in the role performance. If the actor or actress succeeds in his or her performance, he or she is well appreciated. According to Shakespeare, the world is a stage and each person is playing a role. In this view all people are playing roles in life. However, Shakespeare did not elaborate what he meant by this. In Sociology, role and role-playing have been developed as specific concepts. Let us examine how this is so by looking at the concept of role as an aspect of status.

26.2.1 Role as a Dynamic Aspect of Status

The concept of role was initially developed by Ralph Linton (1936). According to Linton, individuals occupy positions in different aspects of social life. Some examples of this are being a father or mother in a family. A person can also be a teacher in a school. He or she can also simultaneously be an office holder in an association. These positions are called statuses by Linton. In Linton's words (1936 : 113-4), 'statuses are the polar positions ... in patterns of reciprocal behaviour'. A polar position comprises 'a collection of rights and duties'. Thus he conceived of status as a group of rights and duties. When a person is enacting these rights and duties, he is said to be performing a role. For example, when a teacher gives a lecture, he is performing his duty or performing his role of a teacher.

Going on from there Linton pointed out that a role is the "dynamic" side of status. It puts into action the various rights and duties. Thus, a teacher when he/she enters the school begins immediately to display the role that is attached to his or her status.

26.2.2 Refinement of the Concept of Role

The above formulation of the concept of role was refined further by Newcomb and Banton. Newcomb (1942) made a distinction between the expected behaviour related to a position and the actual behaviour. He pointed out that the way in which a person behaves may not always be what is expected of him. The expected behaviour conforms to the position that one occupies. That is to say, one's role is directly associated with one's position, and sometimes a person's actual behaviour, may not conform to his or her expected role. Michael Banton (1965) further refined the concept and noted that a role is a set of norms and expectations, applied to the holder of any particular position. Banton distinguished between:

- i) **norms**, which are to be observed as a matter of course. These carry the message that the holder of a role *should behave* in a particular kind of manner; and
- ii) **general expectations**, which indicate that the holder of a position, *will behave* in a certain way in any specific situation.

To understand Banton's ideas, let us take an example. Suppose Rita is a teacher in a school. In this case, Rita becomes the holder of the position of teacher. The school itself has a set of rules and regulations. These are in existence to guide every teacher's conduct in class. This will include;

- i) going to the class, when the bell rings, and
- ii) take the attendance of her students, and so on.

As is usual these norms have sanctions to back them up and make them effective. Apart from this, there are the expectations, such as being well dressed. Also, good conduct in the class is expected. This second set of expectations, includes efficient teaching and so on. These comprise only expectation, because they are not necessarily backed by sanctions.

26.3 CLASSIFICATION OF ROLES

Various methods of classifying roles have been used by sociologists. We are here concerned with classifications of roles in terms of social status.

26.3.1 Ascribed and Achieved Roles

According to Linton roles can be divided into:

- i) ascribed roles; and
- ii) achieved roles.

The ascribed roles are those obtained at birth. Here role learning commences at birth itself. Such learning pertains to one's caste, class, family, gender and so on. Each caste, for example, has its own set of rituals to be performed at the birth of a child, who is subjected to various ceremonial procedures at every stage of growing-up.

Achieved roles are acquired by individuals through merit and competition. Thus, this method of classification is based on the way that roles are allocated.

26.3.2 Relational and Non-relational Roles

Nadel (1957) adopted the principle of content (i.e., the kind of conduct expected) of roles and divided them, like Linton, into two categories of ascribed-achieved roles. He further subdivided them into relational and non-relational roles. A relational role can be played only in relation to a complementary role, while non-relational role is not dependent on a complementary role. A husband's role cannot be perceived without the wife's role. Similarly a creditor's role is inconceivable without a debtor. Thus, these can be taken as examples of relational roles. On the other hand, the examples of the role of a poet or a scholar do not require a complementary role, in the sense that a poet does not have to interact with others for writing poetry. Thus, such roles can be described as non-relational. Nadel's classification is based mainly on the conduct that is implied in them. Thus, role differentiation for Nadel indicated to what extent holding of one role, is independent of holding or relating to other roles.

2) Is there only one valid way of classifying roles? Use two lines for your answer.

.....
.....

26.4 ROLE SYSTEMS : SIMPLE AND COMPLEX

The concept of role can be applied to understand various aspects of life in both simple and complex societies. As every member of the social group has a role to play, an examination of each role shows, what lies behind cooperation or conflict among its members.

26.4.1 Roles in Simple Societies

Let us consider roles in simple societies-such as those of the Bushmen of the Kalahari desert in southern Africa. Roles among the Bushmen are dependent on (i) sex, (ii) age and (iii) kinship/affinity. These roles form a rigid role system in these societies. The role of spirit-medium, is the only role which is independent of this rigid role system. A spirit-medium functions as a person who can contact the other world on behalf of society. He can do this for determining agricultural or any other problems. Here, we first describe the three bases of roles, and then discuss the role of spirit medium.

- i) Differences upon sex provide different roles to males and females. The male takes care of hunting, making weapons and also assisting his wife in collecting wood and water. His wife looks after the hearth and home. She also helps keep the camp clean.
- ii) Age based roles are also very important. For a boy the transition to adulthood comes when he shoots a buck. Following this he is decorated with facial and chest scars. He is also free to marry. He may marry a baby, but the marriage becomes effective only when she matures. Bushmen respect their elders. In old age men and women, take on the role of experts on traditional myths and legends, and family history.
- iii) The ties of kinship and affinity define mutual obligations among the people. Mothers and fathers bring up the children in the traditional way. The grown up children have a set of mutual obligations with their parents. The relationship between husband and wife, also determines the allocation of roles. Again a marriage can be severed very easily. However, divorce is rare, and so are marital quarrels. Marriage between closely related persons is avoided. This is to keep kin ties clear.

These distinctions of sex, age and kinship are all represented in organising socio-political life of the bands. The leader of a band is selected mainly on the basis of a person’s ability to plan the band’s movements, and consideration of its resources. This extra responsibility is not rewarded in any way and an inefficient leader can be easily replaced by another person. However, the role of spirit-medium cannot be replaced in an arbitrary way. The old and experienced mediums, choose men of proven healing ability to act as spirit-medium. Thus, the overall system for allocating roles is very rigid. The harsh environment preclude conflicts in roles. In simple societies, physical distinctions are usually not translated into social distinctions. Thus, men and women feel it is wrong to perform tasks that belong to the other. Among the Bushmen, they even have fixed places to sit.’ Let us see how roles are allocated in complex societies.

Activity 1

Prepare a chart of all the roles that you play as a member of your society, beginning from your family. Relate the kind of status that you occupy as per that role and what are the duties or privileges that you enjoy as a result of your status. Write an essay of about two pages on “My Role and Status in My Society”. Compare your essay with your peers at your study centre and discuss the topic with your Academic Counsellor.

26.4.2 Roles in Complex Societies

Often societies have to develop new ways of role allocation. Societies with advanced technologies have to develop, wider range of criteria for allocating roles. For example, problems arise if one tribe conquers another, and wants to administer it permanently. The simple method of role allocation by age, sex and so on is then not workable, because the king must have retainers. He also needs soldiers whose loyalty is primarily to him. This obligation is even greater than the one to their kinsmen. The king rewards them for their services in money. In this type of society the family into which a person is born, becomes important and the family status assumes greater significance. Thus, we arrive at an important basis for role allocation in a relatively more complex society. In such circumstances, there are developed new criteria for role allocation. Social strata are one such criterion.

i) Social Strata

Clear social strata (estates) make their presence: nobles, commoners and serfs. All the people in the same strata lead a similar-existence. They also have the same obligations and privileges towards the king. Although more flexible than the rigid role system in simple societies, social strata can, become so rigid that they cannot be entered except by birth. After birth they cannot be left. An example of this is the caste system. In India, under Hinduism everyone belongs to a caste.

Caste members pursue the same occupations and have the same religious rites. They are governed by prescribed rules, in the matters of eating and social mixing with other castes. If they contact lower castes they must cleanse themselves of pollution. Similarly in the medieval period, feudal system gave rise to a series of distinct groups (nobels, clergy, commoners, peasants) in Western Europe. A pattern of closed social strata was formed on the basis of these groups.

ii) Specialisation and Diversification

In Industrial systems of today the categories of sex, age and kinship; retain their importance for role allocation, but, the major factor is the increased specialisation of social tasks. There is also a diversification of society into very many sectors with their own rules. Even the smallest of an organisations role have to be defined clearly. Even a small roadside restaurant will have specialist cooks, washerman, cleaners, waiters, gardener, manager and so on. When these roles are all well-defined, there are fewer frictions.

Let us suppose that this restaurant expands, and begins to run its own tours. It then launches its own car rental service. As a consequence the roles needing to be played

will be multiplied. Industrial societies require highly complex incentives. They also require a great deal of flexibility. Large business concerns cannot depend on one person alone. Records and files must be kept meticulously. Rules and regulations

imply much record keeping. The personal touch is lost, and the needs of the complex system very often begins to dominate human beings.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) Rules in a simple system are very many and also very difficult to play. Tick the correct box.

Yes No

2) In a complex society roles are very specialised. Comment using about five lines.

.....

26.5 DIMENSIONS OF ROLES

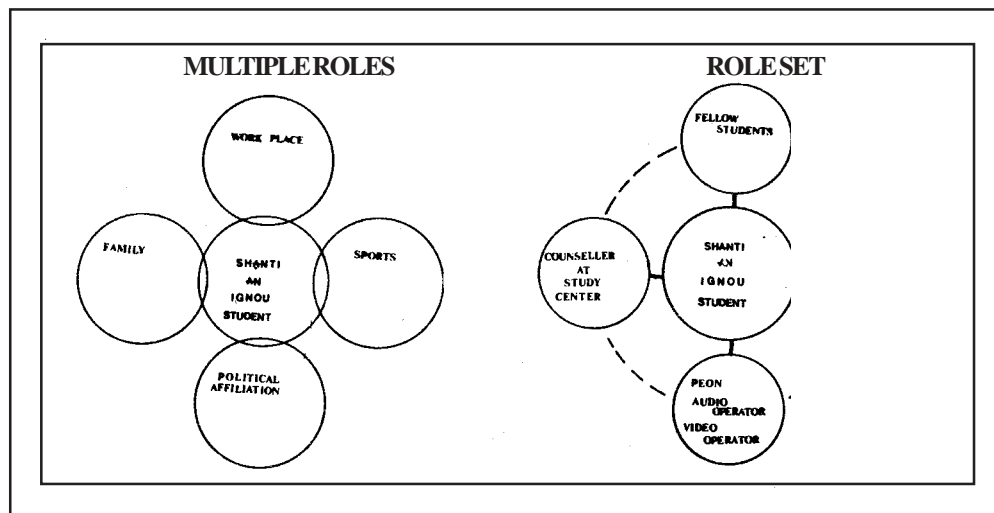
Now, we look at various aspects of the concept of role. First, we speak of the array of roles that an individual may perform, then we discuss the different role-relationships which make up a role-set. Similarly, we discuss the array of role sign, changing of roles, role conflict and strain.

26.5.1 Multiple Roles and Role-set

It is important to realise that one person can occupy more than one role. For example, in the area of kinship alone, one cannot avoid holding many roles at the same time. Try to count how many kinship roles you occupy. In the modern times, we find that people have several roles in other areas of social life than kinship. For example, besides being a son/daughter, brother/sister, husband/wife, father/mother etc., you are an IGNOU student, the citizen of your nation, and you may be occupying many other roles of various types. Occupying of many roles is given the term multiple roles.

Of these multiple roles, some are played together while others are separated. Similarly, some may be carried out in a sequence and other over many years. It is quite common to observe the situation of intra-role conflict, because often a person occupying several roles faces opposite expectations in different role sectors.

While playing one role, a person is linked with many ‘role-others’. According to Merton (1968-84) these ‘role-others’ with regard to a particular person form his/her role-set. Merton distinguishes this idea of role-set from multiple roles, which are several roles of the same person. A role-set, on the other hand, refers to ‘role-others’ in relation to a person playing a role. For example, a student of IGNOU will carry on his/her role (as a student) in relation to specific ‘role-others’ such as the counsellor, fellow students, the librarian, the audio/video operator, the peon at the study-centre. Thus, in relation to a student, all these are ‘role-others’ from role-set. The following diagrams clearly show the difference between multiple roles and a role-set.



26.5.2 Role Signs

The area of role signs is a vast topic and here we will touch only the main points. In all cultures across the world, we find that costume is basic as a role sign that differentiates males from females. Why is this the case?

This is because these role signs serve as an indicator of differences between men and women. Their roles are also different in the social organisation. Thus a role sign tells us more about a person or group. Just as a broken window is sign of violence and a wasted appearance a sign of ill health, a dress can serve as a sign of a role. There are some roles which have more signs while in other cases role signs are few or not at all. Let us consider a situation where all role signs are removed: the general takes off his uniform, and the policeman follows suit. Men start wearing skirts and saris and ladies pants and coats! What would be the result? Basic information would become muddled up. It would take a long time to find out the fundamental information. Thus role signs provide a better means of conveying information than does verbal communication. It would also become difficult to know what good conduct is, as the examples in daily life will be difficult to follow. Thus, role signs further communication as well as control. According to Banton (1965 : 689-92) signs of various roles can be usefully described in terms of basic, general and independent roles.

i) Signs of Basic Roles

In social life basic roles involve a combination of sexual differences, distinctions of age and domestic relations. For example, first name for two sexes are almost always different. Again in both cases, male and female, ways of dressing up, kind of work taken up generally differ as the infant boy/girl matures into adolescence; and then into a young man/woman. In modern Western society efforts are being made to bring about egalitarianism in matters of domestic relations.

Basic role signs provide us fundamental information about what we might expect in behavioural terms. Thus head gear, wearing of rings, skirts, trousers -all have specific indications.

Activity 2

Identify some signs and symbols used by people in your community which relate to the kind of role they are playing in society and the status which they occupy. For eg. The “mangalsutra” or gold necklace that your mother or wife or you may be wearing which denotes your/her married status. Write a note of one page on; “Role Signs” and discuss it with other students at your study centre.

ii) Signs of General Roles

In using signs for general roles, the idea is to distinguish a role because of its relevance in a particular situation. Secondly signs for general roles, are also allocated on the basis of a role's implications, for other role relationships. The role, that is interdependent with other roles is likely to be distinguished by a role sign. In this way, role signs also serve to control and prevent deviant behaviour. For example in the eyes of an ordinary citizen, the uniform of a policeman gives him power to maintain law and order.

iii) Signs for Independent Roles

As independent roles have few, if any, implications for other roles, they hardly require role signs. When placed within a particular setting, such roles may need some distinguishing signs. Within an organisation, such signs may serve a specific purpose while for outsiders, these may simply be prestige signs. Clearly, signs of independent roles carry a specific meaning only in a limited sense, for example, the badge of a particular office in an exclusive club will have relevance for its members only.

26.5.3 Role Changing

To change roles is often very difficult. The person must know the rights and obligations concerning new roles. He or she must change his/her behaviour accordingly. Other people also have to change their roles towards him/her. Role change, therefore, can be problematic. Let us consider the above with the help of some examples. In almost all tribal societies childhood and adulthood are comparatively difficult. A youth, unable to pass his initiation test, is in a bad position. He may never be able to marry if he lives among the Bushmen! Thus, role changing here, is a must if negative sanctions are to be avoided.

Take another example. In an industrial society which changes rapidly, role models themselves undergo change. None of them can be followed uncritically. There is no ready way in which role change can be made.

Let us consider adulthood. This implies readiness for marriage. 'This involves a role change. It is also a fact which alters social relations. All these require alteration of role behaviour by husband, wife, relations and friends. In marriage, the bride undergoes a greater change since it is often a time of extreme emotional changes for her. She may have to leave her home and go to the place where her husband lives.

Finally, a word about retirement and death. Retirement tends to be an individual event. Further there is a sense of loss and despair. This comes from being jerked out of a particular routine. What follows is a lack of routine. This can be very disorienting, and it takes a person time to pick up the threads. Death itself, is a period of adjustment for the widow/widower and others. They will now have to take on more responsibilities. Role changes often take long and tend to be a period of frustrating adjustments.

26.5.4 Role Conflict and Strain

Society is structured in a manner that keeps conflict of roles down to a minimum. However, there are occasions that individuals have to play rather incompatible roles. For example, stepfather and stepson, or the role of divided loyalties between two employers. Such situations cause role conflict to increase. Role-conflict comes when commitment is divided between two or more roles. As a result, usually the overall performance suffers.

Role strain occurs in case of situations where a person does not fit into the slot given to him/her. Thus, if a woman is physically mature but does not marry we have role strain. If a woman marries but is sterile, this again creates role strain. The position is very difficult for a barren woman. She cannot lead the life of an ordinary wife. Among the Nuer of Sudan, she can become a diviner or a trader. She is considered to be almost a man. Again, among the Hindus, the spinster creates role strain. In some communities, this is reduced by marrying her to a tree or a fruit. The small number of roles in society also creates strains. There are customs, therefore, which reduce these strains in an innocuous manner. One such device is the festival or carnival which takes place each year. Ranks are forgotten and everybody intermingles. Role adjustment is more difficult in tribal and peasant societies. In industrial societies the chances of acceptance of roles that do not go into a slot are much larger. However, strain does exist whenever a role faces the problems of choice and adjustment.



Role Conflict

26.6 USE OF ROLE THEORY

The concept of role has been applied in sociological analyses of various dimensions of social life. As we record changes in the notions and expectations around particular roles we arrive at the process of social changes. Similarly, in studying role relationships, we focus our attention at the complex nature of organisational links in social life. Here we point out some of such applications of role-theory in sociological research. Both functionalists and interactionists use this concept.

The functionalists view roles as the culturally defined behaviour which is linked with particular social statuses. For them, roles are determined by social values, norms and attitudes. The interactionists believe that the sense of self comes fully through interaction. They emphasise that we learn meanings by interacting with others, and then organise our social life around these meanings. They lay special stress on the interaction aspect than the social role aspect. They discuss roles in terms of individual choices and interpretation of one's roles.

- Complex role system :** In such role systems there is a great variety and specialisation in roles.
- Cooperation :** This implies that members in a team pull together in the direction of the goal.
- Multiple role :** This indicates the fact that every man or woman has to play different roles in different situations. For example, a teacher in the school; a worshipper in the temple and so on.
- Role :** This is a combination of rights and duties. It is the dynamic aspect of status.
- Role-other :** A role-other is a person with whom a person ;interacts while performing a role.
- Role-set :** Here the multi-links of a single role in a single situation are highlighted, eg. see the diagram in this unit.
- Role signs :** These arise when a person is not able to fully play a role assigned to him or her. Eg. a sterile husband or a barren wife.
- Simple role system :** In such social systems, mainly tribal ones, there are few roles, relatively speaking, in the division of labour.

26.9 FURTHER READINGS

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Worsely, Peter, 1970. *Introducing Sociology*. Penguin Books : London Chapter 2, pp. 294-301

26.10 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Individuals have different positions in social life. For example, being a managing director of a company or an editor in a publishing house. Such position are called statuses. A status is, therefore, a set of rights and duties. When a person is enacting these, a person is performing a role.
- 2) No, there are more than one way of classifying roles. One can give at least four different ways of classifying them. Each of these classification has been developed for a specific aim.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) No

- 2) In complex systems, specialisation of social tasks is a necessity. Even in small companies, well-defined roles are needed to make it work properly. Very many roles are subsumed in every endeavour of complex systems.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Role signs give pointers to differences between roles. For example, dresses/costumes differentiate between men and women. Role signs tell us, for example, more about the role of a person.
- 2) False.
- 3) Role strain results when the incumbent of a role cannot properly play it. For example, a lady police officer may find it difficult to handle criminals on the one hand and behave in a lady like manner otherwise, as generally a lady of a good family is expected to behave.
- 4) The interactionists explain the concept of role in terms of individual choices, and interpretation of person's roles.



UNIT 27 SOCIAL NETWORKS

Structure

27.0 Objectives

27.1 Introduction

27.2 Social Network : Basic Concept

27.2.1 The Total Network of Social Relationships

27.2.2 Formation and Operation of Social Networks

27.3 Types of Social Network

27.3.1 Personal and Group-based Networks

27.3.2 Characteristics of Personal Networks

27.4 Ego-Centric Personal Network

27.4.1 Ego-Centric and Non-ego Centric Personal Networks Defined

27.4.2 Problems in the Delineation of Ego-Centric Personal Network

27.5 Personal Network and the Social Structure

27.5.1 Personal Network and Formal Organisation

27.5.2 The Concept of 'Source'

27.5.3 Resource Networks and Resource Groups

27.6 Let Us Sum Up

27.7 Key Words

27.8 Further Readings

27.9 Model Answers to Check Your Progress

27.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- define a social network;
- describe the process of formation and operation of social network;
- discuss characteristics of personal networks; and
- show the relationship between personal networks and social structure.

27.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit follows those on social structure and social roles. It concerns social networks. Networks or social relationships between individuals are the smallest observable units of social behaviour. These are better known as *personal networks* which are, for purposes of study, extracted from the total networking in society. This unit discusses the process of formation and operation of social networks. After examining characteristics of personal networks the unit focuses on ego-centric personal networks,

and describes some problems in applying this idea to empirical research. Then, we examine the relationship between personal networks and social structure. This is explained in terms of relationships formed in formal organisations. We also discuss the ideas of resource networks and resource groups.

27.2 SOCIAL NETWORK : BASIC CONCEPT

The term “network’ has been added only recently to the vocabulary of sociology. It refers to the set of relationships or links, a person has with others. By the fact of birth, one automatically becomes a member of a family network. Then there are social networks which are created out of individual efforts e.g., membership of a club, a circle of friends and so on. The social networks are both structured and created. This means, that networks have a series of social relationships, ordered in a certain way, and secondly they are built by conscious efforts of individuals for certain goals. As such social factors influence the formation of networks, individuals also play an active role in their formation and continuity.

Social networks basically reflect the nature of links between individuals. That is, they show how individuals relate to each other. Those who can be trusted to provide support are recruited into a network, which then becomes a medium of mobilising resources. Defining networks in this way shows us how significant this concept can be for explaining social behaviour in any organisational setting.

27.2.1 The Total Network of Social Relationships

Society itself is visualised as a chain of social relations. This chain includes various kinds of relations, e.g., acquaintance, friendship, kinship, classmateship etc. Some of the individuals in the chain are in direct contact with each other, while others are linked only indirectly. A chain of social relationships among individuals has no boundary except that of the society concerned. The total chain of social relationships may thus be viewed as coinciding with society itself.

Activity 1

Do you think you are linked up with the wider world and societies? This world may include a range of relationships from your friends, family, kinsmen, etc. doctors, hospital staff, schools, teachers, etc. to the global level of influences on you and your people of other societies, such as, the American society, the British and so on through the mass media, satellite channels on T.V., E-mail or Internet Website etc. Write a report on “My Social Network” of about one page. Discuss your report with your fellow students at the Study Centre.

the basic unit of such a chain is the relationship between individuals. The *dyadic relations*, i.e., between two individuals, from the chain interconnected through the coupling links of individuals. We may, therefore, conclude that the concept of total network is oriented to the individual, and we can delimit and extract personal networks out of the total network. However, before discussing the types of social networks, let us first look briefly at the process of their formation and operation.

27.2.2 Formation and Operation of Social Networks

Right from one’s birth, each person becomes a part of a network. The immediate network of newly born human beings, is their families and kin groups. They are introduced to the social networks of their parents. As children grow, they develop social links with other children in the neighbourhood and school. They begin to look up to their peer groups. By the time they are adults, they are tied with wider networks,

formed on the basis of their profession in groups, social clubs, political parties, affinal relatives etc. The basic parameters of social status, such as caste, class, sex, education, occupation etc., determine how many and what type of networks would be formed. People with more resources and information usually have wider networks. Such persons are able to easily achieve their goals in their life.

The operational nature of social networks is diversified on the basis of social values, beliefs, norms, traditions and customs. Access to information, status and power are achieved through one's social networks. Recent studies on the use of social relationships in finding jobs. Show that knowing people in right places, (also known as 'source') helps young people to find better jobs. The occupational status of the 'source' in such cases, is often linked with the status of the parents of those seeking jobs. In section 27.5.2 of this unit we will discuss the concept of 'source'.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) What is the basic unit of a chain of social relationships in a society. Use two lines for your answer.

.....

2) When does the process of formation of a social network begin? use one line for your answer.

.....

27.3 TYPES OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

While defining social networks, we have discussed how the total network of chains of social relationships covers the society itself. To learn about the types of social networks, we need to focus on the basic unit of relationships between persons. Such personal networks can be extracted out of the total network. In contrast to personal networks, we can also discuss impersonal networks which are based on group relationships. Let us look at both of networks.

27.3.1 Personal and Group-based Networks

A personal network is a set of linkages which an individual establishes around himself. These linkages may be structurally diverse. Some may be based on kin or caste, while others may be based on classmateships, friendship, workmateship and so on. They possess the *morphological* characteristics of *density*, *reachability* and *range* (See Section 27.3.2). They possess also the *interactional* characteristics of *content*, *directedness*, *durability*, *intensity* and *frequency*. If a personal network has the additional morphological characteristic of *anchorage*, or an ego being the anchor of a personal network, then it becomes an ego-centric personal network.

In contrast to the personal network, the group or impersonal network is viewed in terms of the nature of interaction among its members, and in terms of incorporation of its members in the groups. In terms of interaction, we can characterise a group as an aggregate of persons who interact more with each other. Through these interactions

they form a unit, and identify the groups, and thus the members develop the consciousness of being together. In terms of incorporations, the group assumes more formal characteristics such as common interests, right and obligations of members, organisation and structure.

27.3.2 Characteristics of Personal Networks

Personal networks have morphological and interactional characteristics. Morphological characteristics help in the identification of the form of networks, while interactional characteristics of personal networks are discussed in terms of their constituents.

- i) **Morphological Characteristics :** Mitchell (1969) has identified anchorage, density, reachability and range as the morphological characteristics of personal networks:
 - a) **Anchorage :** The word anchorage indicates that the ego is the centre of his network. He or she is its coordinator. Without her or him the network will become amorphous. Thus, emerges an ego-centric personal network. However, an ego may form a personal network without becoming its coordinator. In fact, in a non-ego-centric personal network nobody may act as a coordinator.
 - b) **Density :** The density in personal network signifies the density of social relations. It can be gauged by the proportion of persons in a network, who know one another. For example members of a club have higher density than people in a crowd.
 - c) **Reachability :** The individual who can be relied upon to act as on the request of another individual is reachable or mobilisable. For example, a friend of a friend can be reached or mobilised by a person.
 - d) **Range :** The term 'range' denotes the limit of direct and regular contacts which an individual has. Thus, the total number of persons ego can contact over telephone, letter or personally, is that person's range of contacts. He or she must also be in touch with these 'contacts' regularly.

BOX 27.01

In this context, it is important to know that in the 21st century the very concept of 'network' has changed. It has expanded to include the world at large. This is because the new technologies of mass communication, such as, computers, Internet, E-mail, teleconferencing and so on has expanded the very notion of range and reachability. It is possible to chat with your pen-pal or childhood friend on the internet even though she or he may be sitting thousands of miles away from you. These developments have had a great impact on the very idea of social network.

- ii) **Interactional Characteristics :** There are five *interactional* characteristics. They are *content*, *directedness*, *durability*, *intensity* and *frequency*.
 - a) **Content :** It refers to the normative context in which an interaction takes place, such as friendship, classmateship, caste, membership, kinship etc. For example, family interaction has kinship content and family members behave towards each other on the basis of their kin relationships.
 - b) **Directedness :** *Directedness* means whether the relationship between ego and a member of his network is reciprocal or only one-sided. One

can, put it differently : whether the relationship flows from one direction or both the directions. For example, in friendship, the directedness is reciprocal.

- c) **Durability** : It signifies the continuity and stability of relationship over a period of time. A relationship is durable if interaction between two individuals continues over a period of time and vice versa.
- d) **Intensity** : Intensity refers to the degree to which individuals are prepared to honour obligations. If a member of an ego-centric personal network feels free to dishonour his or her obligation, (flowing from a favour done to him or her by the ego) the intensity of the relationship is low.
- e) **Frequency** : Frequency signifies the number of times the interaction occurs between two individuals. For example, if the individuals meet daily the frequency of their contacts, is high in contrast to a situation in which they meet only occasionally. The higher the frequency of contacts, the greater are the chances of intensity and durability of relationships.

27.4 EGO-CENTRIC PERSONAL NETWORK

It has been already mentioned in section 27.3.2, that a personal network may become an ego-centric network, when somebody emerges as the coordinator of a network. Here we have an example of the kind of problems sociologists face, while applying theory to empirical research. It is easy to define ego-centric personal networks, and identify their characteristics. But when one is conducting research, one encounters a number of problems, in describing the ego-centric personal networks of any individual actor. Here, we first give a definition of the ego-centric personal network, and then discuss the problems in applying this idea to a research situation.

27.4.1 Ego-centric and Non-ego centric Personal Networks Defined

An ego-centric personal network is anchored on an individual. It includes all those persons with whom he or she is in actual contact. Looked at from the point of view of the members of the network, the ego or the individual on whom it is anchored, is the common connection of all of them. It does not mean that it is the only personal network, and all these personal networks may or may not overlap. The following diagram explains the distinction between the two situations.

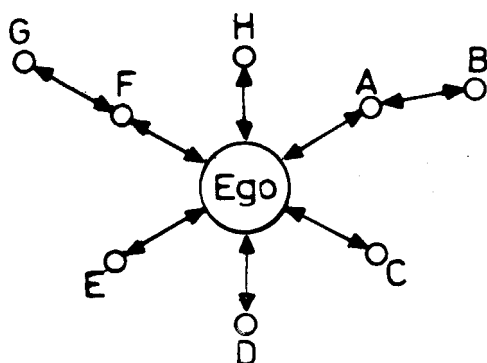


Figure 1

Ego-Centric Personal Networks



Figure 2

The dotted lines indicate the links of A in his ego-centric personal network

In Figure 1 of the above diagram, you have seen the personal network of the ego. It includes ego's direct relationship with A, C, D, E, F, and H and indirect relationships with B mediated through A and G mediated through F. Figure 2 also includes the non-ego-centric personal network of A. In his network are included B, Q, P and R besides the ego of Figure 1. Similarly there can be personal networks of other members of the members of the network of ego. As you can see there is an overlap between the two personal networks. A and B are common to both the ego-centric and non-ego-centric personal networks.

In the diagram Figure 1 and Figure 2 both show the ego-centric personal networks. Figure 1 shows the personal network of ego alone. It shows he has A, B, C, D, E, F. Of these, G and B are indirect contacts. In Figure 2A is shown to have links with ego and these are reciprocal. Thus, two ego-centric networks can be connected and spread outward as a social network.

27.4.2 Problems in the Delineation of Ego-Centric Personal Network

In applying these ideas of ego-centric personal network to empirical research, the most significant problems faced are six in number:

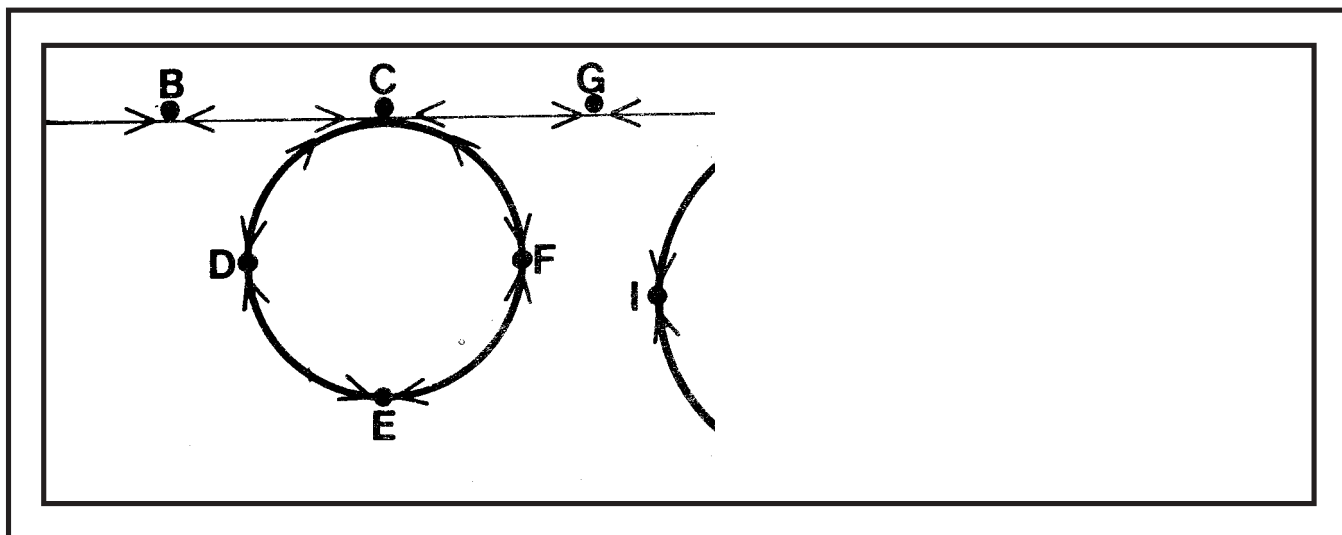
- i) nature of contacts,
- ii) centrality of the ego,
- iii) nature of transactions,
- iv) types of social relations,
- v) mobilisability of the members, and
- vi) identification of the boundary.

i) Nature of Contacts

The social contact, between any two individuals, may vary from a nodding acquaintance and exchange of greetings and pleasantries, (say, in morning walks) to a continual exchange of 'obligations', with built-in expectation of reciprocity. One may have a greeting relationship with many persons in one's neighbourhood or work-place. But can one expect 'help' from all such persons, in all kinds of requirements? Will all such individuals be always prepared to 'help' the ego who is in contact? Obviously not!

ii) Centrality of the Ego

The centrality of the ego is crucial in an ego-centric personal network. An individual may have meaningful contacts with several individuals, on the basis of which a social network may emerge. But he or she may or may not be the centre of this network. In fact, there need not be a centre at all. There could be a situation of a kind of chain of relationships, with a few large or small meshes hanging around the chain, as is depicted below.



In such a chain or mesh of relationship, any one of the members may activate or mobilise others. At the time of mobilisation he or she may be considered the centre of the network. Thus, the centres may shift from one action-set to another action-set. Such chains of links are called non-ego-centric personal network.

The above problem necessitates a distinction between ego-centric and non-ego-centric personal networks. The recruitment of members by an ego, and his or her functioning as the centre of all relationships within the network, make the difference between ego-centric and non-ego-centric personal networks. The latter may not be formed on the initiative of any single person, and nobody acts as its centre or coordinating agency. In this context an action-set would mean, a temporary set of people recruited through various channels to serve some short-term goal.

For example in the diagram on p. 38, we may visualise a situation in which C is the son of D. D approaches E (a doctor) to request F (another doctor) to examine his son C in the hospital of F, and C is examined. This is one action-set in which D has initiated an action of which he may be deemed as the centre. Similarly on another occasion E may initiate an action for achieving some other specific goal. In an ego-centric personal network, all such demands on the network must pass through the centre, or the ego who is the coordinating agency of his or her personal network.

iii) Nature of Transactions

Interactions between the members of a personal network are viewed as transactions. Sometimes even a transaction of market place, may involve a series of interactions. Therefore, transactions signify those sequences of interactions, which are systematically governed by reciprocity. It may be added that reciprocity assumes, that both the parties involved in an interaction are satisfied, both consider it beneficial or profitable. However, two things must be borne in mind.

First, it is difficult, if not impossible, to calculate profitability in all transaction. Secondly, when one does oblige another person, normally he or she does not specify the expectation of the return. He or she may make demands later as a result of several interactions.

iv) Types of Social Relations

In this context, the distinction between expressive and instrumental relationships is relevant. In expressive relationships, one derives satisfaction from the relationship itself. For example, the relationship between a mother and her child. In contrast, an

instrumental relationship is that, in which the relationship is a means to certain ends, rather than an end in itself. As personal networks are formed by individuals in the pursuit of their self-interests, then relationships are basically instrumental. They may sometimes be couched in an expressive form. For example instrumental. They may sometimes be couched in an expressive form. For example, an employee of an organisation may address the wife of his employer as “Mataji” (mother), but in doing so his basic intention is to secure access to the employer through his wife for instrumental purposes. For this he is using the mode of an expressive relationship. While studying a personal network it may be difficult to distinguish between the two kinds of relations. Nevertheless the distinction is important.

Activity 2

Identify at least five social networks in your social life and distinguish between their types, i.e. whether they are expressive or instrumental in nature. Write a report on these five social networks and their nature in about one page. Discuss your report with other fellow students at your Study Centre and also your Academic Counsellor.

v) Mobilisability of the Members

One of the crucial problems in identifying a personal network, is the mobilisability of members of the personal network by an ego. It is not easy to predict whether a member of one's network, will act definitely in accordance with the request of ego. However, there are four major factors which have a bearing on the mobilisability of a member: (a) relative resources of the ego and the member (let us call him alter in accordance with sociological usage) (b) degree of dependence of the alter on the ego, (c) number of intermediaries between the ego and the alter, and (d) The bearing of the demand action on the interest of the alter. On these four factors one can make the following generalisations : (a) The less the material resources of the alter in comparison with those of ego, the greater are the chances of his acting in accordance with the desire of ego, (b) The more an alter is dependent on ego and his network, the greater are the chances of his acting in accordance with the desire of ego. (c) The more the number of intermediaries between ego, and the terminal alter the less are the chances of this acting in accordance with the desire of ego. (d) The less the adverse effect of the demand action on the interests of the alter, the greater are the chances of his acting in accordance with the desire of ego.

vi) Identification of the Boundary

In an empirical research on personal networks, the most difficult problem is the determination of the boundary of a personal network. For this purpose, two criteria are suggested. It is held by some people that all those persons with whom ego is in contact, are members of his personal network. Others object to this criterion on the ground, that all the persons with whom a person is in contact may not be mobilisable. They assert that the criterion should be actual mobilisation in an action situation. The main difficulty in the second criterion is that, if one draws the boundary of a network on the basis of an actual mobilisation in a situation, then the distinction between a personal and an action-set is blurred, (if not lost), because an action-set is delineated in terms of a specific action that brings it into being. A personal network, on the other hand, denotes a set of linkages which exist beyond the duration of any particular action or transaction. Therefore, the boundary of an action-set will vary, while that of the personal network, (if it is conceived as more durable than an action-set), has to be more or less stable. However, its boundary remains indistinct.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) List the morphological and interactional characteristics of personal networks. Use three lines for your answers.

.....

2) Define the ego-centric personal network. Use two lines for your answer.

.....

27.5 PERSONAL NETWORK AND THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE

It may be emphasised that a personal network may become an ego-centric network, when somebody emerges as the coordinator of a network, and an ego-centric personal network may develop into a group. It all depends on the acquisition of additional characteristics, through interaction and change in the nature of social relations. The changes can proceed in the opposite direction as well. The structure of a group may weaken, and it may turn into a personal network or an ego-centric network. This depends on the non-emergence or emergence, of an individual as its coordinator. Thus, personal networks are intimately related to the social structure both in its integrational and disintegrational aspects. They provide a window to look at the social structure both in its integrational and disintegrational aspects. They provide a window to look at the social structure and changes going on in it. As personal networks play an important role in the functioning of formal organisations, the relationship between personal networks and social structure can be illustrated, by showing how personal networks operate in formal organisations. Here, we are taking formal organisation as a social collectivity, and hence a unit of social structure.

27.5.1 Personal Network and Formal Organisations

We can illustrate the relationship between the social structure and personal network, through the study of an interface between personal networks and formal organisations. Before doing so it is in order to explain what we mean by formal organisations.

i) Nature of Formal Organisations

Without going into the technical details, we can say that a formal organisation is a social collectivity, the goals of which are formally defined. It has authority(ies) vested with power. The authorities are expected to mobilise the power vested in them for achieving the goals of the formal organisation. Formal organisations operate through impersonal, universalistic rules and procedures, which are expected to be mobilised across the board impersonally.

ii) Illustration of Formal Organisation

A University may be taken as an example of a formal organisation. Its goals of education are formally defined. It has various authorities such as the Chancellor, the

Vice-Chancellor, Deans, Heads of departments and so on. Each one of the authorities is vested with some defined power to carry out the functions of the university, which may include recruitment of staff, admission of students, administration of educational functions, and conduct of the examinations.

iii) **Formal Organisation in a Traditional Society**

In India, a traditional society, the collectivities such as the family, kin, caste, religion and language, help an individual to achieve his ends through personal and informal relationships. The introduction of formal organisation has created a serious problem. Indians, generally speaking, are used to personal and informal relations. Armed with such relations they feel safe. However, formal organisations function on the basis of universalistic rules and procedures, which operate impersonally and formally. Thus, the juxtaposition of formal organisation with traditional collectivities, such as caste, has created an anomaly.

27.5.2 **The Concept of ‘Source’**

The people who are used to operating on a personal basis do not feel secure with an impersonal system. You must have heard people using the word ‘source’ and trying to find ‘sources’, for getting things done through informal organisations. A source may be conceived of as a person, through whom the power vested in an authority of a formal organisation may be utilised for personal ends. These may or may not be in conflict with the goals of formal organisation.

27.5.3 **Resource Networks and Resource Groups**

These networks and groups are called resource networks and groups. Resource networks are extracts from the total network. They are based on the criterion of shared interest, in the mobilisation of power of formal organisations for personal ends. Therefore, they may be called *partial networks*. They may be either ego-centric personal networks, or non-ego-centric personal networks.

The linkages between the members of a personal resource network may be diverse. They may be based on kin, caste, family, classmateship, etc. An ego may have different degrees of understanding with the members of his resource network, regarding the *mobilisability* of each other. The transactions on which resource networks develop lead to the development of instrumental relationships. Finally, the uncertainties inherent in the mobilisability of members, marks the boundary of a resource network indistinct. Let us now look at the idea of *resource groups*, and functions of resources networks and groups.

i) **Resource Groups**

When the exchange of obligations between the members of a resource group stabilises the unity, then identity and consciousness of kind emerge. Thus, a resource network would turn into a resource group. Its boundary is identifiable and interactions between the members become patterned.

ii) **Functions of Resource Networks and Groups**

The functions of resource networks and groups, may be seen from the viewpoint of individuals, formal organisations and the Indian society. For individuals, they are functional or beneficial because they serve their interest, whether it is in the context of formal organisations or conflicts. They guarantee the requisite support. but for formal organisations they are highly dysfunctional. In other words, they contribute negatively to the achievement of goals of formal organisations, by putting a premium on individual ends vis-a-vis the goals of formal organisation.

The social structure is affected by resource networks in a very fundamental manner. The social relations inherent in resource networks and groups, as particular and personal, and, therefore, may be treated as extensions from the traditional social structure. The traditional social structure, however is based on greater normative and juridical support for the corporate groups. Besides these, love, respect and loyalty play significant roles in the maintenance of the traditional collectivities. In contrast to such collectivities, resource networks are based on instrumental relationships, which affect a much larger number of social interactions. The underlined expectations about reciprocal obligations in such relationships, bring uncertainty and fluidity in social relationships, whether in the traditional collectivities or in formal organisations.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) What is the resource network? Explain briefly in three lines.

.....
.....
.....

2) A resource group is one from which one can get a loan without interest.

Yes No

27.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you were introduced to the concept of social networks, which was defined in terms of the chain of social relationships. In this perspective, individuals establish social relations in the pursuit of their self-interests, and the society is viewed as a chain of social relations which forms the total network.

Then, personal network was contrasted with group-based social network. This was followed by an outline of the *morphological* and *interactional* characteristics of personal networks. The morphological characteristics are anchorage, density, reachability and range, while the interactional characteristics are content, directedness, durability, intensity and frequency of interactions. On the basis of anchorage, a further distinction was made between ego-centric personal networks which are co-ordinated by an individual, and non-egocentric personal networks which are not so co-ordinated. However, in a specific situation, for achieving a specific objective, any member can mobilise others. For such an action-set the ego performs the role of the coordinator.

The unit also pointed out the problems one encounters in identifying a personal network empirically. These problems are:

- i) nature of contacts,
- ii) centricity of the ego,
- iii) nature of transactions,

- iv) types of social relations,
- v) mobilisability of the members, and
- vi) identification of the boundary.

This discussion was followed by a focus on the relationship between personal networks, and the social structure. This relationship was illustrated by describing the introduction of formal organisations in a traditional society. It was pointed out that personal networks and groups are formed for the mobilisation of the power of formal organisations for personal ends. Such networks and groups have been termed as resource networks and resource groups.

27.7 KEY WORDS

Anchorage	: Ego as the centre of his/her network.
Centricity	: The central nature of ego in a network.
Density	: The proportion of persons in a network who know each other.
Directedness	: Whether a relation is one sided or reciprocal.
Ego	: Terms used to denote an individual.
Expressive Relationship	: Relationship in which one derives satisfaction from the relationship itself.
Formal Organisation	: A social collectivity, the goals of which are formally defined.
Mobilisability	: The ability to put into circulation the resources or contacts for action.
Morphological	: Those features which help in the form and structure of something e.g., density, reachability etc. of personal networks.
Personal Network	: This indicates all those persons with which ego is in contact.
Range	: Denotes the limit or span of direct and regular contacts which an individual has.
Total Network	: Chains of social relationship which cover the whole of society.

27.8 FURTHER READINGS

Bott, Elizabeth, 1971. *Family and Social Network*. Tavistock Publications : London.

Mayer, Adrian c., 1966. *The Significance of Quasi-Groups in the Study of Complex Societies*. In M. Banton (ed.), *The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies*. Tavistock Publications : London. pp. 97-119.

Persell, C.H., 1987. *Understanding Society*. Harper and Row Publishers : New York. Chapter IV.

Sharma, K.N., 1975. *Institutions, Networks and Social Change*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study : Simla. Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, pp. 191-197.

27.9 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The basic unit in social networks is a dyadic relationship i.e., between two individuals.
- 2) The process of formation of a social network begins right from the time of birth of a human being.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The morphological characteristics of personal networks are:

- i) anchorage;
- ii) density;
- iii) reachability; and
- iv) range.

The interactional characteristics of personal networks are :

- i) content;
 - ii) directedness;
 - iii) durability;
 - iv) intensity; and
 - v) frequency.
- 2) When a person or the ego is the centre of a network and he or she coordinates it, we find the emergence of an ego-centric personal network.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) A resource network is a part of the total network. Shared interest is basic to them. They are partial networks and may be ego-centric or non-ego-centric personal networks.
- 2) No.

UNIT 28 SOCIAL FUNCTIONS

Structure

- 28.0 Objectives
- 28.1 Introduction
- 28.2 Definition of Function
- 28.3 Function and Collective Conscience
- 28.4 Function : Cultural Perspective
- 28.5 Function : Biological Perspective
- 28.6 Function : System Perspective
- 28.7 Function : Critical Perspective
 - 28.7.1 Functions and Dysfunctions of Religion
 - 28.7.2 Manifest and Latent Functions
- 28.8 Uses of Functional Analysis
- 28.9 Limitations of Functional Analysis
- 28.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 28.11 Key Words
- 28.12 Further Readings
- 28.13 Model Answers to Check Your Progress

28.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- define functionalism;
- state Durkheim's view on social function and describe his analysis of social life;
- describe social function as given by Malinowski from a cultural perspective;
- describe the biological perspective of social function;
- describe social function from the critical perspective; and
- explain the uses and limitations of functional analysis.

28.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will discuss the concept of social function. You will learn about the meaning of social function and the major ideas developed around this concept. We first describe the concept of function and collective conscience, as formulated by Emile Durkheim. This is followed by a discussion of the cultural perspective, and its relation to social function as described by Malinowski. His ideas regarding the relationship of magic with the concept of social function, have been outlined in this

unit. Then, the unit explains the organic analogy between society and biological organism. In this biological perspective, we have given Radcliffe-Brown's contribution, especially his analysis of structure and function. We will discuss Talcott Parson's system perspective which considers the "social system", as the unit of study and Robert K. Merton's critical analysis of the pre-existing functional thesis. Finally, we will explain to you the uses and limitations of functional analysis in this unit.

28.2 DEFINITION OF FUNCTION

The term 'function' is often used, (in popular usage as well as in academic discussion) in more than one sense. Hence, it is necessary to clarify and explain its various connotations. As the eminent American sociologist, Robert K. Merton has explained, the term 'function' is used in five major senses. First, it is used to refer to some public gathering or festive occasion (e.g., "Republic Day function", "the annual function of a College" etc.). Second, it is used alternatively for occupation. Third, it is used to refer to the activities of the incumbent of an office, as for example, one may speak of the function of a bureaucrat. Fourth, it is used in a mathematical sense. For example, when X is said to be a function of Y, it is understood that change in Y would lead to a change in X. Fifth, as used in sociology and social anthropology, functions are social procedures or processes which help the maintenance of social equilibrium.



This view of human society is known as functionalism. Sometimes it is referred to, in a broader sense, as structural-functionalism. Broadly defined, functionalism is a theoretical and methodological perspective in sociology and social anthropology, which views society as a system of inter-related and inter-dependent parts. These inter-related parts of the social system contribute to the stability and maintenance of society. Functionalism seeks to understand and explain a custom or a cultural feature in terms of its functions or consequences, for the various parts of society as well as for the social system as a whole.

28.3 FUNCTION AND COLLECTIVE CONSCIENCE

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) systematically formulated the concept of social function. He held that society has a reality of its own, beyond the individuals who constitute it. It is not merely the sum total of all the individuals of the society. It is an entity external to the individuals and exercises constraint over them. He sought to analyse and explain life in terms of society itself, and not in terms of psychological or biological factors.

Durkheim's analysis of social life is centred on what he calls "social facts". He says that members of society are constrained by "social facts", by ways of acting thinking and feeling, external to the individual. For example, mores and norms (social facts) make a person behave in a certain manner. Durkheim held that social facts should be examined as things, which were independent of the consciousness of individuals who comprise society.

Durkheim made a distinction between two types of inquiry, historical and functional. The historical type of inquiry is concerned with the origins of social institutions and cultural traits. The evolutionary anthropologists of the 19th century, such as James Frazer and Edward Taylor employed this type of inquiry. Durkheim disagreed with it and advocated the functional type of inquiry. According to him, social life must be examined and explained in relation to its function. He held that the reason for the continued existence of a social fact or a cultural item must be sought in its function, in its usefulness for society. ***He defined the function of social institutions as the satisfaction of the needs of the social organism.***

Durkheim held that society has certain basic needs or functional prerequisites, which must be fulfilled if it is to maintain its stability and continuity. The need for social order is the most important need of society. It is fulfilled through consensus or "collective conscience", which comprises commonly held norms, beliefs and sentiments.

Functional analysis lies at the heart of Durkheim's major works. In the *Division of Labour in Society* (1897) he examined the functions of division of labour in society. In the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1917) he sought to examine the integrative functions of religious beliefs and practices. He analysed the functions of religions in terms of social cohesiveness and solidarity. The sharing of religious beliefs and rites, produces a sense of unity among the believers. This sense of unity is symbolically expressed in rituals.

Activity 1

Think carefully about different aspects of your Community/Society. Note down five features which you think help your Community/Society to maintain it self i.e. to continue from one generation to another. Discuss these features with other students at your Study Centre and your Academic Counsellor.

Function of Crime

Durkheim discussed crime and deviant behaviour from a radically unconventional perspective. Criminology views crime as a pathological phenomenon, and explains it in terms of psychopathological factors. Durkheim rejected this view, and held that crime is a normal and positive aspect of social life. Durkheim maintained that some measure of deviance from the commonly held norms and values of society is inevitable. Since no society can possibly enforce total conformity to its norms.

Durkheim argued that crime is normal in that it reinforces the moral values and norms of society. A criminal act violates the commonly held norms or society, and therefore arouses collective sentiments of anger and outrage. It strengthens and reinforces the normative consensus. As Durkheim put it in his characteristic way: Crime brings together upright consciences and concentrates them.

Durkheim’s functionalist view influenced a number of sociologists and anthropologists, particularly the British social anthropologist A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and, to a lesser extent, Bronislaw Malinowski, who made extensive use of the concept in their theoretical and field researches.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) Define what is meant by function. Use about five lines for your answer.

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.....
.....
.....
.....

2) What is the function of crime according to Durkheim? Use about three lines for your answer.

.....
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.....

28.4 FUNCTION : CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Malinowski (1884-1942) maintained that culture has a reality of its own. He was against the evolutionary and the diffusionist interpretations of culture, which dominated British anthropology during the 19th century. The evolutionary anthropologists (such as Frazer and Tylor) sought to reconstruct the past and trace the origin and evolution of social institutions. The diffusionists, such as W.J. Perry and Elliot Smith, were interested in reconstructing the history of mankind, by studying the spread of cultural patterns and artefacts from one region to another.

Malinowski held that cultures form wholes, because essentially they are working and on-going units. Every custom or cultural trait, according to him, exists to fulfil a vital function. He maintained that the most important units of culture are institutions. A social institution, according to him, is a set of activities organised around some need. Social institutions are responses to fundamental biological and psychological needs of individuals, such as hunger and security. Human needs or drives, according to Malinowski, are physiological in nature but they are restructured by acquired habits. This conception of needs, both biological and psychological is at the core of his functionalist theory.

In his book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) Malinowski has analysed the role of magical and religious rites, in the stability and maintenance of the social structure of the Trobriand Islanders. He observed that magic arises and functions in situations of uncertainty and emotional anxiety. It fulfils the vital need of relieving anxiety in situations of crisis. The function of magic, according to Malinowski, is to enhance primitive man's hope and faith, in the face of uncertainty and fear. It is criticised as being an over-simplistic explanation of the function of magic in societies.

28.5 FUNCTION : BIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Radcliffe-Brown was deeply influenced by the sociological functionalism of Emile Durkheim. He held that human societies are natural systems, governed by the inexorable laws of nature. The various parts of the social system, according to him, are inter-related and inter-dependent. The inter-relations between the parts help in the maintenance of the whole.

Radcliffe-Brown favoured the analogy between society and biological organisms. He held that cultures and social systems should be studied with the methods of the natural sciences, especially biology and zoology. Radcliffe-Brown, like Malinowski, advocated a *synchronic* perspective, in preference to a diachronic one. The *synchronic* perspective is essentially concerned with the present, and holds that societies can be analysed and explained without any necessary reference to their past. The diachronic perspective, on the other hand, holds that the present structure of a given society cannot be adequately understood, without taking into consideration its past and the changing aspect of social reality. Radcliffe-Brown maintained that it is possible and imperative to discover the underlying regularities or laws of social life.

Structure and Function

Radcliffe-Brown maintained that organic systems are characterised by three features: Morphology (which deals with the structure), Physiology (which is concerned with function), and Evolution (the development of the system). These features are found in equal measure in human societies. There is, in the first place, the social structure, which comprises the social relations between individuals occupying social roles. Secondly, the function of a social activity or cultural item, relates to its contribution to the social system as a whole. Radcliffe-Brown stated his ideas in his well-known book, **Structure and Function in Primitive Society** (1952). According to him, individuals are connected by social relations within a social structure. He maintained that the basic need of all societies was 'co-adaptation', or the mutual adjustment of the interests of members of society. Durkheim defined the function of social institutions as the satisfaction of the needs of the social organism. Radcliffe-Brown replaced the word 'needs' with the term, "necessary conditions of existence".

Check Your Progress 2

- Note:** a) Use the space given for your answer.
- b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.
- 1) According to functionalists, social institutions are responses to fundamental biological and psychological needs of individuals.

Yes

No

- 2) What does Radcliffe-Brown mean by synchronic perspective? Use three lines for your answer.

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28.6 FUNCTION : SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE

All functionalists assumed that the satisfaction of basic needs, was necessary for the survival and stability of social systems. Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), the doyen of American sociology, held that any social system has four functional-prerequisites: (i) *adaptation*, (ii) *goal attainment*, (iii) *integration*, and (iv) *pattern maintenance*.

Adaptation refers to the relationship between the system and the environment. Parsons maintains that social systems, must have some degree of control over the environment. According to him, this basic function is fulfilled by the economy. Goal attainment refers to the need for the social system, to set goals towards which the activities of its members may be directed. This function is fulfilled by the polity. Integration refers to the adjustment and management of conflict. It has to do with the coordination of the parts of the social system. This function according to Parsons, is fulfilled by the judicial system. Pattern maintenance refers to the maintenance of the basic pattern of values and norms. This function is fulfilled by the family, religion and the educational system.

Parsons' view of the functional prerequisites of society has been criticised on the ground that it is difficult to test whether these prerequisites are empirically valid.

28.7 FUNCTION : CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Robert K. Merton (1910), the most influential among contemporary American sociologists, has made significant contributions to functional analysis. He has perceptively differentiated between the popular, and the sociological connotations of the term function. He has also sought to explain and clarify the functional units.

Merton examined three major prevalent ideas in functionalist theory, and proved their redundancy in sociological analysis. The first is the idea of the functional unity of society, which holds that social activities or cultural items, are functional for the whole social system. The second is the idea of universal functionalism, according to which all social and cultural items fulfil social functions. The third is the idea of indispensability, which holds that these social items are indispensable for society.

Merton criticised these prevailing postulates of functional analysis. He pointed out that the first idea presumes the total integration of all societies. However, we cannot assume that all societies are fully integrated. Small-scale, primitive societies may be highly integrated, but not the large-scale, complex urban-industrial societies. The second idea of universal functionalism. This he considers to be a misjudgement, since not all aspects of society are functional for the whole society. It can be functional dysfunctional or non-functional. He criticised the third idea on the grounds that all cultural items, e.g., religion, are not indispensable for the whole society.

28.7.1 Functions and Dysfunctions of Religion

To explain his views, Merton gives an example of religion. Anthropologists speak of the integrative functions of religion, on the basis of their observation of pre-literate

societies. Some sociologists have generalised this observation, and have maintained that religion fulfils integrative functions in all societies. They neglect the disintegrative functions of religion in certain types of societies. Societies which have several religions are quite often faced with deep conflicts and antagonisms among religious groups. An illustration from the contemporary Indian scene would bring out the disintegrative consequences of religious pluralism. Religious diversity itself does not account for communal discord and antagonism in contemporary Indian society. But religious rites and rituals are often used (or misused) by various religious groups and communities, for fanning the fires of communal hatred and animosity.

Merton maintains that a given institution or social item may have diverse consequences, functional as well as dysfunctional. He calls for a specification of the units for which a social item may be functional. Merton criticises the view that certain functions are indispensable for the survival of society, or that certain social or cultural forms are essential for fulfilling each of these functions. He observes that alternative social forms or items, may serve the functions necessary for the survival of a group or society. In other words, as Merton (1957) succinctly puts it : Just as the same item may have multiple functions, so may the same function be diversely fulfilled by alternative items.

28.7.2 Manifest and Latent Functions

Perhaps the most significant contribution to functional analysis has come from Merton's distinction between manifest and latent functions of social action. Manifest functions refer to those consequences of social behaviour which are *intended, anticipated and recognised* by the participants. Latent functions, on the other hand, are those consequences which are neither intended nor recognised. Merton maintains that it is the latent functions of social behaviour, which deserve our closest attention, and which can significantly add to our understanding of social life. The study of latent functions, according to him, clarifies the analysis of seemingly irrational customs and rituals. Let us examine two examples of the social practices which have latent functions for the society.

i) Function of Rain making Ceremony

Rituals and ceremonies quite often serve the latent function of reinforcing group identity and collective solidarity. Merton gives the examples of the rain making ceremony, among the Hopi Indians of Northern Arizona. The Hopi Indians have an elaborate rain making ceremony, which is significant in regard to its consequences. The manifest function of this ceremony (it is believed that it brings about rain) is not significant, simply because the ceremony does not bring about rain. However, the latent function of the ceremony is important because it provides an occasion to the Hopi Indians to participate in a common activity. This participation strengthens and enhances their group solidarity and cohesiveness.

Activity 2

Do you have knowledge of some social activity; for example, an elaborate ritual ceremony or festival etc. which serves a latent function, as well. Write a note of one page on "Latent and Manifest function of ritual/ceremony/festival in My Society". Discuss your note with other students at your Study Centre.

ii) Function of Conspicuous Consumption

The celebrated American economist and sociologist. Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929). perceptively analysed the consumption pattern of the rich class. The manifest

function of buying expensive goods and commodities is the satisfaction of the needs of consumers. Veblen, however, was mainly concerned with the latent function of what he called conspicuous consumption. He observed that conspicuous consumption leads to a heightening of social status and prestige. Rich people buy expensive goods not so much because of their superior quality, but because they are expensive. The purchase of expensive goods is a symbolic pointer to the high social status of the buyer. Veblen gives examples of candlelight dinner and possession of expensive automobiles. The manifest function of candles is to provide light, and that of an automobile transportation. However, the latent functions of candlelight at dinner and possession of a Maruti or a Gypsy are quite different and much more significant : they enhance one's status, and provide an index to one's higher social position.

28.8 USES OF FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

Functionalism, as a theoretical perspective in sociology and social anthropology, has significantly contributed to our understanding of human society and social processes.

The main contribution of functionalism lies in its emphasis on the wholeness of society, and its insistence on the inter-relationship of its parts. It regards society as an on-going system, which must be studied in its entirety.

The functional orientation has been largely responsible for the detailed and comprehensive field studies of modern anthropology. The holistic approach, a characteristic of functionalism, has been particularly fruitful in the study of small-scale, primitive societies.

Another merit of functionalism is that it clarifies understanding of seemingly irrational beliefs and cultural patterns. Consider, for example, the custom of head hunting. This was prevalent among the Aucas of Brazil and Bolivia, the Ganawri of West Africa, the Dyaks of Borneo, the Lampongs of Sumatra, and the Nagas of Assam. When the enemies were killed in a warfare or battle, their heads were cut off and taken as souvenirs. The function of head hunting among these people was to enable the unmarried warrior to prove his worth and physical prowess before his community, and thereby to endear him to his beloved.

Merton's distinction between manifest and latent functions is particularly illuminating, since it focuses attention on those consequences of social behaviour which may not be intended or recognised by the participants, and yet they positively contribute to the maintenance and stability of society.

28.9 LIMITATIONS OF FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

The most frequently repeated logical criticism against functionalism is that it entails teleology. It holds, in effect, that the parts of society exist because of their functional consequences for the system as a whole. In other words, an effect is treated as a cause. Similarly, function is fallaciously equated with purpose. For example, if we say that religion exists in societies, because it sustains the moral foundations of society, we are using the effect of the moral foundation of society to explain the existence of the cause, namely religion. Critics of functionalism believe that this kind of explanation defies the laws of logic, since what has come later cannot be the cause of what has preceded (Cohen 1979 : 45).

Functionalism is also criticised for presenting a deterministic view of human behaviour. Human action is portrayed as being determined by the social system, and human being is pictured as an automation, controlled by the forces of society over which he or she has little or no control.

According to Percy Cohen (1968 : 56) the major substantive criticisms against functionalism are :

- i) the role of norms is overstressed,
- ii) social conflict is almost ignored,
- iii) social harmony is overstressed as being basic to human society, and
- iv) social change is not accounted for.

Out of these criticisms, the first does not hold true since not all functionalists considered the normative element is social life as of supreme importance, such as Malinowski.

The second criticism is inter-related to the first, because if all members of the society follow the norms and values of the society, there will be no cause for conflict. But evidence shows that even though human beings may accept the rules and norms, conflicts arise out of competition to achieve one's interests. This could be to succeed to a position of power or to acquire something socially and economically valuable, etc.

The third accusation against functionalism is that it gives too much importance to the harmonious nature of social systems. This is true and it has been stated by Robert K. Merton in his book *Social Theories and Social Structure* (1957). Merton says that religion has a unifying role in a small community, but it can be a cause of great conflict in a complex, multi-religious society. The functional thesis which holds that all social and cultural items have positive function, is therefore not correct. They could have a disturbing effect on social process, thus being dysfunctional.

The fourth substantive criticism of functionalism is that it cannot explain social change. It states that all social and cultural items fulfil positive role and that they exist because they contribute to the functioning of the total social system. The theory of functionalism, therefore, assumes that all aspects of society are already perfect and, therefore, there is no need for change. In fact, since the functionalists emphasise persistence and stability of the society to such an extent that change for them becomes abnormal. Thus, we can see that the critics of functionalism are justified in criticising them for overlooking the aspect of social change.

Some of the ideological criticisms of functionalism are that it upholds the status quo in society. The way that the functionalists describe stratification in society, the aspect of exploitation of the masses by the selected few is totally ignored by them. In fact, domination of the masses by a handful of elites is justified by them. They have been accused of encouraging and reflecting the conservative bias in their theories.

The strongest criticism of functionalism has come from the conflict school, which views the social order as evolving out of conflict and dissension, and not consensus as held by the functional school.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

- b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

- 1) What are the four functional prerequisites for any social system, according to Talcott Parsons? Use about eight lines for your answer.

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- 2) What are the manifest and latent functions according to Merton? Use about three lines for your answer.

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28.10 LET US SUM UP

We have discussed in this unit about social function, its definition and various uses.

We have seen that the use of function and functionalism consequently varies in the ideas of Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Parsons and Merton. Thus Durkheim’s analysis shows how crime is normal if it does not exceed a certain limit. It may in fact strengthen society. We have also discussed the relation of function and collective conscience developed by him. Malinowski indicates how magic provides a route for the native to affect the outcome of uncertain ventures. Next, we have discussed the system perspective developed by Talcott Parsons. Further, we show that Merton’s latent and manifest functions add a new dimension to functionalism. Finally, our discussion of the uses and limitations of functional analysis, indicates that there is still room for further development of sociological theory in order to understand human social life.

28.11 KEY WORDS

- Diachronic** : The diachronic approach takes into consideration the present as well as the past of a given society, the assumption being that the present cannot be adequately understood without reference to the past.
- Diffusionism** : An anthropological approach, advocated during the 19th century by W.J. Perry, Elliot Smith and others, which sought to reconstruct the history of mankind by tracing the spread of cultural patterns from a few primordial centres of civilisation.
- Dysfunction** : Those consequences of social behaviour which adversely affect the maintenance and stability of the social system.
- Function** : The process whereby the inter-related parts of a given system contribute to its maintenance and stability.

- Latent Functions** : The unintended and unrecognised consequences of social action.
- Manifest Functions** : The intended and recognised consequences of social action.
- Synchronic** : The view that the present structure of a given society can be studied as it is, without any references to its past.
- Teleology** : A view which mistakenly regards an effect as a cause or function as purpose. Functionalism is charged by its critics for being teleological in orientation.

28.12 FURTHER READINGS

Inkeles, Alex, 1964. *What is Sociology?* Prentice-Hall : New Delhi, Chapter 3, pp. 28-40.

Cohen, Percy, 1968. *Modern Social Theory*. Heineman Educational Books Ltd. : London. Chapter 3; pp. 34-68.

Levy, Marion K., 1968. *Functional Analysis*. In David L. Sills (ed.) *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*. Macmillan and Free Press : New York. Vol. 6, pp. 21-42.

Merton, Robert K., 1957. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. The Free Press : Glencoe Chapter 1.

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R., 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. The Free Press : Glencoe. Chapter IX, pp. 178-187.

28.13 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The term function is used in five major ways. First as a public gathering e.g., Republic Day Function. Second, it is used for occupation. Third, it is used to describe a person's job e.g., function of a bureaucrat. Fourth, in a technical mathematical sense. Finally, in sociology it is used to describe social procedures or processes which help in the maintenance of a society.
- 2) According to Durkheim crime is not pathological but normal. According to him a certain amount of crime normally reinforces a society. A criminal act violates commonly held norms and thereby arouses collective sentiments against that activity.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Yes
- 2) By synchronic perspective Radcliffe-Brown means that a society can be studied as it is. There is no need to refer to the history of a society to study its functioning, its norms and mores.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) According to Talcott Parsons, any social system has the following functional prerequisites:
 - i) Economy fulfils the function of *adaptation* with environment.

Social Structure

- ii) Polity fulfils the function of setting goals for directing the activities of a society's members.
 - iii) The judicial system fulfils the function of integration of different parts of the society.
 - iv) Finally, the family, religion and educational system fulfil the function of *maintaining the basic pattern of values and norms* of a society.
- 2) Manifest functions are those effects of action which are deliberate or 'intended', or anticipated, and recognised. On the other hand latent functions are those which are not intended or recognised.



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UNIT 29 SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Structure

29.0 Objectives

29.1 Introduction

29.2 What is Social Stratification?

29.2.1 Dimensions or Bases of Social Stratification

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29.3.1 Age-set System

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29.3.3 Estate System

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29.3.5 Class System

29.3G Race and Ethnicity

29.4 Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Social Stratification

29.4.1 Functional Approach

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29.6 Key Words

29.7 Further Readings

29.8 Model Answers to Check Your Progress

29.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- define the concept of social stratification;
- discuss its three dimensions;
- describe six types of social stratification; and
- give an account of the functionalist and conflict theories of social stratification.

29.1 INTRODUCTION

Social stratification is an aspect of the wider issue of social inequality. The existence of socially created inequalities is a feature of all known human societies, and, therefore, it is an important subject for sociologists to discuss. Social stratification is the last of the major concepts in sociology, discussed in this book. It is related to the study of social change, which is the focus of our next block in this course. This unit is also the link unit between these two blocks.

This unit explains what social stratification is, and then discusses its general principles in terms of the bases or dimensions of social stratification. An account of basic

types of social stratification, is followed by a discussion of the current sociological theories on social stratification.

29.2 WHAT IS SOCIAL STRATIFICATION?

stratification is a system of social ranking, involving relations of superiority and inferiority. These relations between the units of rank are governed by a set of norms. Analytically, stratification is conceived of as an evaluative ranking of social units. Concretely, it refers to the empirical distribution of advantages and benefits in society. It can be seen as a process, which is regulated by some principles. These principles **determine** the bases of the distribution of social advantages in society.



29.2.1 Dimensions or Bases of Social Stratification

The bases or dimensions of social stratification refer to the different levels of differentiation which are made to allocate people in a given society. These can be listed as follows:

- i) **Class** : It refers to differentiation at the level of wealth. In this sense it can be termed as economic differentiation.
- ii) **Power** : It refers to differential access to power in society. It includes political, social and other types of power.
- iii) **Status** : It refers to distribution of prestige or social honour.

In most cases, the three dimensions complement each other. However, Max Weber (1947) draws a distinction between class, power and status. According to Weber, class is an economic category, a product of the market situation. The status group, on the other hand, constitutes the social order based on prestige or honour. Status is determined by the social prestige one enjoys. Social prestige is expressed through different styles of life. Analytically, class and status groups can be independent

Each of these systems offers clearly argued theories, to explain and justify its respective system of stratification. In some cases, there is flexibility regarding social mobility from one stratum to another. In other cases, there is little or no chance of mobility out of a stratum. The following discussion of the different types of social stratification, will make clear what the distinct features of stratification in human societies are.

29.3.1 Age-set System

Societies, which have been described as stateless type of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), lack centralised government. They have no office of chief, or if they have such an office, it holds more ritual than secular power. Still, such societies are found to be stratified on the basis of age. This type of stratification, is a characteristic of certain east African societies. The principle of age is most prominent among the Masai and Nandi in East Africa, where ranking on the basis of age, is put together with the exercise of authority, on the basis of seniority. The ranks determined on the basis of age are called age-sets. All the persons (basically men) born, within a range or number of years, belong to one set. The first age-set may comprise as short as six or seven years or as long as fifteen.

In most cases, usually around adolescence, the membership of the first age-set closes and recruitment to the next set takes place. At this stage, entry to the new age-set generally involves an initiation rite, such as circumcision or other body-marks. Thus, after going through the ritual, each member comes out of childhood, and takes on full membership of his tribe. Each person, thus, belongs to an age-set, to which he remains attached throughout his life. Along with other members, he moves to the next age-set. The age-sets in these societies, determine their social organisation, because membership of these sets covers all areas of life. It directs a person to decide whom he may marry, what land he can own, and in which ceremonies he can take part etc. Thus, membership of each stratum tells a person about his ranking in society.

In most cases, where age-sets operate, a member of an age-set also belongs to a particular age-grade. These grades are clearly marked out from one another, so that a person belongs to only one grade at a time. Generally, a person after childhood would move from junior warriorhood to senior warriorhood. Then he would graduate from junior elderhood to senior elderhood. The warriors fight and defend their tribe from attack, while the elders take decisions and settle disputes. They also communicate with the ancestral spirits. Thus, the age-sets go through the different grades in complete units. In other words, all the members of one particular age-set move into one grade all at once. Thus, their social status also changes all at once. In the kinds of societies we belong to, each person usually makes his or her own natural transition from childhood to adulthood and finally to old age. But in age-set societies, these transitions are made on a corporate basis as members of large age-sets.

In terms of a system of social stratification, the age-set system provides for an open society, in which no one is allocated a particular position for life. Everybody in his time does become old, and therefore gets a chance to hold decisive authority. Thus, this is a system in which personnel change within the system, without changing the pattern of stratification itself.

29.3.2 Slave System

The slave system of stratification does not exist any more. Slavery was abolished in 1833 by Britain and 1865 by USA. This was characterised by a high degree of institutionalisation, i.e. there was a solid legal framework to the system. The main emphasis in this system was on economic inequality, which rendered certain groups

phenomena, but in reality the two overlap with each other. The notion of **power** is the keynote of Weber's theory of social stratification. Both the propertied and the propertyless can belong to the same status groups. Thus, economically determined power is not always identical with the social or legal power.

It has been said that Weber's theory of stratification, is a reaction to **Marx's** theory of class. We can say that Weber is the founding father of stratification analysis, which developed best in the U.S.A. Marx, on; the other hand, **was** not a stratification theorist. For him the oppositions and contradictions found in modes of production, were of central importance. In answer to **Marx's** ideas on **class**, Weber developed his ideas on stratification. He **emphasised** the distinction of the economic, social and political bases of stratification. Thus, he provided a multi-dimensional approach to the study of social stratification. In **ESO-14**, you will get an opportunity to learn in detail, about various approaches to, and aspects of the study of social stratification. Here, we discuss different types of **social** stratification, found in human societies.

Activity 1

Take a round of your colony/village and note down the pattern of housing, such as, where the richest and most **powerful** people live, where the market is situated, where the poorest people live. Write a one page essay on "Social Stratification in my Community" Discuss your paper with other students and your Academic Counsellor at your Study Centre.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) What are the three bases of social stratification? Use one line for your answer.

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2) Distinguish between class and status group. Use three lines for your answer.

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29.3 TYPES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Broadly speaking, the following types of social stratification have been known to exist:

- i) the age-set system
- ii) slave system,
- iii) estate system,
- iv) caste system,
- v) class system, and
- vi) race/ethnic system.

The typical characteristics of the caste system are – i) the membership is hereditary and fixed for life, ii) each caste is an endogamous group, iii) social distance is encouraged by the restrictions of contracts and commensality with members of other castes, iv) caste consciousness is stressed by caste names as well as by conformity to the particular customs of the particular caste, and v) occupational specialisation.

The system is rationalised by religious belief.

Caste operates at two levels. Firstly in terms of an abstract classification into four types of 'varna': brahmin (priests), Kshatriya (kings), vaishya (merchants) and shudra (workers). Secondly at the operational village level, there is a division of local communities into groupings called jati. The rigidity of this system is unchangeable. Marginal upward social mobility, is possible by a process called sanskritisation. In this process, members of a lower caste adopt the manners and customs of a higher caste, and sever their ties with their original caste. (For a descriptive elaboration of this concept, you are advised to read block V in ESO-12 and blocks of ESO-14).

Individual features of the caste system can be observed in other societies, which follows strict segregation of particular groups. But caste system in its entirety is of course, found in India, and outside India among Hindus settled abroad and within India among non-Hindu groups. The stronghold of caste and the trends towards change in its nature and functioning, have affected the pattern of social stratification in India. You will learn about this process in ESO-14.

29.3.5 Class System

The class system is very different from the systems of stratification, we have so far discussed. Social classes are neither legally defined nor religiously sanctioned groups. Rather, these are relatively open groups which have been considered to be the by products of the process of industrialisation and urbanisation throughout the world, in all modern industrial societies.

The class system of social stratification basically implies, a social hierarchy based primarily upon differences in wealth and income. These differences are expressed in different life styles and hence different consumption patterns. In some cases, we also find different manners in terms of speech and dress. As a general type, class-systems are characterised by social mobility – upward and downward, both inter-generational and intra-generational.

In studying the concept of class, we face two questions. Firstly, what criteria should be used to identify classes? Secondly, there is the subjective element, i.e., do people with identical tangible material assets form a class, even if they are not perceived by others and themselves as a conscious class? For the first problem of criteria, according to Max Weber, the dimensions of wealth, power and lifestyle are crucial in determining the class. Most sociologists generally use several criteria simultaneously in determining the class. For the second 'subjective' problem, it is generally agreed that the issue of class-consciousness should not be introduced as a definition of the class itself. This is a matter for individual empirical investigation in each case.

Generally, most sociologists agree that in all industrial societies we find the existence of the upper, middle and working classes. Similarly, in agrarian societies a noted sociologist, Daniel Thorner has identified three classes in the rural countryside in India. These he called the class of 'malik', 'kisan' and 'mazdur' i.e., the proprietors who owned land, the working peasants who owned small amount of land and the labour class or mazdurs who did not own any land but worked on other peoples'

of people without rights. The article "slavery" in the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* (1968) makes a distinction between primitive, ancient, medieval and modern slavery. Here we mention only two main types of slavery—ancient slavery and New World slavery. Ancient slavery was prevalent in ancient Rome and Greece. Here slaves were usually foreign prisoners of war. In New World slavery, the basis of development of slavery were colonial expansion and racist ideology. In this system, the slave was designated as the master's property. The slave had no political and social rights. He or she was compelled to work. Living upon slave labour, the masters formed an aristocracy. It is said that the decline of slavery was primarily brought about, by the inefficiency of slave labour. Some other scholars hold that slavery declined, because of continued opposition to the slave system by educated and enlightened public in general, and the anti-slavery struggles organised by the slaves themselves in different parts of the world at different times. The ancient slavery was somewhat reformed, by limiting the owner's right of punishment and giving personal rights to the slave. The Christian Church in the Roman Empire also supported the provision of manumission to the slave.

29.3.3 Estate System

This type of social stratification, was characteristic of feudal societies of medieval Europe. In this system we find hierarchy of social strata, which are distinguished and rigidly set off from one another by law and custom. The defining feature of the estate system, was that the position held in the society, depended entirely in terms of ownership of land. Though this system was less rigid than the caste system, it was also characterised by hereditary transmission of social position. Each estate had a clearly defined set of rights by law. At the top of the system existed a royal family, and a hereditary military aristocracy, who were the landholders. Ranking on par with this group were the priesthood or clergy, who were allied with the nobility. Below this were the merchants and craftsmen, who were a small proportion of the population initially, but later formed the nucleus for the emergence of the middle class. At the bottom were the free peasants and the Serfs. Defined by a legal set of rights and duties, each estate had a status. The differences between estates were reflected in differences in punishments given for identical offences. Comparative feudal systems and their connections with modern capitalist systems can be traced, for example, in Japan.

As the nobility was supposed to protect everybody, the clergy to pray for everybody, and the commoner to produce food for everybody, the estates may be referred to as a system of division of labour. Lastly, the estates also represented political groups. In this way, one can say that in classical feudalism, there were only two estates, the nobility and the clergy. It was only after the 12th century that European feudalism had a third estate of the burghers, who first remained as a distinct group and later changed the system itself. If we view the feudal estates as political groups, the serfs, who did not possess any political power, cannot be considered as part of an estate.

This system of social stratification is best explained in terms of the nature of and relationship between property and political authority in medieval Europe.

29.3.4 Caste System

The caste system in India can be compared with other types of social stratification but it is unique in some senses to the Indian society. It is uniquely associated with Indian agrarian society as well as, the urban communities like, the Aggarwals, Jains, etc. It consists of essentially closed social groups arranged in a fixed hierarchical order of superiority and inferiority. It represents the most rigid type of social stratification in terms of ascribed as well as socially accepted stratification.

point out that disappearance of ethnic identities through the process of assimilation is often hampered when the dominant groups do not allow the flow of social benefits to certain groups, deemed to be powerless ethnic minorities. This situation gives rise to ethnic conflicts. All such situations of conflict make the study of social stratification very important, and relevant for sociologists. That is why it is necessary to also look briefly, at the various theories of social stratification. Here, we discuss two major theories, namely, the functionalist theory and the conflict theory.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) What is the term given to ranks determined on the basis of age? Use one line for your answer.

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2) Name two main types of slave system. Use one line for your answer.

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3) Which form of social stratification is defined in terms of relationship to ownership of land? Use one line for your answer.

.....

4) Name the two levels at which the caste system in India operates. Use four lines for your answer.

.....
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.....
.....

5) Which of the six types of social stratification, is commonly found in industrialised societies? Use one line for your answer.

.....

6) Give the sociological definition of race. Use three lines for your answer.

.....
.....
.....

29.4 THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

At least four social processes are associated with stratification. These processes are discussed below:

i) Differentiation refers to allocation of roles, rights and responsibilities. Through differentiation of statuses tasks are clearly defined and distinguished. Motivation and rewards are provided for fulfilment of expected roles and responsibilities.

land. (Thomer, D. in Gupta (ed.) 1992; pp. 265). On the questions of the role of classes in society and their **intra** and **inter linkages**, sociologists have adopted different approaches and developed different theories of social stratification. About these approaches and theories we will tell you briefly at the end of this unit. You can get more details on these issues in ESO-04 & ESO-14.

In industrial societies, we find that social classes coexist with status groups. This observation led Max Weber to distinguish between the two, and to look at their linkages with each other. Max Weber argued that social classes are ranked according to their **relation** to the ways of producing and acquiring goods. Status groups however are ranked according to the ways of consuming goods. This way of understanding the difference between classes and status groups is an over simplification. Since **Weber's formulation** of this distinction, many **sociologists** have made studies of the notions of class and status. At this stage it will suffice to say that analysing social stratification in industrial societies is a very difficult task. In the context of developing societies, it is an even more difficult task, because in these societies social class is only one component and the elements of status **groups**, castes or caste-like groups, racial and **ethnic** groups exist side by side.

29.3.6 Race and Ethnicity

The remaining type of social stratification is the **one** based on race and ethnicity. Race, as a biological concept, refers to a large category of people who share **certain** inherited **physical** characteristics – colour of skin, type of hair; facial features, size of head etc. Anthropologists initially tried to arrive at a classification of races, but ran into problems, because more advanced studies of racial types showed the near absence of pure races. Thus, the latest thinking is that **all** humans belong to a common group. **Recent** genetic research indicate that 95 per cent of DNA (gene-rating) **molecules** are the **same** for all humans. **The** remaining 5 per cent are responsible for differences in appearance. Outward differences are also seen as varying within a race rather **than** across the races. Thus, **the** classification of races floundered at the scientific level.

For sociologists, a race is a group of people who **are** perceived by a given society, as biologically different from the others. Thus, people are assigned to one race or another, by public opinion which is moulded by that society's **dominant** group, rather **than** on any scientific basis. In racist societies, for example South Africa, physical characteristics are believed to be intrinsically related to moral, intellectual and other non-physical attributes and abilities.

At the theoretical level, sociologists talk about race relations **as** forms of stratification. These are characterised by unequal access to wealth and power, on the basis of physical characteristics. We find in this situation **the** presence of racial ideologies in one form or the other,

Looking at **ethnicity**, it can be said that whereas race is based on popularly perceived physical traits, ethnicity is based on cultural traits. Ethnic group is thus defined as a common group of peoples with a common cultural **heritage** (**learned**, not inherited). This group may share a **common** language, **history**, national origin, or lifestyle.

The factor of migration on a massive scale in the **last** century, provided sociologists an opportunity to **examine** the fate of ethnic **identities**. For example, the Chicago School of Sociologists found that over several **generations**, ethnic identities were lost and later revised. **Gellner** (1964 : 163) aptly describes the situation thus : the grandson tries to remember what the son tried to forget. However, sociologists also

Activity 2

Think about your local community and the kind of social inequality found in it. Now read carefully the section 29.4 of this unit and write an essay on which approach you think is more suitable, the functionalist or the conflict approach towards the understanding of your community. Discuss your answer with the students and Academic Counsellor of your Study Centre.

29.4.2 Conflict Perspective

According to the conflict perspective, stratification occurs not because it is functional, but because groups compete for scarce resources. Thus, rather than performing a function, stratification reflects an unjust allocation of resources and power in society. Those having power exploit the rest in the competition for resources and power in society. Those having power exploit the rest in the competition for resources. The unequal distribution of rewards reflects the interest of the powerful groups rather than the societal needs. Conflict theorists also say that the use of ideology by dominant groups justifies their dominance. Further if a system is to survive and reproduce itself, the subordinate group must also follow the system. It would otherwise lead to instability of the society.

The conflict perspective is understood easily when one looks at the history of stratification systems. Tuniin (1969) looked at the functional theory from a conflict perspective. He felt that far from being functional, stratification systems are dysfunctional. Firstly, stratification limits the opportunities of the under-privileged or subordinate groups in society. This limitation of opportunities represents a loss of talent to the wider society. Secondly, stratification helps to maintain the status quo even when the status quo has become dysfunctional. This is because the privileged class is able to impose upon society the idea that the existing inequalities are natural, logical and morally right. Thirdly, because stratification systems distribute rewards unjustly, they encourage the less privileged to become hostile, suspicious and distrustful. This results in social unrest and chaos.

Although, Marx was not a stratification theorist, much of conflict theory came up in response to his approach to classes and class conflict. According to Marx, development of material production forms the basis of progress. In order to achieve production, classes come into being. A class, due to historical factors, gains control of the productive forces (the means of production) in a society. The others then become subservient to this class, and this leads to antagonistic relations among classes. In Marxist theory, social classes have a decisive role in the process of social change. Those attitudes make sure that widespread ideology in society is that which suits them most. This situation gives rise to conflict between classes. Within the conflict theory, Marx's ideas were criticised by many sociologists. Social Stratification (ESO-04 and ESO-14) deals in detail with various aspects of the conflict theory.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) Name the four social processes associated with stratification. Use two lines for your answer.

- ii) **Ranking** of statuses is based on personal characteristics, trained skills and consequences of tasks performed.
- iii) **Evaluation** of ranks depends upon values cherished by a society. Evaluation is also based on prestige and preferability **attached** with a given status.
- iv) **Reward and punishment** depend upon **performance** as well as society's evaluative considerations.

A number of theoretical approaches have been put forward for studying these processes, involved in stratification. Of these, functional and conflict approaches occupy a place of prominence.

29.4.1 Functional Approach

Differentiation based on division of work is considered an inevitable state of **affairs** in all human societies. One person obviously **cannot** perform all or most of the **functions** in a society. One has to depend upon other **persons** for some tasks, which **one** does not or cannot perform. Similarly, others **depend** upon him or her for those tasks **which** he or she performs. Thus, for different **functions**, persons of different intent and ability are required. These **persons** by sheer **differential** intent, ability and **performance** become different **from** each other. Their **functions** are valued differently. They are rewarded according to the values attached to their functions. It is this differential reward pattern which gives rise to stratification and hierarchy.

Functional theorists of stratification, such as **Kingsley Davis** and **Wilbert Moore** stress the necessity of stratification in the **functional sense**. They observe that it is a universal phenomenon, and go on to argue that it must **serve** a useful positive function, and be necessary for societal survival. For them, it is the mechanism by which society ensures, that the most perfect positions are **carefully** filled, by the most **qualified** and able persons in society. They observe that since these top positions require a substantial period of training and deferral of gratification, they also receive higher rewards, in **terms** of prestige and monetary **rewards**. These act as motivational factors to perform efficiently in the job. Thus, **according** to this theory, the unequal **possession** of talents is handled by the system of stratification. This theory provides us an understanding of the present system of stratification. With the help of this theory, the parts of a society can be related to the **whole** of it.

However, sociologists, such as **Tumin (1969)** and **Dahrendorf (1959)**, have challenged the basic **assumptions** of this theory. **For** example, **Davis and Moore (1945)** have been criticised for confusing social stratification with the existence of specialised roles or division of labour. In fact, stratification refers to a system of **unequally** privileged groups and individuals, rather than the differentiation based on division of labour.

The Davis-Moore approach is too general to explain the specific nature and causes of social inequality. It ignores the possible negative consequences of stratification and differential **opportunities** for mobility.

Ralph Dahrendorf (1959) observes that **stratification** originates from the "closely related trinity of norm, sanction and power". A **society** has an authority structure to **sustain** its system of norms and sanctions. It **has** a system of "institutionalised power". It is the **possession** of this power in terms of "coercion" and "coerced" that explains social stratification. According to **Dahrendorf** the functional theory does not specifically explain the distribution of **power, authority** and privilege as the basis of social stratification.

process of attempting to change one's rank by giving up attributes, that define a **caste** as low and **adopting** attributes that are indicative of higher status, has been called **Sanskritisation**.

- Serf** : A person, belonging to a servile feudal class, **bound** to the soil and the master,
- Slave** : A person held in submission **as** the chattel of a **master**.
- Social Mobility** : A change in status within the ranked social levels of a society.

29.7 FURTHER READINGS

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29.8 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The three bases of social stratification **are**:
i) class, ii) status, iii) power.
- 2) Class is an economic category, based on one's income while status group is determined by the social prestige one enjoys.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Ranks determined on the basis of age are called age-sets.
2. The two main types of slavery are – Ancient slavery and New World slavery.
- 3) Estate – **system** of social stratification is determined on the basis of one's relationship to ownership of land.
- 4) Caste operates at two levels. Firstly, at an All-India level, caste is understood in terms of a four-fold classification of *varna* – *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*. Secondly, it operates at the village level in terms of "jati".
- 5) Class **system** is the most commonly found system of social stratification in **industrial** societies.
- 6) In sociological terms, **race** can be defined as a group of people who are considered by a given society **as** biologically different **from** the others.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) The four processes **involved** in social stratification **are** :
i) differentiation, ii) ranking, iii) evaluation and iv) rewarding
- 3) The functionalist theory helps **one** to understand the existing system of social stratification in society. Secondly, it helps in **relating** the **parts** of society to the whole and one part to **another**.
- 4) According to conflict **theory**, social stratification occurs in society because groups compete for scarce resources.

- 2) Give two ways in which the functionalist **approach** to the study of social stratification helps a sociologist. Use three **lines** for your answer.
-
- 3) Give, in one line, the main reason why, **according** to the **conflict** theory, stratification occurs in society.
-

29.5 LET US SUM UP

After defining social stratification as a system of social **ranking** involving relations of superiority and inferiority, we have discussed its **three** dimensions, namely, class, status and power. Then we described the six types of social stratification; namely,

- i) the age set system,
- ii) slave system,
- iii) estate system,
- iv) caste system,
- v) class system, and
- vi) **race/ethnic** system;

existing in human societies. This unit outlined theoretical approaches for studying various processes involved in social stratification. We concluded the discussion with an account of the **functionalist** and **conflict** approaches to the study of social stratification.

29.6 KEY WORDS

- Aristocracy** : An upper class, comprising an hereditary nobility.
- Burghers** : Inhabitants of **borough** or a town.
- Commensality** : The relationship involving those who habitually eat together.
- Commoner** : One of the ordinary **people**, without a noble rank.
- Estate** : **The** extent of one's **interest** in land or a person's property in land **and** tenements or a landed property.
- Evaluative Ranking** : Determining a **rank** on the basis of its high or low value.
- Feudal** : The relation of **lord** to vassal (a person under the protection).
- Manumission** : Fonnal **release from** slavery,
- New World** : **The western hemisphere**, especially the continents of north and south *America*.
- Sanskritisation** : At some time or **the** other, most castes try to raise their **rank** in the local **caste** hierarchy, by giving up their attributes and trying to **adopt** those of castes above them. The

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