
UNIT 3 SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND DYNAMIC THEORIES OF STRUCTURE

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Learning Objectives



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

- define Social Organisation and Social Structure;
- describe about the dynamic theories of social structure; and
- indicate the importance underlying these theories from an anthropological perspective.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this lesson we are going to try and understand about 'Social Organisation and Dynamic Theories of Structure.' The term 'structure' (Latin *structura* from *struere*, to construct) has been applied to human societies since the 19th century. Before that time, its use was more common in other fields such as construction or biology. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1999) gives three meanings of the

term structure: (i) the way in which something is organised, built, or put together (e.g., the structure of the human body); (ii) a particular system, pattern, procedure, or institution (e.g., class structure, salary structure); and (iii) a thing made up of several parts put together in a particular way (e.g., a single-storey structure).

In Social anthropology a study on structure will encompass all the three meanings. The term structure, will thereby imply an ‘interconnectedness’ of parts, i.e., the parts of a society are not isolated entities, but are brought together in a set of relationships. Spencer developed the organic analogy, believing that this analogy will be greatly valid if we are able to show not only that society is like an organism but also that ‘organism is like society’ (see Barnes, H.E. 1948; Harris 1968). Why organic analogy is used more than other analogies such as of the solar system, and later, of atomic and chemical systems – is because an organism is far more concrete than other systems, and is easy to understand, comprehend, and explain. This analogy was basic to the understanding of the concept of social structure, a term used for the first time by Spencer.

For those who regard structure as an important analytical concept, the world is an organised entity; it comprises interconnected parts, where each part is to be studied in relationship with other parts. Thus, ‘Structure refers to the way in which the parts of an entity are interconnected so that the entity emerges as an integrated whole, which for the purpose of analysis can be broken down into individual parts.’

3.2 SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

‘Social organisation’ has tended to be used loosely to refer to the sum total of activities performed in a given social context. So we must understand that social organisation which defines the roles individuals play in relation to one another is mainly concerned with social action whereas social structure which defines the statuses of actors performing such roles are more concerned with the formal relations between people. We are all aware of the fact that all human groups of a society are organised and the individual components function through interrelation and interaction. Social organisation implies some degree of unification, a putting together of diverse elements into common relation. To do this, advantage may be taken of existing structural principles or variant procedures may be adopted. This involves the exercise of choice, the making of decisions.

Herbert Spencer who used the term ‘function’ for the analytical study of society perceived close parallels between the human society and biological organism. He believed that just like the interrelated parts of a machine function to keep the machine working in a similar fashion there is functional dependence of different parts of the society for maintaining the integrity of the society. Durkheim tried to explain this concept with social phenomenon. Malinowski used the term social organisation and tried to define it in terms of purposive manner in which people acted upon their environment to satisfy their needs thereby putting forward what is called the theory of functionalism. However Radcliffe-Brown later modified Malinowski’s concept, emphasising upon distinguishing the structural function from the function of Malinowski. Brown has made a clear cut distinction between social structure and social organisation. According to him, social structure refers to arrangement of persons, whereas social organisation refers to arrangement of activities of two or more persons which are adjusted to give a united combined

activity. He perceived social organisation as the arrangement of 'roles' associated with 'statuses.', which ultimately constitute social structure. Levi-Strauss, and many other anthropologists, have consistently employed the term 'social structure' for what Radcliffe-Brown called 'structural form'. Lévi-Strauss even uses 'social structure' to refer to a still higher degree of abstraction—the structure of social relations in all societies, as well as that within a particular society.

Parsons' view of the relation between social organisation and social structure (1951) was essentially the same as that of Radcliffe-Brown, but in addition he posited the idea of the social system, which comprises both. Parsons distinguished four levels of this system: social values, institutional patterns, specialised collectivities (groups), and roles performed by individuals in these collectivities or groups. To complicate things further, Murdock's (1949) famous book by the title *Social Structure* seems to suggest a very wide meaning of 'social structure', one which bears little relation to the more precise formulations of other theorists, though it probably comes closer to the usual meaning of 'social organisation'.

'Social structure' has usually been employed for the social context itself, or more precisely for the set of social relations which link individuals in a society. Writers who are mainly concerned with social action tend to concentrate on social organisation which defines the roles individuals play in relation to one another. Those who are concerned more with the formal relations between people tend to concentrate on social structure, which defines the statuses of actors performing such roles. Thus, social organisation is of greater interest to Malinowskian functionalists, and to some extent processualists, notably Raymond Firth (1951). Social structure is of greater interest to those whose approaches are descended from classic structural-functionalist and structuralist traditions.

According to Raymond Firth (1951) the arrangement of parts or elements constitutes social structure how people in the society get things done constitutes social organisation. The concern of structural studies will be to outline the fundamental social constituents that are revealed in the forms of basic social relations. Structural elements give shape to the society just like the anatomical framework give shape to human body. The study of social structure is indispensable to delineate the functions of the society to understand the continuity of social life.

Social Organisation, on the other hand is not limited to the ideal pattern of social relations. It indicates the factors to change i. e, the extent to which the social standard deviate as an influence of different external factors. Therefore if social structure is conceived as a model of action, the social organisation will be the reality. According to Firth, a structural analysis alone can not interpret social change. Analysis of the structural aspect necessitates the analysis of the organisational aspect.

Social organisation can be explained by the examples of social groups, industrial groups, and sport groups. When we think about the organisation of work in factory, we understand that there are managers, foreman and other workers who tend to carry out different activities for the functioning of the factory as a whole. This arrangement of activities reveals the organisational aspect of the factory. In a similar manner, social structure can be explained by the examples of army and tribal groups, which reveal arrangement of persons in institutionalised form. Thus, an organisation is arrangement of relationship within the total activities of an institution. For example, activities of various members of household may be subject to some regular arrangement, and arrangement of these activities is its organisation.

The arrangement of activities of one family may differ from another household, which is structurally of the same order. Radcliffe-Brown makes this distinction clear by stipulating that ‘when we are dealing with structural system, we are concerned with a system of social positions .While in an organisation, we deal with a system of roles.’ In the study of social structure, we deal with total network of social relationships, and not such relationship themselves.

For a clear understanding of the terms social structure and social organisation, let us take into consideration the Garo society which is a matrilineal tribe inhabiting basically in the state of Meghalaya. The Garos follow matriliney in descent and inheritance and their residence is matrilocal. They also have a distinct dialect of their own. All these features give the Garo society a typical structure. An Organisational study on the other hand will encompass the study of the various traditional aspects of Garo social life i.e., family types, clans kinship, marriage, political system, educational system, religious beliefs and practices coupled with the significant changes in traditional Garo society due to their conversion to Christianity and contacts with other contemporary Indian societies. The total study of a society including the structural aspect is what we call an organisational study.

3.3 DYNAMIC THEORIES OF STRUCTURE

As we go further into the unit we will as students of anthropology be able to understand how the theory of social structure has attracted the attention of these scholars whose findings, interpretations and analysis of the elements of social structure has revealed the dynamic nature of social structure. This section will deal with examining the contributions of Radcliffe-Brown, G. P. Murdock, Levi-Strauss, S.F. Nadel, Edmund Leach, Raymond Firth, Meyer Fortes, Evans-Pritchard, T.Parsons, Emile Durkheim and Rodney Needham to the understanding of the dynamic theories of social structure.

3.3.1 Social Structure is a Reality: A. R. Radcliffe-Brown’s Contribution

When we speak of social structure, we must remember as said earlier that Spencer who coined the term social structure did not offer a theoretical perspective on it. However his analogy between societies and organisms influenced later scholars in developing the concepts of structure and function. For instance, Émile Durkheim (1938 [1895]), although a staunch critic of Spencer, was inspired by his organic analogy, and used the term ‘social morphology’, by which he meant what we mean by the term ‘social structure’. Durkheim’s sociology exercised an indelible impact on the British social anthropologist, A. R. Radcliffe–Brown, the chief pioneer of British School of Structuralism. Besides his contribution to what he called the ‘structural-functional approach’, one of his important contributions was to the understanding of the concept of social structure. He used the concept of social structure for the first time as early as 1914, while delivering his presidential address to Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain.

Radcliffe-Brown (1952) who believes that social phenomena are investigated by methods similar to those used in natural and biological sciences makes an important distinction between an ‘individual’ and a ‘person’. As an individual, ‘he is a biological organism’ which keeps on carrying out a multitude of physiological and psychological functions till the time he is alive. As a ‘person’, the human being is a ‘complex of social relationships’. It is the unit of study for sociologists and social

anthropologists. Radcliffe-Brown uses the term ‘social personality’ for the ‘position’ a human being occupies in a social structure. It however does not imply that the position remains the same throughout the life of an individual, for it changes over time. We study persons in terms of social structure and we study social structures in terms of persons who are the unit of what it is composed. So we need to understand that society is not a ‘haphazard conjunction of persons’, rather an organised system where norms and values control the relationships between persons. According to Radcliffe-Brown all social relations of person to person, i.e., interpersonal relations (for example, the kinship structure of any society) and the differentiation of individuals and of classes by their social role (for instance, the relation between men and women, employers and employees, etc.) are in fact concerned with relations between persons, which norms and values of that society condition.

Radcliffe-Brown further stated that social structure is that concrete reality that comprises the ‘set of actually existing relations at a given moment of time, which link together certain human beings.’ We can conduct direct observation on social structure – we can see the ‘actually existing relations’, describe and classify them, and understand the relations of persons with others. Social structure is observable, empirical, and fully amenable to study by methods of natural and biological sciences.

According to Radcliffe-Brown both the social structure and organism are prone to change yet they are stable. Social structure continues over time, a kind of continuity that Radcliffe-Brown calls ‘dynamic continuity’. It is like the ‘organic structure of a living body’. By change he means that organs of both the structure are liable to development and destruction. As a living body constantly renews itself by replacing its cells and energy level, in the same way, the actual ‘social life renews the social structure.’ Relations between people change over time. While the social structure changes over time, there remains an underlying continuity and relative constancy, which designates its structural form. This certainly does not imply that the structural form is static — it also changes, sometimes gradually, sometimes with suddenness, as happens in cases of revolution. But even then, some kind of a continuity of structure is maintained. Our job as sociologists and social anthropologists is to discover the structural form of society. It is to move from particular to general, or in the language of Radcliffe-Brown, from ‘ideographic’ to ‘nomothetic’.

Reflection and Action

What does Radcliffe-Brown mean by dynamic continuity?

Radcliffe-Brown’s attempt was praiseworthy, for it was the first rigorous attempt to define the concept of social structure, rather than just taking its meaning for granted. However, it led to many questions and confusions. If social structure is a collectivity of interpersonal relations, real and observable, then what is society? Do we study society and find its structure?

These questions clearly show that while there is no confusion between the categories of particular and general, confusion prevails with respect to the distinction between ‘society’ and ‘social structure’, ‘social life’ and ‘social structure’, and the ‘structural form’ of a social structure and the ‘structural form’ of social structures. One more observation: what Radcliffe-Brown understands by the term ‘structural type’ is what many understand by the term ‘social structure’. And, what Radcliffe-Brown calls ‘social structure’ is what many would call ‘society’.

3.3.2 George Peter Murdock's view on Social Structure

Murdock like the other American anthropologists of his times has been more critical in their acceptance of pure functionalism. i.e., synchronic functionalism.. His book 'Social Structure' was most explicit on the point of functionalism. He tried to form a harmonious synthesis of cross cultural comparisons by combining the historical, functional, psychological and statistical methods.

3.3.3 Social Structure is a Model: Contribution of Claude Lévi-Strauss

Perhaps the most provocative and debatable contribution to the concept of social structure was that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French structuralist, who is famous for his ingenious cross-cultural analysis of myths and kinship systems. Levi-Strauss believes that structure of society is but a surface manifestation of fundamental mental processes. If for functionalism, society is a 'kind of living creature', consisting of parts, which can be 'dissected and distinguished', for structuralism, it is the analogy from language that helps us in conceptualising society. From the study of a given piece of language, the linguist tries to arrive at its grammar, the underlying rules which make an expression meaningful, although the speakers of that language may not know about it. Similarly, the structuralist tries to infer its underlying structure from a given piece of social behaviour. In structuralism, the shift is from observable behaviour to structure, from organic analogy to language (Barnard 2000). Further, structuralism submits that the set of relations between different parts can be transformed into 'something' that appears to be different from what it was earlier. It is the idea of transformation — of one into another that lies at the core of structuralism, rather than the quality of relations.

Lévi-Strauss says that social structure is not a field of study; it is not a 'province of enquiry'. We do not study social structure, but it is an explanatory method and can be used in any kind of social studies. Here, Lévi-Strauss distinguishes the concept of social structure from that of social relations. The latter are the 'raw data of social experience' – they are the relations between people, empirical and observable. It is from social relations that models comprising the social structure are built. Although the models are built from raw, empirical reality, they cannot be reduced to it. The ensemble of social relations in a given society can be described, but social structure is an anthropologist's construction, built for the purpose of analysis.

Reflection and Action

How does Levi-Strauss distinguish between the concept of social structure and social relations?

Lévi-Strauss claimed that social structure and the social relations that are its constituents are theoretical constructions used to model social life. He believed that a major goal of social anthropology was to identify social structures and formal relationships between them and that qualitative or discrete mathematics would be a necessary tool to do this. He makes three distinctions: first, between observation and experimentation on models; second, the conscious and unconscious character of the models; and third, between mechanical and statistical models. The observation of social relations and the construction of models after these facts need to be distinguished from 'experiments' on models. By experimentation, Lévi-Strauss means the 'controlled comparison' of models of the same or of a different kind, with an intention to identify the model that accounts best for the observed

facts. In a structural analysis, the first step is to observe the facts without any bias, then to describe them in relationship to themselves and in relation to the whole. From this, models are constructed, and in the final analysis, the best model is chosen. This distinction is with reference to the anthropologist who studies society. By comparison, the distinction between conscious and unconscious models is made with reference to the society under study.

Conscious models are the “insider’s models”: according to which the society views itself. Underneath these models are ‘deeper structures’, the unconscious models, which the society does not perceive directly or consciously. Anthropologists principally work with the models that they construct from the deeper lying phenomena, rather than with conscious models. It is because, Lévi-Strauss says, the aim of conscious models is to ‘perpetuate the phenomena’ and not to ‘explain’ it.

Let us now come to the last distinction. The classic formulation of mechanical models is that they are those models which lie on the same scale as the phenomenon is. And, when they — the model and the phenomenon — lie on a different scale, they are called statistical models. Unfortunately, as critics have noted, Lévi-Strauss does not explain the meaning of the ‘same scale’. But from the example he has given, it seems that he is concerned with the quantitative differences between ‘what people say’ and ‘what they do’. To make it clear, Lévi-Strauss gives the example of the laws of marriage. When there is no difference between marriage rules and social groupings — the two are placed on the same scale — the model formed will be mechanical. And when several factors affect the type of marriage and people have no option but to deviate from the rule, the model formed will be statistical; like the difference between the prescriptive and preferential systems of marriage.

3.3.4 A Synthesis of Structural Functionalism: Contribution of S.F. Nadel

Nadel developed the theory of social structure in his posthumously published book entitled *The Theory of Social Structure* (1957). Nadel’s central argument was simply that the structuralist orthodoxy was inadequate by itself – it has to be wedded to a functionalist perspective.

Nadel disagrees with Radcliffe-Brown’s idea that social structure is an observable entity, but an abstraction from it. At the same time, he rejects Lévi-Strauss’s view that social structure has nothing to do with empirical reality. From Radcliffe-Brown, he borrows the idea that each person occupies a position in the social structure, but from an empirical level of inter-personal interaction, he moves to a level of abstraction where the person becomes the actor who plays a role with respect to the others. This abstraction, however, does not imply that it loses touch with reality. Nadel (1957: 150) writes: I consider social structure, of whatever degree of refinement, to be still the social reality itself, or an aspect of it, not the logic behind it...

We must therefore understand that for Nadel, the components of social structure are roles and the pattern (or design) of interconnected roles constitutes the social structure of a society. His definition of social structure is as follows (1957: 12): ‘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’.

Nadel feels that when describing structure, we abstract relational features from the totality of the perceived data, ignoring all that is not in order or arrangement in brief, we define the positions relative to one another of the component parts. Structures can be transposed irrespective of the concrete data manifesting it; differently expressed, the parts composing any structure can vary widely in their concrete character without changing the identity of the structure.

Nadel now translates all this into the language appropriate to the analysis of societies. To begin with societies are made up of people; societies have boundaries people either belonging to them or not and people belong to a society in virtue of rules under which they stand and which impose on them regular determinate ways of acting towards and in regard to one another. For determinate ways of acting towards or in regard to one another we usually say relationships and we indicate that they follow from rules by calling them institutionalised or social relationships. We identify the mutual ways of acting of individuals as relationships only when the former exhibit some consistency and uniformity since without these attributes they would merely be single or disjointed acts. Most relationships lack this simple uniformity. Rather the concrete behaviour occurring in them will always be diversified and more or less widely variable intentionally changing with the circumstances it will be constant or consistent only in its general character in its capacity to indicate a certain type of mutuality or linkage.

Nadel concludes that we arrive at the structure of a society through abstracting from the concrete population and its behaviour, the pattern or network of relationships obtaining between actors in their capacity of playing roles relative to one another.

Reflection and Action

What does Nadel imply by a synthesis of structural functionalism?

Nadel has tried to explain in this definition that structure refers to a definable articulation, an ordered arrangement of parts. Nadel therefore says that structure indicates a transportable being, relatively invariants, while the parts themselves are variable. According to him, there are three elements of society: (i) a group of people, (ii) institutionalised rules according to which members of the group interact, (iii) an institutionalised pattern or expression of these interactions. The institutionalised rules or patterns do not change easily and this creates orderliness in society. These rules determine the status and roles of the individuals. There is an order among these rules and status also which provide an ordered arrangement of human beings.

According to Nadel there are three dichotomies to resolve which are aspects of structure: (i) structure as opposed to function, (ii) structure as opposed to qualitative character and (iii) structure as opposed to process. Unless we resolve these dichotomies, we are unable to give a satisfactory account of social structure. Social behaviour which is institutionalised involves relatively determinate ways of action within and between groups over periods of time. The institutionalised behaviour characterised by consistency of the relationships may not always be concrete behaviour. It varies in detail according to occasion and circumstances but its general characters which allows it to be subsumed in an identical category of relationship are clearly bound by the convention of a particular society. What we mean to say is that all these contain an element of abstraction; they are all categories which we infer from a number of observed sequences or actions. Therefore the problem is to find a way of expressing the relationship between individuals acting as individuals and as their acting as part of a social network.

3.3.5 Edmund Leach on Social Structure

The British anthropologist, Edmund Leach who disliked synchronic functionalism also made significant contribution to the idea of social structure as a model, although there are many significant differences between the approaches of Lévi-Strauss and Leach to structuralism. Leach has dealt with change without abandoning the useful notions of structure and function. For instance, whereas Lévi-Strauss is interested in unearthing the ‘universal structures’ – structures applicable to all human societies at all point of time — Leach applies the method of structuralism to understand the local (or regional) structures. Because of this, some term Leach’s approach ‘neo-structural’ (Kuper 1996 [1973]). Leach has formulated a conception of social structure that is “essentially the same as Lévi-Strauss’s” (Nutini 1970: 76). Like Lévi-Strauss, Leach divides the ‘social universe’ into different epistemological categories: the raw data of social experience (i.e., social relations) and the models that are built from it. Models are not empirical; they are the ‘logical constructions’ in the mind of the anthropologist. Like Lévi-Strauss, Leach also arrives at the distinction between the mechanical and statistical models, i.e., models built respectively on ‘what people say’ and ‘what people do’, but he calls mechanical models ‘jural rules’ and statistical models ‘statistical norms’. The meaning Leach gives to ‘jural rules’ and ‘statistical norms’ is essentially the same which Lévi-Strauss gives to mechanical and statistical models.

But two important differences stand out. First, for Lévi-Strauss both mechanical and statistical models are of roughly equal analytical value and they complement each other. For Leach, jural rules and statistical norms should be treated as separate frames of reference. In an analysis, the statistical norms should have priority over the jural rules. We should begin our study with the actual behaviour of people, the deviations that occur and the conformity they achieve. Second, Leach points out that mechanical models or jural rules are qualitative rules of behaviour. Sanctions support them and they have the power of coercion. Statistical models or norms are only ‘statistical averages of individual behaviour’. They do not have any coercive power.

In his hands, functionalism became dynamic and diachronic. The best known critic of Radcliffe-Brown’s type of structuralism is E.R Leach. He contends that the aim of social anthropology should be generalisation rather than comparison and challenges Radcliffe-Brown’s conception of social structure and the comparative method.

3.3.6 Raymond Firth on Social Structure

Raymond Firth also disliked synchronic functionalism and like Leach dealt with dynamic or diachronic functionalism. Raymond Firth was concerned with the nature of individuals and the choices they make. As mentioned earlier he focuses on observed activities as he sets out his impressions on structural-functionalism. He made distinction between social structure and social organisation. While the arrangement of parts or elements constitutes social structure how people in the society get things done constitutes social organisation.

Firth in his book *Elements of Social Organisation* (1951) emphasises the necessity to distinguish between social structure and social organisation and says that the more one thinks of the structure of a society in abstract terms as of group relations or of ideal patterns the more necessity it is to think separately of social organisation in terms of concrete activity. Firth sums up –the fulfilment of the moral obligations laid down by structural requirements is conditioned by individual interests.

3.3.7 Contribution of Meyer Fortes

In his article *The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups* (1953) Fortes has analysed the African kinship groups. His analysis of the lineage organisation has come mainly from Radcliffe Brown's formulation of the structural principles found in all kinship groups. According to Fortes the social structure should be thought of in terms of levels of organisation. He says that we can investigate the total social structure of a given community at the level of local organisation at the level of kinship at the level of corporate group structure of government and at that of ritual institutions. These levels are connected in some sort of hierarchy. It is important to perceive and state the fact that all levels of structure are involved in every social relationship and activity.

Fortes believes that the study of the unilineal descent groups as a part of total social system means studying its functions in the widest framework of social structure and that of the political organisation. He shows that descent is fundamentally a jural concept. He sees its significance in the connecting link between the external political or legal aspect of unilineal descent groups and the internal or domestic aspect. The dynamic character of lineage structure can be seen most easily in the balance that is reached between its external relations and its internal structure. Maintaining the stable condition in the social structure is one of the chief functions of lineage systems.

3.3.8 Social Structure Refers to Relations between Groups: The Contribution of E.E. Evans-Pritchard

Evans-Pritchard's description of the elements of *Nuer Society* (1940) and their interrelationship guided him to the concept of social structure. Instead of beginning with the idea of person, as did Radcliffe-Brown, he began with viewing social structure in terms of groups. To quote him (1940: 262): By social structure we mean relations between groups which have a high degree of consistency and constancy. The processes of life and death condition individuals, but the structure of society endures. It is clear that for Evans-Pritchard, social structure deals with units which are largely invariant, i.e., groups. What Radcliffe-Brown means by 'structural form' is what Evans-Pritchard means by 'social structure'. The groups considered for describing social structure may be called 'structural groups' – the examples of which among the Nuer are territorial groups, lineages and age-sets. Evans-Pritchard does not consider the family as a 'structural group' but he does acknowledge the fact that family is essential for the preservation of structure. Reflecting on the example of the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard says that the tribe is not a haphazard congregation of residential units. Thus, structure is a 'relation between groups'.

To sum up: for Evans-Pritchard, the parts of social structure, among which structural relations are to be described, are groups that endure over time. Social structure is not an empirical entity for him. Therefore, social structure is an anthropologist's abstraction from the existing reality. It should be kept in mind here that for Evans-Pritchard (1951), social anthropology is not a branch of natural science, as it is for Radcliffe-Brown, but it is a kind of historiography. Its kinship is with history, and not natural and biological sciences.

3.3.9 Talcott Parsons on Social Structure

Talcott Parsons like his British counterparts also emphasised the importance of roles in defining social structure and the problem of how to relate the static

concept of structure to the dynamic aspects of social change. According to Parsons, social structure is a term applied to the particular arrangement of the interrelated institutions, agencies and social patterns as well as the status and roles, which each person assumes in the group. He emphasised that all the units of social structure i.e. institutions, agencies, social patterns, status and roles are invisible and intangible and hence are abstract. Customs, traditions and conventions of society determines the status and role of individuals which finally leads to the formation of different agencies, institutions and patterns. The social structure of a society is built when all these institutions, agencies and patterns are interrelated and organised in a particular manner. Social structure is concerned with the interrelationships between these units which constitute the society. The ordered arrangement between this units is what Parsons calls social structure.

What is being said is that the structure of a social system is defined with respect to the 'institutionalised patterns of normative culture'. All these when interrelated and organised in a particular manner will build the social structure of society.

3.3.10 Emile Durkheim on Social Structure

The concept of structure and function also appeared in the writings of French anthropologist, Emile Durkheim in his books *Division of Labour* (1893) and *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895). He has also treated society like an organism. He opines that as an organism makes the body alive through fulfillment of essential needs, the society also tends to exist through fulfillment of essential needs. He uses the term function to refer to the activities by which the essential needs of the society are fulfilled. According to Durkheim, the structural units of a society such as family, religion, kinship, political and economic organisation contribute valuable function for maintaining the order of society.

Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski were influenced by Durkheim's concept of Functionalism. Brown refers to Durkheim's definition of function which states that 'the function of social institution is correspondence between it and the needs of the social organism.' Durkheim thus made a systematic formulation of the analogy between society and organic life, As the life of an organism is considered to be the functioning of its organic structure, therefore social life is conceived by Durkheim to be the functioning of social structure.

3.3.11 Rodney Needham on Social Structure

Rodney Needham was one of the leading British social anthropologists of his generation. Together with Sir Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas, he brought structuralism across the Channel and anglicised it in the process. In the early 1950s, the structural-functionalist approach which had made British anthropology a world leader was beginning to languish from its rigorous but over-extended empiricism. By chance, Needham spotted a copy of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Les Structures élémentaires de la Parenté* (1949) in Blackwell's the week before he went on fieldwork to Borneo. Primed by his knowledge of Dutch structural anthropology, he quickly realised its significance and its concern with conceptual structure over social organisation.

Structuralism thus provided him with a radically new interpretation of kinship systems, the bedrock of social structure in small-scale societies. Back in Oxford, he industriously put this approach into practice in a series of brilliant papers in which he emphasised the importance of alliance, through marriage, over that of descent, through lineages. Never scared of fomenting lively debate, his first great

work, *Structure and Sentiment* (1962), demonstrated devastatingly the power of structuralist approaches over psychological ones.

But in 1969 Lévi-Strauss somewhat unfairly attacked Needham's interpretation of his work in the preface to the English edition of his kinship work, which Needham as his leading British disciple had so carefully translated, as *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. From then on, Needham ploughed his own structuralist path producing central work on systems of classification, cognitive universals, indigenous psychologies, and kinship theory. His first theoretical interest was the extremely complex systems of kinship and marriage known as "prescriptive alliance". In these, a man has to marry a relative in a certain category, such as the mother's brother's daughter, and it was as an expert in the very demanding analysis of these systems that he first made his professional mark with a short but devastating monograph, *Structure and Sentiment*. This refuted the claim that the rules of these systems could be explained by the particular feelings that people would have towards different categories of relative.

Needham strongly agreed with Evans-Pritchard that British social anthropology could benefit from the ideas of Durkheim, Mauss, Hertz and others of the *Année Sociologique* school. He took a leading part in translating and introducing this, and also translated some work of German and Dutch scholars into English.

As mentioned earlier *Structure and Sentiment* had been a defense of Lévi-Strauss, and Needham organised the translation of his *Elementary Structures of Kinship*; but in the course of the word-by-word analysis of the text that this involved he became increasingly critical of what he saw as Lévi-Strauss's casual and inaccurate handling of his data. But although he came to regard Lévi-Straussian structuralism itself as banal and empty, certain elements of structuralist thinking, especially the importance of binary opposition, remained crucial to Needham's thinking.

He believed that the global comparisons made by social anthropologists reveal that there are only very limited numbers of ways in which kinship systems and marriage rules can be constituted. So too, underlying all the diversity of myth, ritual, and social organisation there are a fairly limited number of what Needham called "primary factors"; these are found all over the world, if not in every society then regardless of language or historical associations.

Examples are the same three colours of black, white and red, which also tend to have similar associations; sacred numbers, almost always below 10; the association of the right hand with men, the sun, odd numbers, and hardness, and the left hand with female, the moon, even numbers, and softness; the use of percussive sounds to mark a transition between two states, such as a new moon or a wedding; a distinction between sacred and secular authority, and so on.

These symbolic elements occur in a limited number of relations, in particular: opposition, exchange, alternation, reversal, inversion, and transition across a boundary. So archetypal figures such as the witch, and the half-man (with one eye, one arm, and one leg, all on the same side), are complexes made up of these primary factors, which are also the basic building blocks of a great deal of myth and ritual, and of important aspects of social organisation. In Needham's view, these are not "beliefs" that have been consciously formulated, nor are they the expressions of any discernible inner states, but are direct expressions of the working of the human brain, which is why they are independent of language and culture.

3.4 SUMMARY

The concept of social structure has been a 'pleasant puzzle', to remember the words of A.L. Kroeber (1948), to which, at one time, almost every anthropologist and sociologist tried to make a contribution, either by drawing attention to the part (or parts) of society that seemed important to the author, or by lending support to an already existing idea or theory of social structure. As noted in the beginning, the debate concerning social structure has centered around two issues: (i) among whom parts of society are there structural relations? and (ii) is social structure 'real' or a 'model' which the investigator constructs? Of the two major opinions on social structure, Lévi-Strauss's is closely connected to his method of structuralism – social structure is a 'model' devised for undertaking the study of social behaviour (relations and experiences). Thus Levi-Strauss's structuralism has become concerned with understanding cultural and social patterns in terms of the universal mental processes that are rooted in the biochemistry of the human brain. For Radcliffe-Brown, social structure is an 'empirical' entity, constituting the subject matter of social anthropology and sociology. Murdock like the other American anthropologists of his times has been more critical in their acceptance of pure functionalism. i.e. synchronic functionalism. S.F.Nadel however proposes to combine the views of both Radcliffe-Brown and Levi-Strauss. Nadel has tried to explain in this definition that structure refers to a definable articulation, an ordered arrangement of parts. He has emphasised that social structure refers to the network of social relations which is created among human beings when they interact with each other, according to their status in accordance with the patterns of society. E.R.Leach who disliked synchronic functionalism dealt with change without abandoning the useful notions of structure and function is considered as the best known critic of Radcliffe-Brown's type of structuralism. Leach applies the method of structuralism to understand the local (or regional) structures. Because of this, some term Leach's approach 'neo-structural' (Kuper 1996 [1973]). Raymond Firth also disliked synchronic functionalism and like Leach dealt with dynamic or diachronic functionalism. He equally proposed that variations of actual behaviour should be observed and recorded in order to discover the process of change. Meyer Fortes regarded social structure as not only an aspect of culture but the entire culture of a given people handled in a special frame of theory. Evans-Pritchard's description of the elements of Nuer society and their interrelationship guided him to the concept of social structure. Instead of beginning with the idea of person, as did Radcliffe-Brown, he began with viewing social structure in terms of groups. What Radcliffe-Brown means by 'structural form' is what Evans-Pritchard means by 'social structure'. Durkhiem, who made a systematic formulation of the analogy between society and organic life thinks that just like the life of an organism is considered to be the functioning of its organic structure, social life is conceived by him to be the functioning of social structure. Rodney Needham who was initially fascinated by structuralism and inspired by linguistics, attempted to explain the diversities of human culture by a few basic and universal structures of the brain.

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Sample Questions

- 1) Define Social Organisation and Social structure.
- 2) Critically examine the contributions of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, G.P. Murdock, Levis-Strauss, Leach, Firth, Meyer Fortes, T. Parsons, Nadel, Needham, Durkheim and Evans-Pritchard to the dynamic theories of social structure.