
UNIT 28 SOCIAL FUNCTIONS

Structure

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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.

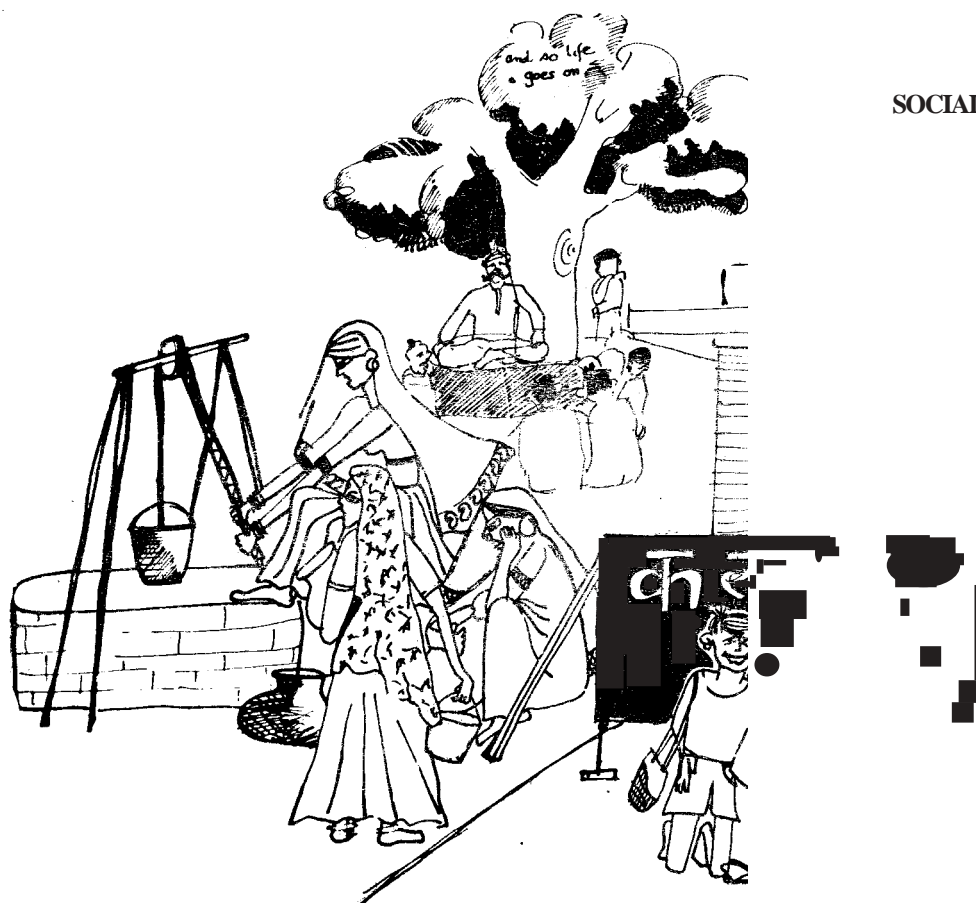
28.1 INTRODUCTION

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.



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.