UNIT 27 THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL SYSTEM — PARSONS

Structure

27.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you should be able to

• explain the early approaches to the study of social systems and Parsons' own point of view regarding them

- understand the action approach of Parsons in the study of the social system

- discuss the basic unit of organisation of the social system

- outline the concept of pattern variables given by Parsons

- describe the functional prerequisites of a social system, and finally

- discuss the types of structures of social systems exemplified empirically by Parsons.

27.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units of Block 6 you learnt about the contributions of B. Malinowski's and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown's functionalist and structure-functionalist approaches to the study of society. Both these thinkers belonged to the British tradition of social anthropology. They had based their theories on their study of primitive societies.

In this Block, we will explain to you the contribution of American sociologists, Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton to the development of functionalism. For several decades sociology, specially American, was dominated by Parsons and later Merton. The functionalist approach of both Parsons and Merton is a common link between the Blocks 6 and 7 of this course. Unlike the British social anthropologists, the focus of Parsons' and Merton's study was on the modern industrial societies, especially the American society.

To understand the sociological version of functionalism, it is necessary to grasp Talcutt Parsons' concept of the social system. Unit 27 is devoted to this task. It describes the concept of **social system** as analysed by Talcott Parsons. His conceptual scheme is provided to analyse the structure and processes of social systems. Parsons' concept of the social system is developed in the nature of a general sociological theory, which can be applied for the study of both the simple primitive societies as well as the complex modern industrial societies.

The unit begins with a discussion of the early approaches to the study of the social systems and Parsons' alternative to these approaches. This is discussed in Section 27.2. The alternative to these approaches is Parsons' 'action approach', which is given in Section 27.3. Parsons has developed his theory from the level of **action** to the social system. The next Section 27.4 describes the basic unit of organisation of a social system given by Parsons. These units are roles and role expectations. The institutionalisation of roles is discussed and social system as a collectivity is described in this section. To explain the dilemma of choice of action available to an individual in a social system Parsons developed the concept of pattern variables. These pattern variables are discussed in Section 27.5.

The survival of any social system depends, according to Parsons on four functional prerequisites. These functional prerequisites have been described in Section 27.6. Finally, Section 27.7 discusses the types of structures of social systems exemplified by Parsons from empirical cases in society.

27.2 TALCOTT PARSONS AND THE EARLY APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL SYSTEM

Let us first understand in simple terms what is meant by a social system. A social system has been defined by Mitchell (1979: 203) as 'consisting of a plurality of al actors interacting directly or indirectly with each other in a bounded situation. There may be physical or territorial boundaries but the main point of reference sociologically is that here individuals are oriented, in a wide sense, to a common focus or interrelated foci'. According to this definition such diverse sets of relationships as families, political parties, kinship groups and even whole societies can be regarded as social systems.

Parsons' ideas on social systems and his theory of action or action approach are rooted in the thinking of his predecessors. In his monumental book *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) Parsons has reviewed the contributions of many social scientists, but gave special emphasis to Pareto, Durkheim and Max Weber. In this work Parsons attempts to highlight the underlying unity in the contributions of most of these thinkers. By sorting out these unities. Parsons felt that his quest for a general theory of social system would be forwarded. In his opinion a notion of a theory of action was hidden or was present by implication in the works that he reviewed. In the case of Max Weber, however he found action theory more or less clearly formulated. Let us now examine the early approaches to the study of the concept of social system.

27.2.0 The Utilitarian, the Positivist, and the Idealist Points of View

Parsons divides earlier contributions into three broad schools of thought, viz., the utilitarian, the positivist, and the idealist. The utilitarians see social action in a highly individualist fashion. They emphasise utilitarian rational calculation but at the level of the individual. For this reason they are unable to accommodate the fact that social life is collectively cohesive and not a random effect (See Box 27.1).

Box 27.1 Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a school of thought, which believes in the fact that pleasure is better than pain. It is a philosophical outlook and is generally associated with the name of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). According to this outlook utility is the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The proper goal of all human beings should be maximisation of utility. Bentham believed that good motives are good as far as they lead to harmony of interests of an individual with those of others.

Thus utilitarianism is a moral theory which has certain social implications. It holds that nothing is desired for its own sake pleasure that it provides. Since pleasure is the guiding force of this philosophy, the moral rules also are believed to be those which encourage behaviour, which can increase pleasure and reduce pain.

> Bentham applied this philosophy to the study of economics, administration and law. The classical economists such as Adam Smith, Ricardo and few others subscribed to this view.
>
> Early English Sociology too, was influenced by this philosophy. One of the sociologists most influenced by this philosophy was Herbert Spencer.

The positivists on the other hand believe that social actors have complete knowledge of their social situation. This leaves no room for error on the part of actors or variation among actors (See Box 27.2)

> **Box 27.2 Positivism**
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> The term 'positivism' was first used by Auguste Comte (1798-1897). You learnt about his 'positive philosophy' in the first block of ESO-13.
>
> This term also has been used for the distinct doctrines of school of philosophers known as 'logical positivists'. They believed in the central idea that the meaning of a statement lay in the method of its varification. Any statement, which could not be verified, therefore, becomes meaningless.
>
> In Parson's view a social theory is positivistic which holds the view that human action can adequately charecterised without regard to the agent's own standpoint. He considered utilitarianism as one of the good example of a positivistic theory.

The idealist posit that social action is the realisation of the social spirit and the ideas such as, of a nation or a people, and consequently pay scant attention to real everyday impediments on the ground that obstruct the free realisation of ideas. (see Box 27.3)

> **Box27.3 Idealism**
>
> Idealism is the school of thought, which believes that the mind plays a key role in the constitution of the world as it is experienced. In the history we can discern different forms and applications of idealism. Its most radical form has been rejected because it is equivalent to solipsism. Solipsism is the view that all reality is nothing but the activity of one's own mind and that in reality nothing exists but one's own self
>
> However, idealists usually recognise the existence of the external or natural world fully. They do not claim that it can be reduced to the mere process of thinking. They believe that the mind is active and capable of producing and sustaining modes of being that would not have existed otherwise, such as law, religion, art and mathematics
>
> The eighteenth century Irish philosopher George Berkeley is identified closely with this philosophy. He believed that all aspects of everything of which we are conscious are actually reducible to the ideas present in the mind. For example, the idea of a chair or a cow already exists in

our minds, therefore, we recognise the chair or the cow when we find it. Thus, the observer does not conjure the external objects (chair or cow) into existence. In fact, Berkeley held that the true ideas of the external objects are caused in the human mind directly by God

The eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant further refined idealism through his critical inquiry into the limits of possible knowledge. Kant believed that there is no way of knowing things in themselves, they can be known to us only in the way that they appear to us in experience. He held that the fundamental principles of all science are essentially grounded in the constitution of the mind rather than being derived from the external world.

Finally, the name most closely associated with this philosophical outlook is of the nineteenth century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegal. Hegal believed that the highest achievements of the human spirit (culture, science, religion, and the state) are conceived and sustained by the dialectical activity; such as thesis, antithesis and synthesis of free reflective intellect. It is not the result of naturally determined processes in the mind (Funk and Wagnalls' New Encyclopedia 1971-83, Volume 13: 370-371). In fact, Hegel's philosophy, especially his dialectical thought influenced Karl Marx in developing his ideas of dialectical historical materialism. For Hegel's ideas see Block 2 of ESO-13.

In the *Structure of Social Action* Parsons uses this classification to review the contributions of major thinkers like Durkheim, Pareto and Weber. He goes to great lengths to point out elements of the various schools of thought in their writings. While doing so, however, Parsons is also coaxing out of these authors elements crucial to his understanding of social action and for the development of his action frame of reference.

27.2.1 The Point of View of Talcott Parsons

Parsons emphasised that both the utilitarian and idealist approaches to the study of social systems and social reality were one-sided. The **utilitarian approach** treated social systems as products of rational impulses of human beings (individuals) to integrate their needs and urges as orderly systems. These systems are based on compatibility of interests through contractual mutuality. An example of contractual mutuality is the system of polity (government and state) which represents organised system of power. The market system, which is based on contractual relationships of economic interests, is yet another such example of an orderly system.

But the orderly systems as analysed by utilitarian social scientists, according to Parsons, neglect the role of values. Similarly, in the idealist treatment of social system, democracy is seen simply as the fulfilment of the spirit of a nation. Idealism places too much emphasis on values and ideas and not enough on social practice. Weber too, in a way, belonged to this tradition for he argued that capitalism was aided in its early stages by the Protestant ethic. The difference between Weber and the outright idealists is that Weber never said that the Protestant ethic caused capitalism. But it must he admitted that Weber elaborated at length certain values such as those of

'rational asceticism' or 'inner worldly asceticism' but neglected the role of needs or search for utilities.

According to Talcott Parsons both the idealist and the utilitarian notions of the social system assume certain characteristics in human impulses in an apriori manner. By apriori we mean that which is already given or assumed. One such characteristic is rationality in the regulation of needs in the utilitarian approach to the social system, and commitment to ultimate values and ideals in the idealist approach.

The utilitarian approach does have the notion of individual actor in the system but only as an abstraction with certain endowed qualities (a prioristic in character).

The idealist approach does the same, only prioristically assumed characteristics are different. The idealists assume that human beings act only to fulfil a grand mental design.

The positivists go to the other extreme and insist that true human action is born out of full information of the situation. There is thus a finality and inflexibility in their scheme for there is only one way to act: the correct way. Consequently there is no room for values, error and variations in social action.

Thus, while each of these schools of thought, the utilitarian, the idealist and the positivist say something important, it is their exclusivism, which Parsons objects to. The utilitarians only emphasise the individual's rational choice and miss the collective. The idealists talk of values and miss out the pressures exerted on values by empirical reality. Finally, the positivists emphasise complete knowledge of the situation and overlook the role of values, or of error or of variations.

Keeping the above in mind, Parsons offers another approach to the study of social systems termed as "action approach".

27.3 PARSONS' ACTION APPROACH

Parsons own approach to the social system is integrative in nature since he not only brought out the significance of motivational factors, such as those present in the utilitarian perspective in the formation of the system, but also that of values. He formulates this approach through his theory of social action, which is an intrinsic element of the social system.

Action, according to Parsons (1973) does not take place in isolation. It is not "empirically discrete but occurs in constellations" which constitute systems. We will discuss these systems later. Let us first understand the concept of action. The concept of action, according to Parsons, is derived from behaviour of human beings as living organism. As living organisms they interact (orientate) with outside reality as well as within their own mind. Behaviour becomes action when four conditions are present.

i)   it is oriented to attainment of ends or goals or other anticipated affairs,

ii)   it occurs in situations,

iii) it is regulated by norms and values of society,

iv) it involves an investment of 'energy' or motivation or effort.

When all these factors are present, a behaviour becomes action. Take for example a lady driving an automobile to go to a temple. She is probably going to offer prayers. In which case then the offering of the prayer is her end or goal to which she is oriented. Her situation is the road on which she is driving and the car in which she is sitting. Moreover, her behaviour is regulated by social norms or values in which the offering of prayers is recognised as desirable. In addition, she is applying her intelligence in the skill of driving which is learnt from society. Finally, the very act of driving the car implies expenditure of energy, holding the wheel, regulating the accelerator and skilful negotiation through the traffic on the road. When behaviour is seen in this analytical context, it can be defined as action.

Orientation of action can therefore be divided into two components, the **motivational orientation** and the value orientation. Motivational orientation refers to a situation in which action takes place taking into account needs, external appearances and plans. The second form of orientation is value orientation, which is based on considerations of standards of values, aesthetics, morality and of thinking. You will learn more about these two components of action in sub-sections 27.4.1 and 27.4.2 of this unit.

Activity 1

List four kinds of social behaviours you perform in your day-to-day life which qualifies as action according to Parsons, having the four conditions,

i) it is oriented towards the attainment of ends or goals or other anticipated affairs.

ii) it occurs in a situation

iii) it is regulated by norms and values of society

iv) it involves investment of 'energy' or effort or motivation.

Write a note of two pages giving the behaviours and why you consider them 'action' as defined by Parsons. Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

As mentioned earlier, action according to Parsons does not occur in isolation but occurs in constellations. These constellations of action constitute systems. These systems of action have three modes of organisation, which Parsons describes as the personality system, the cultural system and the social system. The personality system refers to those aspects of the human personality, which affect the individual's social functioning. The cultural system encompasses instead, the actual beliefs, concrete systems of values and symbolic means of communication. The social system, in this context, refers to the forms and modes of interaction between individuals and its organisation. Mitchell (1979: 204) gives the example of a social system as the authority structure of an organisation or the division of labour in a family.

A social system, according to Parsons, has the following characteristics.

i)   It involves an interaction between two or more actors, and the interaction process is its main focus.

ii) Interaction takes place in a situation, which implies other actors or alters. These alters are objects of emotion and value judgement and through them goals and means of action are achieved.

iii) There exists in a social system collective goal orientation or common values and a consensus on expectations in normative and **cognitive** (intellectual) senses.

To understand the concept of social system better, let us now examine the basic unit of organisation of the social system.

27.4 BASIC UNIT OF ORGANISATION OF A SOCIAL SYSTEM

The social system has a mode of organisation of action, which is called role. It is the basic conceptual unit of the social system and it incorporates the individual actor's total system of action. It is also a point of intersection between the system of action of an individual actor and the social system. The primary element of role, according to Parsons is role-expectation. It implies reciprocity between the actor and his/her alter (the other persons), and is governed by a range of motivational and value orientations.

As mentioned earlier, the motivational orientation refers to a situation in which action takes place taking into account needs or motives, external appearances and plans of the individual actors. **Value orientation** refers to the values, aesthetics, morality, etc. aspects of action. The organisation of unit acts into social systems therefore involves the motives and values, which link it to the personality system in the first case and to the cultural system in the second.

27.4.0 The Motivational Orientation

The range of motivational orientations are three. These are the cognitive, the **cathectic** and the **evaluative** orientations.

i)   The cognitive orientation makes actors see their environment or object in relation to their need dispositions as a mental object. They, i.e. the actors, attempt to understand the objectivity of the subject matter of observation.

ii) The cathectic orientation involves emotional attitude of actors towards their object.

iii) The evaluative orientation leads the actors to organise their effort in realisation of their object with optimum efficiency. Take for example the behaviour of a housewife going to the market to purchase vegetables. The cognitive orientation enables her to judge the quality of vegetables in relation to her need and need in relation to its prices, the cathectic orientation would determine as to which vegetable she

likes more than the others, and the evaluative orientation would make it possible for her to make a choice of a vegetable which gives her maximum satisfaction.

27.4.2 The Value Orientation

The range of value orientations also comprises three parts. These are the cognitive, the appreciative and the moral.

i) The cognitive orientation is one, which relates to the issue of validity of judgement.

ii) The appreciative orientation is that which makes it possible for actors to judge their emotional response to object, its appropriateness or consistency.

iii) The moral orientation is one, which refers to value commitment of an actor towards his or her objects.

The example of a housewife buying vegetables reveals only the motivational orientation of the housewife. But in value orientation it is the value system and the cultural pattern of the society which is involved. The individual actors act in the context of this cultural-pattern. For example, the role and status of a son in his family is guided by certain norms of the society. As a son in a patriarchal family, he has a different status than as a son in a matriarchal family. His behaviour will be guided by the norms of his society.

Thus, the motivational orientation involves only the motives or psychological aspects of the individual while the value orientation involves the cultural system. Both, the psychological and the cultural aspects of individual behaviour are, however, interlinked and interdependent.

The motivational orientations and value orientations are two levels of orientations, according to Parsons, that define the behavioural and cultural aspects of role and role expectations.

The role expectations in a social system serve as patterns of evaluation. Every actor who performs a role has a dual capacity, because role implies interaction with other person or persons. It divides role into two kinds according to Parsons. The first is the orientation role where actor as ego (self) interacts with alter (the other person) as his or her object. The second is the object role where actor is the object of alter's orientation.

27.4.2 Institutionalisation of Roles in a Social System

In a social system roles are institutionalised. Institutionalisation means that expectations from a specific role, its values and motivational orientations are integrated within the culture of a society. Society sets common standards for role expectations from its members, and when an actor imbibes these standards common to society in the orientations and performance of his/her roles, the roles are said to have been institutionalised.

In order that roles are performed in society in accordance with the standards prescribed by society or in line with the pattern of institutionalisation, each society imposes sanctions. These sanctions are rewards or punishments, as

the case may be, if the role is performed in conformity to the standards or values of society or when it is violative of these values.

27.4.3 Collectivity as a Social System

Related to the concept of role is Parsons' notion of collectivity as a social system. Collectivity can be identified only through the boundary of a social system that determines which members are included and which others are excluded from the membership of the collectivity. All collectivities have membership boundaries (such as, among others, those based on kinship, qualifications or skills or faith). By boundary we mean the limits to which a social system functions as a distinct identity. A kinship system, as an example of a social system has its members and their roles and statuses determined by the cultural pattern found in that society. The boundary of a collectivity varies from situation to situation. The collectivity is not merely a social aggregate of members such as a category. A category is defined through common attributes such as age, sex or education, etc. Collectivity is also not a plurality of individuals who are commonly interdependent with one another ecologically, that is, in a physical situation, such as in a market.

Collectivity differs from the above two types of social aggregates because its plurality is characterised by solidarity of its members; as in a kinship group or in an association. This solidarity emerges from the institutionalisation of shared values such as, the value of cooperation among certain kins or sharing the beliefs and practices of a religion.

Collectivities may have internal subdivisions as sub-collectivities where membership might overlap. Collectivities and sub-collectivities are forms of social system. Society, according to Parsons is a total social system which is self-subsistent or which maintains itself without being dependent on any other social system. The distinction between the social system and society is however relative and analytical.

So far you have learnt about the conceptual unit of the social system called roles, the institutionalisation of roles, and collectivity as a social system. To explain the choices of action available to individuals in the social system as a collectivity, Parsons has developed the concepts of pattern variables. You will learn about these concepts in the next section.

Check Your Progress I

i)   Distinguish between the utilitarian, the positivist and the idealist basis of social action given by Parsons using about nine lines.

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ii) What do you understand by role institutionalisation? Discuss using about five lines.

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iii) Fill in the blanks:

a) The .... system is an example of contractual mutuality based on economic interests.

b) Action according to Parsons does not take place in ....

c) The systems of action have three modes of organisation which Parsons describes as the social system, the personality system and the .... system.

d) The range of motivational orientation is cognitive .... and evaluative.

e) The .... comprises three parts, the cognitive, the appreciative and the moral orientation.

27.5 PATTERN VARIABLES

In order to develop concepts, which could reflect the properties of all action systems, Parsons was led to a set of concepts, which could bring out the variable properties of these systems. These concepts are termed pattern variables.

Role being the most vital element of the social system, its performance generates forces of strain or tension. The extent of strain depends on the way role-expectations are institutionalised in society and also on the degree to which the values of role-expectations are internalised by social actors. In relation to motivational orientation and value orientation, in the performance of roles, each actor faces dilemmas. These dilemmas emanate from strains in an individual's choice of or preference within a range of orientations both related to needs and to values. Though these dilemmas are often seen dichotomously they in fact are placed along a continua. But for reasons of simplicity let us proceed as if these dilemmas were dichotomous in character. The actor must choose between the options, before she or he can act with respect to the situation. For example, in a situation, which requires an actor to choose between universalistic values or particularistic values, the actor can choose only one of them.

There are in all five pattern variables, each side of it represents one polar extreme. These pattern variables are

i)   affectivity versus affective neutrality

ii) self-orientation versus collectivity orientation

iii) universalism versus particularism

iv) ascription versus achievement

v)   specificity versus diffuseness.

Let us now discuss each of them in detail.

27.5.0 Affectivity versus Affective Neutrality

Affectivity versus affective neutrality concerns the dilemma of role performance where evaluation is involved in relation to a situation. How much should a situation be evaluated in emotional terms or with a degree of emotional neutrality? This poses a difficult choice in most roles that we are expected to perform in society. Take for example the mother-child relationship. It has high degree of affective orientation, but discipline is also required. So on many occasions a mother would have to exercise affective-neutral role in relation to her child's socialisation. But mother-child relationship is essentially dominated by affectivity. In comparison, doctor-patient relationship brings out the aspect of affective neutrality that characterises a doctor's role. Affective-neutrality is essential for proper medical care, especially where surgical treatments are involved. But according to Parsons in all role performance situations the dilemma of choice and its degree of expression or commitment remains.

27.5.1 Self-orientation versus Collectivity Orientation

Similarly, in self-orientation versus collectivity orientation pattern variable the main issue is that of moral standard in the procedure of evaluation. The moral standard arises from the fact that actor has to make a choice between his or her own gratification and its deferment for the good of a larger number of people, a collectivity. Some form of altruism and self-sacrifice is involved. The dilemma of this pattern variable has always been present in human life from primitive mode of economy and society to modern civilisation. The notion of socialist society and socialist consciousness offers us a good example where a whole social system and patterns of its institutions are based on the dominant choice in favour of collectivity orientation. But as Parsons has rightly pointed out, institutionalisation of such values is always fragile. This is because the response to the situation by the actor is always in the form of a dilemma.

27.5.2 Universalism versus Particularism

Universalism versus particularism is a pattern variable which defines the role situation where the actor's dilemma is between the cognitive versus the cathective (or emotional standards) evaluation. A very good example of roles adhering to universalistic standards of human behaviour are role performances which go strictly by legal norms and legal sanctions. It one abides by the rule of law irrespective of personal, kinship or friendship considerations, then that would be an example of the universalistic mode of role performance. If one violates legal norms only because the person

involved is a kin or a friend, then particularistic considerations would be said to be operating. Parsons says that in societies where the role of the bureaucracy of formal organisations and modern institutions have become widespread there the dilemmas of Universalism and particularism have become a matter of choice in everyday life.

27.5.3 Ascription versus Achievement

The actor's dilemma in the ascription versus achievement pattern variable is based on whether or not the actor defines the objects of his or her role either in terms of quality or performance. In India a very good example of this pattern variable is the role performance governed by the caste system. In the caste system, the statuses of persons are determined not on the basis of their personal achievement or personal skills or knowledge but on the basis of their birth. Ascription is based on assigning certain quality to a person either by birth, or age, or sex or kinship or race. Achievement is based on personal acquisition of skills and levels of performance in society.

27.5.4 Specificity versus Diffuseness

The specificity versus diffuseness pattern variable concerns the scope of the object of role performance. Scope, in this case, is to be understood in terms of the nature of social interaction.

Some social interactions, such as between doctors and patients or between buyers and sellers of goods in the market, have a very specific scope. The nature of these interactions is defined in terms of a very precise context of interaction. A doctor does not have to understand the social, financial or political background of his or her patients in order to treat them and to give them a prescription. Doctor's task is very specific. So is the case of sellers of commodities in the market, who do not have to know the general details of the life of their customers. Such roles are specific in terms of the standards of response between actors.

On the contrary, some role relationships are very general and encompassing in nature. Such roles involve several aspects of the object of interaction. Some examples of such role relationships are friendship, conjugal relationship between husband and wife, relationships between kin of various degrees. All these relationships are such where the actor does not interact with another in a relationship in a specific context as such, but in a diffused manner such as in case of two close friends. The scope of interaction is flexible, open and encompassing in nature.

Activity 2

Think carefully about the organisation where you work or study such as, your Study Centre. Now, according to the Pattern Variables described by Parsons give two features of your interaction with this organisation and determine which pattern it falls into. For example, if you work in a private company runs by your friend or relative, your interaction with it can have both the qualities of universalism or particularism.

Write a note of a page and compare, if possible, with the notes of other students at your Study Centre.

The pattern variables, according to Parsons, not only define the nature of role interaction and role expectations in social system but provide in addition, the overall direction in which most members of a social system choose their roles. It also gives us an idea about the nature of the social system. For instance, take the family as a social system: the role expectations within the family amongst its members can be said to be affective, largely collectivity oriented, particularistic, ascriptive and diffuse.

On the contrary, take the example of your membership in a medical association or bar association, or student association, here role expectations and standards of role performance would largely be oriented towards pattern variables of affective neutrality, self-orientation (due to competition), universalism, achievement and specificity. But these are extreme examples. In real life the dilemma of choices in terms of pattern variables are much more precarious and full of strain than we find in the examples we have mentioned.

Till now you learnt about the various characteristics of the social system. In the next section we are going to discuss those aspects of the social system which Parsons considers the prerequisites for its functioning.

Check Your Progress 2

i)   Define pattern variables and list them using about six lines.

ii)   Given below are different types of social behaviour. State in the line given below each sentence, the pattern-variable to which it belongs.

    a)   A school teacher giving extra marks to her own child.

    b)   A policeman shooting his brother who is running away after looting a bank.

    c)   The son of a millionaire working as a clerk in his father's company.

d)   The daughter of a clerk getting the job of the Director in an organisation through her merit.

e)   The saleswoman gives the change of money to a client.

f)   The exchange of notes and gossip between two friends.

27.6   FUNCTIONAL PREREQUISITES

As you have already learnt. Parsons thinks all systems such as the family, the economy or the polity have a boundary which they maintain in order to subsist. This self-maintenance of systems is possible because human actors as social beings are socialised in society and their motivational and value orientations accordingly are patterned. In order to maintain itself, social systems have to perform some indispensable adjustment between its internal organisation and outer environment. These adjustments are like the adjustment that the human body has to make with the outside environment through breathing, blood circulation and through the maintenance of a steady temperature within itself. Social systems, Parsons

argues, also have a self-adjustive and self-maintaining quality. These adjustment processes which maintain the social system internally and through its boundary conditions are called functions. Functions are processes of system's self-maintenance.

There are certain functions without which a social system cannot subsist. These are called 'functional prerequisites' by Talcott Parsons. There are four such functional prerequisites.

i)   adaptation

ii)   goal attainment

iii) integration

iv)   latency

The scope of functioning of these functional prerequisites is further defined in terms of whether they deal with processes external or internal to the system. They are also defined in terms of the nature of interaction as such, whether it is consummatory or whether it is instrumental. Consummatory is where the emphasis is on achieving some desired end and instrumental is where the emphasis is on the acquisition and incorporation of means to achieve ends.

Let us now examine each of these functional prerequisites.

27.6.0 Adaptation

Adaptation as a functional prerequisite implies generation and acquisition of resources from outside the system, its external environment and to effect its distribution in the system. External environment in this case means land, water, etc. As an example we can mention the economic system, which involves resource utilisation, production and distribution in the society. Adaptation is oriented to factors external to the system and it has an instrumental character.

27.6.1 Goal-Attainment

Goal-Attainment is that functional prerequisite which involves, firstly, the determination of goals, secondly, the motivating of members of the system to attain these goals, and thirdly, the mobilising of the members and of their energies for the achievement of these goals. Its processes are consummatory in character although it does involve external interaction.

The organisation of the power and authority structure in a social system is an example of an institution where goal attainment is the primary thrust. The political processes are its examples. It needs to be remembered that goal attainment is related to the ideological and organisational set up of the social system.

27.6.2 Integration

Integration is that functional prerequisite which helps to maintain coherence, solidarity and coordination in the system. In the social system this function is mainly performed by culture and values. Therefore, the cultural system and its associated institutions and practices constitute elements of integration.

Integration ensures continuity, coordination and solidarity within the system; it also helps in safeguarding the system from breakdown or disruption. This functional prerequisite is internal to the system and has a consummatory character.

27.6.3 Latency

Finally, latency is that functional prerequisite of the social system which stores, organises and maintains the motivational energy of elements in the social system. Its main functions are pattern maintenance and tension management within the system.

This function is performed by the socialisation process of the members of the social system. The process of socialisation helps in internalisation of the symbols, values, tastes and habits specific to the social system in the personality of the actors who are members of the system. It needs also to be added that in Parsons' view the function of tension management must take place internally in all institutions. This is how it can be differentiated from the function of "integration" which refers primarily to the integration between different systems in society. The functional prerequisite of latency also bears an instrumental character.

Functional Prerequisites of a Social System

	Adaptation	Goal Attainment
External	Example - Economic System - Resource utilisation, production, Distribution etc.	Example-Political System - State, Political Parties, etc.
Internal	**Latency or Pattern Maintenance** Example - Family socialisation, Education etc.	**Integration** Example - Cultural system - Religion, ideology, etc.

In the preceding sections we familiarised you to the concept of social system. Let us now understand the empirical examples of types of structures of social systems given by Parsons.

27.7 TYPES OF STRUCTURES OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Parsons has dealt primarily with four types of structures of social systems in his sociological analysis. These are the economic system, the family system, the political system and the personality system.

Ideas about dilemmas of role expectations and role performance enunciated in the form of pattern variables (which you just studied) and formulation of functional prerequisites, taken together would further our knowledge of societies significantly. We find that it helps us to identify different types of structures of social systems, their social characteristics and their place in

society. We can identify social systems not just theoretically, as we saw in the earlier sections on pattern variables and functional prerequisites, but empirically as well.

In his book *The Social System* (1951), Parsons mentions many types of empirical (i.e., that which can be observed in the field [societies] and can be verified) social systems with different clusterings of social structures. Parsons made a distinction between the concept of social system and **social structure**. Social system is manifested through the totality of the principles through which roles and related elements of social interaction are organised. Social structure, on the other hand, reflects the specific manner in which these roles in an interaction situation are configured or composed together. For instance, family is a social system but its social structure can be seen in the empirical clustering of kinship roles.

Similarly, the economic system can be treated as another example of a social system, but its social structure is characterised by roles related to production, marketing, management, etc. Pattern variables illustrate in a precise manner the principal types of clusterings of social structures. Parsons mentions four such types

i)   the umversalistic-achievement pattern

ii)   the universalistic-ascription pattern

iii) the particularistic-achievement pattern

iv)   the particularistic-ascription pattern

27.7.0 The Universalistic-Achievement Pattern

It is a type of structure of social system in whose roles those value-orientations are dominant which encourage achievement based on legal rational methods among members of a society. It exemplifies modern industrial societies where the governing values are those of equality, democracy, freedom of enterprise, rational management and openness in social interactions. Divisions of society based on caste, ethnicity or other particularistic values do not go well with this social system. The nearest example of this type of structure of a social system, in Parsons' opinion, would be the American society.

27.7.1 The Universalistic-Ascription Pattern

It is yet another type of configuration of roles which makes a kind of social system in which values of legal rationality are encouraged in performance of roles but the distribution of authority is not on the basis of equality or democracy. Modern principles of science and technology are employed in work and occupation, in industry and communication but the distribution of these takes place on ascriptive principles, such as membership to a particular ideological association, or party, or cult. Parsons believes that Nazi Germany is an example of one such society.

German social structure during the Nazi regime manifested a peculiar combination of rational methods of organisation of roles in industries, management and productive institutions but discriminated between those

who, according to them symbolised ideal qualities of German people such as white Nordic races, and those that did not, namely the Jews. There could be other examples drawn from other periods of social history as well.

27.7.2 The Particularistic-Achievement Pattern

This type of social structure, according to Parsons, is best seen in the classical Chinese society. This society was dominated by values of 'familism'. By 'familism' we mean the notion of continuity with ancestors (ancestor worship), strong ties of kinship, but where the female line of descent was undermined in favour of the male. This led to an overall female subordination in that society. It was based on a configuration of roles in which occupation, authority, management, etc. were organised not on universalistic principles but on particularistic ones.

Of all the particularistic principles in operation in traditional or classical Chinese society birth and kinship were emphasised the most. But at the same time, the society also emphasised achievement and a "code of propriety" in the conduct of roles which was equivalent to legal rationality (universalistic principle). All these features were contained in Confucianism which was the official ethic in classical China. The dominance of universalism along with the ascription principle can be seen in the recruitment of civil servants in China. Entrance into these services was based on competitive examinations, which only those candidates who conformed to the official ethic could take.

27.7.3 The Particularistic-Ascription Pattern

It refers to such types of social structures in which the roles are organised in terms of values, which are associated with kinship, birth and other ascriptive features. In social structures of this kind, achievement through individual effort is not encouraged. Work, in this type "is considered as a necessary evil just as morality is a necessary condition of minimum stability", says Talcott Parsons.

Overwhelming emphasis, in this kind of society, is placed on expressive or artistic orientations. Society is traditionalistic as there is no incentive to disturb tradition and a strong vested interest exists in favour of stability. In Parsons' view the "Spanish Americans" in the USA exemplify this type of social structure. But you could also debate whether traditional Indian caste society had features, which were particularistic-ascriptive, or not.

Check Your Progress 3

i)   Fill in the blanks:

    a)   According to Parsons, all social systems have a ……………….. which they maintain in order to subsist.

    b)   In order to maintain itself social systems have to perform some ……………….........................………. adjustments in its internal organisation and outer ……………………

    c)   Adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency are the ……………… without which a social system cannot subsist.

d) Pattern variables illustrate in a precise manner the principal types of clustering of ……………………

ii) Describe one of the functional prerequisites, with examples, in about six lines.

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iii) Discuss any one of the types of structure of social system described by Parsons in eight lines.

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27.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you learnt about the early approaches to the study of social systems, such as the utilitarian, the positivist and the idealist approaches. You learnt that Parsons did not accept these approaches because the utilitarians stressed too much on external, motivational factors, the positivist left no room for error on the part of social actors or values and the idealists stressed too much on values. Thus, as an alternative, Parsons developed his own 'action approach' theory, which is integrative in nature. In this theory he has included the motivational orientation as well as the value orientations.

Parsons has described role as the most vital element of social systems. In performance of roles individuals are confronted with dilemmas which in turn emanates from choices offered by society within a range of orientations, both motivational and value. The dichotomy in the nature of orientations described by Parsons in his pattern variables determines the course of action followed by individuals in society. We have described in this unit the functional prerequisites, such as, adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency without which a social system cannot exist. Finally, we have

described in this unit the types of structures of social systems analysed by Parsons based on the criteria of universalism, particularism, ascription and achievement. Parsons has given the examples of these types of social systems from real societies.

27.9   KEYWORDS

Action	A human behaviour, according to Parsons, in which four conditions are fulfilled is an action. These conditions are

i)   it is oriented towards attainment of ends or goals or other anticipated affairs

ii)   it occur in situations

iii) it involves investment of 'energy' or effort and

iv) it is regulated by norms and values of society.

Cathectic	That which pertains to the emotions such as, affection, love, like, dislike, etc.
Cognitive	That which pertains to comprehension or understanding. For example when you see a chair you know that it is a chair because it has a certain shape, it is made of wood or metal and so on.
Evaluative	That which pertains to comparative judgement
Motivational Orientation	It refers to the mechanical aspects of action. Reasons or purposes of social action which are not related to the values and norms of society such as, choosing the best sari or most appropriate birthday card.
Social Structure	It reflects the specific manner in which the roles in interaction situation are configurated or composed together.
Social System	It is manifested through the totality of principles through which roles and related elements of social interaction are organised.
Utilitarian Approach	It refers to the belief that individual in society is guided by rational motives of satisfying needs and avoiding pain. Hedonism, i.e. the doctrine that pleasure is the chief good in life is part of the belief in utilitarianism.
Value Orientation	It refers to that orientation of social action which is governed by social norms and values,

such as marrying someone within one's own caste or class or wearing a formal dress for a formal party.

27.10   FURTHER READING

Black, Max (ed.) 1961. The Social Theories of Talcott Parsons: A Critical Examination. Prentice-Hall, Inc.: Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Hamilton, Peter, 1983. Talcott Parsons. Key Sociologists series; Routledge: London and New York

Parsons, Talcott, 1951. The Social System. The Free Press, Glencoe: Illinois

27.11   SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i)   According to Parsons, the utilitarian point of view of social action is highly individualistic in nature. It gave importance to rational calculation at the individual level. The positivists believed that social actors know everything about the situation in which they act i.e. in which they perform their social roles. Therefore, for them, the actor has only one way to act, the correct way. This point of view left no room for variations of action or for values. Finally, the idealists believed that social action is the realisation of the social spirit and the ideas, such as of a democracy or socialism. They gave overemphasis to values and ideals.

ii) Social roles are said to be institutionalised when the expectations from that role, its values and motivational orientations are integrated within the culture of the society. The society sets the common standards for role expectations from its members and when the actors (performing their social role) imbibe these standards common to society their roles are said to be institutionalised.

iii) a)   market

     b)   isolation

     c)   cultural

     d)   cathectic

     e)   value-orientation

Check Your Progress 2

i)   Pattern variable refers to the dichotomy within the range of orientation, both motivational and value orientations in which the social actor has to choose one side before the actor can act. In the performance of roles, individuals face dilemmas which occur due to improper internalisation of values related to role expectation. These strains in

the role performance are reflected in the dichotomy of the pattern variables. These pattern variables are

i)   affectivity versus affective neutrality

ii)   self-orientation versus, collective orientation

iii) universalism versus particularism

iv)   ascription versus achievement, and

v)   specificity versus diffuseness.

ii)   a)   affectivity

      b)   collectivity orientation

      c)   universalism

      d)   achievement

      e)   specificity

      f)   diffuseness

Check Your Progress 3

i)   a)   boundary

      b)   indispensable, environment

      c)   functional prerequisites

      d)   social structure

ii)   Adaptation is a functional prerequisite. It implies the generation and acquisition of resources, such as food, water, materials for construction, etc. from outside the system i.e. the external environment. It also takes care of the distribution of the resources in society. Best example of this functional prerequisite is the economy. It is oriented to the external factors for the system and is instrumental in character.

iii) The particularistic-achievement pattern of configuration of a social system, according to Parsons was dominated by values of "familism". In this type the values of kinship ties, continuity with the ancestors and ancestor worship were prominent. The organisation of occupations, authority, management, etc. were based on particularistic principles of birth and kinship. However, in this society achievement and "code of propriety" in performance of roles similar to legal rational action was followed. Traditional or classical Chinese society represents this type of social system.

UNIT 28   FUNCTIONALISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE — PARSONS

Structure

28.0   OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you will be able to

● explain Parsons concept of functionalism

● discuss the relationship between functionalism and social change

● describe the changes within social systems

● outline the changes of social systems or the evolutionary universals given by Parsons.

28.1   INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit (Unit 27) you have learnt about the concept of the social system, given by Talcott Parsons. In this unit we shall explain to you his concept of functionalism and social change. Parsons described two types of social change; one kind of social change is within the social system and the other kind is when social systems change as a whole. We shall describe both these varieties of social changes in the following pages.

Section 28.2 explains Parsons' concept of functionalism, and section 28.3 the relationship between functionalism and social change. In section 28.4 changes within social systems are discussed while section 28.5 describes the changes of whole social systems: Parsons' notion of **evolutionary universals**.

28.2 PARSONS' CONCEPT OF FUNCTIONALISM

In Parsons' view the stability of a social system is maintained not only through the rules and regulations that society imposed upon its members or through other measures of social control that state enforces upon its citizens but in a more enduring manner, by the internalisation of socially approved values, expected behaviour patterns and codes of social existence. This internalisation takes place in society through the process of socialisation of its members. Child learns from his/her environment in the family and neighbourhood both the expected and prohibited norms and values with respect to different social institutions and social roles. Later on as the person grows older, the school, the college and work-place make the person learn and imbibe other sets of social values and expected behaviour patterns.

Recall from the past exercise Parsons' concept of, the functional prerequisites of a social system. These functional prerequisites are adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency, which are all necessary responses, in Parsons' view for the existence and survival of any social system. The institutions and processes, which serve to maintain the existence of the system, are considered to be functional for the system by Talcott Parsons.

Functionalism represents the viewpoint that all social systems invariably possess the tendency to evolve and integrate such processes and institutions as elements (parts) of the system, which help in its own self-maintenance. Social systems are basically oriented to evolving such units as components of their form, be it in the shape of processes (such as, in Parsons' understanding, adaptation, goal-attainment, integration and latency) or as social institutions, such as government, economy, schools, courts, etc. all of which serve to maintain the system as if on purpose. The term **teleology** refers to this purposiveness of institutions. Teleology is thus an essential characteristic of functionalism. It is based on an analogy with the organic system, for instance the human body. In the human body, processes such as respiration, blood circulation, maintenance of a constant temperature, etc., are intended to maintain the health of the body. As such these processes are Ideological or purposive in nature. Simply stated, teleology is any explanation, which is in terms of the final cause or purpose. For example it would be teleological to argue that fruits and seeds exist so that animal and birds can eat them in order to live; or that the function of the long tail of monkeys is to help them jump easily from tree to tree. (See Box 28.1 for teleology as a criticism of functionalism.)

Box 28.1 Teleology

Besides several criticisms of functionalism, its teleological nature is its logical criticism. As you know, teleology is the explanation for the existence of a process or institution or any object or idea in terms of the purpose it fulfils. Thus, according to this explanation the effect is treated as the cause. This is the principal objection to the functionalist theory. For example, according to this theory, religion exists in societies in order to uphold the moral order of societies. Here the effect of religion

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has been used to explain the cause, i.e, the moral order (see Cohen, Percy 1968, Chapter 3 for detailed criticism of functionalism).

Why is the teleological nature of functionalism its logical criticism? It is a logical criticism because how can an effect which comes later explain the cause which precedes the effect. It defies the laws of logic. It is like saying that A factor produces B, therefore, the occurrence of B must explain A. However, sociologists belonging to the functionalist school of thought, such as Durkheim were aware of these flaws in functionalism and made attempts to overcome them.

The vital functions of the human body have the purpose of maintaining the survival of the body, and if any foreign infection threatens the body, its internal system reacts to save it from such invasions and continues to do so until the threat has been neutralised. There is a self-regulatory role that such processes play in human body. It is called **homeostasis**.

Functionalism implies that social systems bear resemblance to organic systems such as the human body. The processes and institutions in social systems and the human body possess self-regulatory mechanisms that keep them stable and save it from external threats. A stability of this sort is called homeostasis. But unlike the human body however, which has a universality for all species of human kind, the social systems are historical products. Parsons acknowledges the enormous variations in the forms and styles of social systems. This is ensured by the plasticity of human infant, which unlike other animal species does not grow up with a limited general traits of behaviour. The child learns different languages, conforms to different sets of cultural values and behaviour patterns of the group of society in which he/she is born. The child also has the unlimited capacity to learn new languages, cultural styles, etc; depending on what it is exposed to. Human beings are not born with pre-determinate instinctive traits like other animals are. The socialisation process of the human child and its personality system maintain the stability and integration of the social system through the internalisation of values and ways of social behaviour that the social system approves. In addition human beings not only learn from culture and society but also create new forms of culture and integrate them within pre-existing patterns.

28.3 FUNCTIONALISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The above characteristics of functionalism might give us an impression that it only has to do with continuity and self-maintenance of the social system, and that it does not have a view of social change. In fact, there are many sociologists who have criticised functionalism only for this reason and argued that functionalism over-emphasises only those features of a social system which bring about stability of continuity. They also accuse functionalism for assuming a large measure of agreement or consensus in a society on its core values, beliefs and behaviour patterns or opinions about social issues. This Criticism is based on the-functionalist position that members of a social system are socialised from childhood onwards to a common set of beliefs and values, which are specific to that society.

Talcott Parsons did not deny the element of value consensus and stability in a social system that results from the functional processes of the systems concerned. But he also visualised the possibilities of social change. This results from the specific nature of individual social systems as well as from the very nature of the motivational orientations, which organise action systems of members in a society. The first links social systems to its external boundary conditions, such as ecology, resources, physical and environmental conditions as well as to historical factors such as cultural contacts, **diffusion** of ideas and interests and to social strains arising out of these historical factors. The second relates it to motivational elements in action systems, which are essentially directional in nature. The direction of orientation of motives and values generates harmony as well as strain in the social system. The first leads to stability, the second to change. Parsons viewed social change at two levels, firstly, change which emerges form processes within the social system, and secondly, the processes of change of the social system itself.

According to Parsons social sciences have yet to formulate a general theory of social change which can take into account both these aspects of social change. But sociology can approach the problem of social change if it delimits its analysis in two respects, first, change must be studied with the help of a set of conceptual categories or paradigms. The conceptual categories that Parsons puts forward for such analyses of change are those of motivational and value orientation, as well as those that relate to the functional prerequisites of the system. (In section 27.6 of Unit 27 of this block, you had been introduced to them.) Second, social change, according to Parsons, must be studied at a specific historical level rather than in a general form applicable universally to all societies. Parsons, therefore, held the view that for sociologists it is relatively easier to study processes of change within the social system than processes of changes of the social system as a whole.

Parsons' main contributions relate to studies of changes within the social systems in varying specific situations, but he had also attempted to analyse changes of whole social systems with the help of the concept of "evolutionary universals" which he formulated later in his career. We shall be studying Parsons' contributions to processes of social change at both these levels.

Check Your Progress 1

i)   Define the concept of functionalism using about four lines.

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ii) What is meant by teleology? Discuss using three lines.

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iii) Fill in the blanks

    a)   Unlike the human body, which has universality for all species of human kind, the social systems are …………………… products.

    b)   The direction of orientation of motives and values generates ……………….. as well as …………………….. in the social system. The first leads to stability and the second to ……………………

28.4 CHANGES WITHIN SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Elements of functionalism are clearly evident in Parsons' explanation of social changes that takes place within social systems. He drew an analogy between the changes in biological life cycles and changes within social systems, although he qualified this analogy by saying that unlike the organic or biological systems, social systems are governed to a large extent by cultural factors which transcend biology. Nevertheless, the processes of growth, differentiation, the tendency towards self-maintenance that we witness operating in the processes of change within biological systems to a large extent also operate within the social system. In addition social systems also undergo changes from within due to cultural innovations within the system, contact with other cultures and diffusion of new values and styles of living.

A primary factor related to processes of change within the social system is increase in population, its density and aggregation. It has been observed historically that major social systems, such as large communities, cities and organised forms of polity emerged in the past near river valleys and fertile lands where production of food could be harnessed in larger quantities. This increase in food production contributed to a growth of population and for other major changes within the social system, such as the division of labour, emergence of urban centres, and more complex form of social organisations such as caste in India and guild in Europe. According to Parsons these changes did not come about smoothly but almost invariably through the need for re-establishing equilibrium in the system. This re-establishing of equilibrium was required due to strains in relationships between past and present patterns of relationship, values and interests. Parsons says, "change is never just alteration of pattern but alteration by the overcoming of resistance". By overcoming of resistance, Parsons meant the resolution of strain or conflict in the social system.

Each social system, according to Parsons, develops a vested interest or interests of different kinds over a period of time as it integrates itself in accordance with its functional prerequisites (adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency). But the demands of new ideas from within, need for changes in technology or the mere pressure of external factors on the system, such as changes in climate, ecology or pestilence, etc., force social systems to shed pre-existing vested interests and give way to accepting new modes of thinking; to new ideas, technology, patterns of work, division of labour, and so on. These contribute to disturbances in the older mode of equilibrium and to its replacement by a new equilibrium in the social system.

Between these two points of time a long drawn process of adaptation takes place in social systems by which new ideas, new ways of doing things are made acceptable to people. Parsons calls this process, the process of institutionalisation. New roles, new types of organisations, new "cultural configurations" such as the development of science or of religious ideas, impinge, or put strain, upon existent modes of equilibrium in the social system. The impingement of the new upon the old elements of the social organisation generates strains and conflicts with established vested interests. Parsons does not place the responsibility for causing social strain on any one factor; there is no 'prime mover' as such in the making of social change. The fact of social strain, however, represents a point of social development at which the older balance of interaction systems, institutions and structures of the system (roles, statuses, occupations etc.) is destabilised and the tendency towards a new equilibrium begins.

28.4.0 Factors Causing Strain Towards Change

Parsons mentioned several factors, which contribute towards the building up of strain in social systems, which bring about the need to establish a new equilibrium. Some of these factors are

i)   Changes in the demographic character of population through migration, racial intermixture (intermarriages), as well as changes in the mortality and fertility rates of the population. All of these factors affect the nature of social configuration.

ii) Changes in the physical environment, such as exhaustion of physical resources (soil, water, weather conditions etc.) may also contribute to strain and change in the social system.

iii) Changes in population resulting from increased productivity of food and availability of resources for members within a social system.

iv) Changes in technology and application of scientific knowledge for the advancement of society, and finally

v)   Development of new "cultural configuration" such as new religious ideas, or the integration of religious values with science and technology might also trigger changes in the social system. Parsons held the view that these factors are not exhaustive but merely illustrative in order to indicate that they do not act individually but in a state of "interdependent plurality". Or, in other words many factors and some may have escaped mention above, act interdependently, to bring about changes within the social system.

Cultural factors bring about changes within the social system through a continuous process of "**rationalisation**" and "**traditionalisation**" of values and beliefs. Parsons used the concept of "rationalisation" to mean, as it did for Weber, a process of progressive growth of rational, individualistic and innovative attitudes towards work, personal commitments and social institutions in general. It also includes an increase in legal and formal methods of allocation of responsibilities in place of custom or tradition or personal whims of people in authority such as the king, the priest or the potentate. But while the rationalisation process works there is also a

tendency in social systems to render its values stable, and thus institutionalise them over a period of time. This gives birth to the rise of vested interests. These vested interests emphasise preservation of these values irrespective of changing situations. When this happens the rational values tend to become traditionalised. Cultural values in society or in social systems continually undergo these processes of rationalisation and traditionalisation and again further rationalisation leading to traditionalisation, and so on in a cyclical process.

Cultural factors which bring about change within social systems
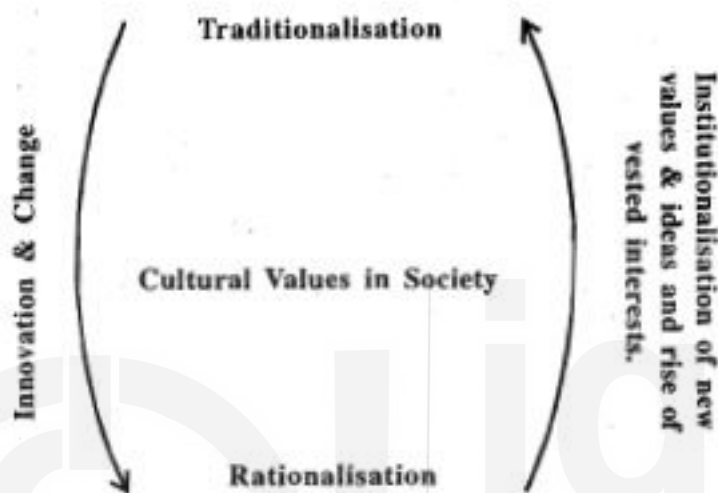
Figure 28.1 Changes within Social Systems: An Example

Parsons illustrated the processes of social change within the social system by drawing examples from the family system. The family undergoes changes inherently through the life cycle of the persons who are its members. The processes of birth, maturation, adulthood, old age and death are internal to the family system, each giving rise to social consequences which call for change and new adjustment in family roles, occupation, authority, status, as well as values and beliefs of its members. The mechanism by which the child is socialised is crucial to this process of continuity and change in the family. It engrains values of the system in the personality of the child, but as the child grows older other values are imbibed from the larger systems of society. The new roles and expectations in adult life may not always harmonise with those of the child, and family system has thus an inbuilt process of both stability and change.

Activity 1

Think carefully about the social roles you perform in your family. Now compare these roles with the ones you performed in your family when you were a child.

Write a note of one page on the changes in your roles and role expectations (i.e. what you think the others in your family expected from you) as a member of your family. Compare, if possible, your note with the notes of other students at your Study Centre

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These changes are best illustrated through the study of the family cycle. One aspect of this cycle relates to changes in the role of the child in the process of biological growth. This puts strain on his or her personality for at each stage in the changing biological cycle of the person (for example, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age) the role expectations also change. New educational and cultural values need to be imbibed in place of the older ones. The biological process of socialisation is however not without strain because change from one phase of life of a person to another involves resistance and anxiety. It gives expression to new defense mechanisms to preserve the old in place of learning new roles and new values. The process of socialisation and education therefore always involves manipulation of role expectations through rewards and punishments. In early childhood parents perform this role and in later life social system offers its own structure of social sanctions to bring about conformity with expected roles.

The second aspect of the family cycle is structural in nature. It is determined by changes in the size of the family. Families, which were nuclear become joint with the increase in membership. The size of family may be governed by factors both internal and external to the system. The external factors may have to do with economic resources, wealth and property or mode of occupation. The internal factors are governed by the reproduction rate and sex ratio. These two factors are interrelated.

28.4.1 Social Movement and Social Change

Parsons discussed social change within the social system at two levels

i)   At the first level Parsons analysed social change as it occurs through role differentiation, socialisation and institutionalisation processes and their attendant strains (recall our earlier illustrations from the family system). Changes of this type are slow, continual and inherently adaptive in nature. The chain of processes involved in this type of social change are, innovation or rationalisation, institutionalisation of innovation, development of vested interest around new institutional adaptations, and finally, traditionalisation of innovation. This is an ongoing process of adaptive social change.

ii) The second level is social change through "revolutionary" movements. This type of social change results from "revolutionary" movements which brings about a sudden alteration or change in the balance or equilibrium of the social system. He gave the examples of Communist and Nazi movements to illustrate this kind of change. Parsons held that broadly four types of conditions must prevail before such movements could spread widely and gain supremacy in the social system.

     These conditions are,

     1)   The presence of widely spread and distributed alienative motivations among the people. In other words, a large section of population must feel disenchanted with the existing system.

2) The emergence of the organisation of a deviant (or alternative counter) subculture. In other words, the presence of a counter ideology which departs radically from the existing one. This helps a large population of members of the social system to evade the sanctions of the existing social system or even to challenge it openly.

3) This results into the third condition of success of a revolutionary social movement, that is, the development of an ideology, a set of beliefs, which could be successfully put forward and claim legitimacy for its values, symbols and institutional structures.

4) Finally, the fourth condition for such social movement is the organisation of a power system with particular reference to the state to support and legitimise the ideology of the new movement and give it an operative shape. The success of the Communist Movement both in Soviet Russia and China illustrates historically the existence and validity of the above four conditions.

A major consequence of revolutionary social movements in terms of social change is that it sets in motion adaptive transformations in the social system. This is because most revolutionary ideologies according to Talcott Parsons have good deal of the Utopian (idealistic) element in them. When these values are subjected to implementation there follows "a process of concession" to development of adaptive structures. The more radical the ideology the more difficult is the evolution of such adaptive structures. Instead there is a compulsive tendency towards orthodoxy. For instance, in the Communist movement, the institution of the family was characterised as a "bourgeois prejudice", or property system, in terms of private ownership was declared as evil. But to do away with both these institutions in actual practice proved impracticable. There is thus a tension in revolutionary ideology between belief and practicality.

Secondly, all revolutionary movements, according to Parsons, involve a degree of ambivalence in structures, such as between class and egalitarianism in Communist movement. Moreover, in most such movements there is a tendency among the followers to gratify or satisfy their own repressed need-dispositions as the system is no longer "theirs", but "ours". A sense of command over the system contributes to the tendency towards personal or collective self-gratification among the leadership. This in course of time mitigates the radical nature of the revolutionary social movement. Finally, as time moves on a movement which began on a revolutionary plank slowly moves towards "orthodoxy". There is a tendency thus to socialise members into patterns of conformity in the same manner as the pre-revolutionary society did. This contributes to the system's stability and is no different from any other normal stable social system. Thus, Parsons believed that even revolutionary social movements which claim radical social transformation in the social system ultimately undergo the process of adaptive change consistent with the needs of system stability. Such revolutionary movements begin with heterodoxy and end up in orthodoxy.

Check Your Progress 2

i) In what way is population a primary factor in bringing about change within a social system? Discuss using about six lines.

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ii) List the factors, which contribute towards building up of strain in social systems leading to a new equilibrium. Use about eleven lines.

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iii) Tick (√) the correct statement.

a) Rationalisation is the process in which new values, beliefs, attitudes, etc. get institutionalised. ☐

h) Rationalisation is the process of progressive growth of rational, individualistic and innovative attitude towards work, personal commitments and social institutions ☐

c) Rationalisation is the process whereby individuals internalise the values, beliefs and customs of their society ☐

28.5 CHANGES OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS: EVOLUTIONARY UNIVERSALS

You have so far learned about Parsons's views on social change as enunciated mainly in his early work *The Social System* (1951). In his later

writing particularly. *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (1966), *The Sociological Theory and Modern Sociology* (1967), *The System of Modern Societies* (1971) and *The Evolution of Societies* (1977), Talcott Parsons contributed substantially to an evolutionary theory of social change. His approach to social change, however, remained primarily functional, that is, he still considered all processes of change emanating from strains towards differentiation and adaptation to be system maintaining in the longer time scale. But he introduced two new factors.

i)   First, he postulated the concept of "evolutionary universals". By this he meant to say that despite the specific historical particularities of each social system or society (because of its boundedness in its own culture and material environment), if one looked at societies in a longer time scale there were some general directions of evolution through which societies tend to evolve. Parsons called the direction and nature of this historical process of social evolution of all societies "evolutionary universals".

ii) The second main departure in Parsons' views on social change during this period can be noticed in his emphasis on historical and comparative analysis of major types of evolutionary stages of social systems at a global level. Through this exercise he offered a comparative treatment of societies ranging from the primitive to the modern industrial society.

The evolutionary typologies of societies are described by Parsons in the following terms.

28.5.0 Primitive or Archaic Societies

These societies are the most elementary in terms of social organisation. According to Parsons in order that any human society may exist they must have

i)   elementary forms of economy taking care of procurement for the survival of human beings (main forms being food gathering, hunting, animal husbandry and cultivation)

ii) they must also possess elementary technology through which production of food, shelter, protection from environment and other dangers could be ensured

iii) they should also have some means of speech or mechanism of communication through which social solidarity from the family to the community level could be established and social organisations could be managed and

iv) some form of belief system (animism, animalism or magic and religion etc.) through which cultural and expressive motivations of people could be socially galvanised and integrated must also be present. Finally,

v)   an elementary form of political organisation is also necessary for the functioning of these types of societies. The political system may be very simple, such as that of tribal chiefdoms or control by community's collective rules, but its presence is necessary for the integrative existence of the society.

The process of social evolution could proceed forward through either collective movement in the direction of growth in the above five factors or it could emanate primarily from any one of these social institutions. For instance, it could well be that in a particular primitive society the innovations in technology revolutionalises the economy or the food production capacity of the community. Thus it could be possible for this society to sustain a much larger population. The increase in population triggers the process of social differentiation and brings into existence new strains or tensions for adaptation and integration. In yet another society, the primary impulse for change might come from the belief system, where the magical or religious outlook of the people may inspire them to explore new opportunities for economic and technological advancement. Parsons related the process of social change to two main sources of adaptive tensions existent in human societies, firstly, the existential or the material, and, secondly, the symbolic or the cultural. His own emphasis was on the primary causative impulse of symbolic or cultural institutions in societies. This is in line with Max Weber's work on the role of the Protestant Ethic in the rise of capitalism. But in general terms, both these factors, i.e., the existential and symbolic, mutually reinforce one another in most social systems undergoing social change.

28.5.1 Intermediate Societies

Following the primitive stage, the second evolutionary universal stage according to Parsons is that of the intermediate type of society. This type of society results from the pressure for social differentiation. One most common form of such pressure for differentiation in social systems, according to Parsons, is that of population increase. This changes the size and composition of society. The nature of differentiation in societies like those in the organic system such as the cellular structure within the body is that of binary division that is, in which units divide into two. Following this analogy with the organic system. Parsons argued that with the pressure of population growth there is division of human settlements on binary lines between town and village. This division further brings about occupational differentiations and many types of occupations not related to agriculture emerge. This is because the growth of towns and cities also brings into existence new classes of people who control surpluses of wealth, have more power and social status, and also those who are artisans, craftsmen, people in literary and priestly professions, businessmen, warriors, etc. The primitive or tribal society is generally a society without division between classes or castes. The leaders in this society might enjoy some prerogatives, which are mainly honorific and entail no major differences in consumption pattern or life style.

In the second phase of evolution social differentiation on class lines or as in India, on caste lines, evolves. This type of growth in the nature of the social system also necessitates new rules for the administration of society. As in the past merely customs are not sufficient for the management of societies at this stage. So, more generalised rules and legal norms are codified, often in written form, for the governance of society. In this phase the political system takes on a more systematised form, such as those of feudalism and monarchy. But the two basic new institutions which constitute

the distinctive character of societies in the intermediate stage of evolution, according to Parsons are (i) emergence of an elaborate and complex system of social stratification and (ii) the emergence of generalised norms for the social control of society.

The examples of these types of societies according to Parsons are China, India, the Islamic empires and the Roman empire. But apart from these historical examples, most social systems undergo this process of evolution due to their need to be adaptive, and because of social differentiation. In the primitive society the examples of adaptive change can be drawn from several specific instances. The cultural or symbolic source of initiation of processes of change has been reported among many Indian tribal societies such as the Mundas and Birhors of Bihar through the emergence of messianic movement or *Devi* movement. The goddess appears in the dream of some tribal leader(s) and requires of him or her to implement many social reforms in the conduct of people. Often such reforms are necessary even otherwise to combat the forces threatening the vital interests of the tribal community. May be these reforms emanate from hostile nature or from the presence of other hostile communities or classes outside. Illustrations of innovative new technologies to improve the productive capacity of society are indeed numerous in many simpler societies. As a matter of fact the technology of seeding and ploughing were very novel when they were first introduced many thousand years ago.

28.5.2 Modern Societies

The third stage in the process of evolution of societies according to Parsons, was that of the modern social systems. These types of societies evolved from the intermediate stage of evolution (which could also be called the pre-industrial stage of societies) through the development of a number of social institutions. Technology, of course, played an important role in this process. But all this was possible because of three types of revolutions that the Western (European) society went through. These revolutions according to Parsons, were uniquely Western contribution to humanity. That is why he also held the view that the development of the modern stage of society is an entirely Western contribution, and no other civilisation, such as India or China, from the Eastern hemisphere took a lead in this direction.

This scale of change was possible in the West (Europe) because of three revolutions, (i) industrial revolution (ii) democratic revolution led by the French Revolution and (iii) educational revolution. The industrial revolution in Europe which you have already learnt about in Unit 1, Block 1 of this course (ESO-13) was caused by technological revolutions through invention of steam and electrical sources of energy. This brought about radical changes in transport, navigation, commerce, the production system and its market. Factories emerged where instead of animal power, which was the main source of energy during the intermediate stage of societal evolution, steam and electrical energy sources were used on a large scale.

The factory mode of production contributed to urban and industrial growth and increased the role of science and technology in economic and social affairs of society, providing thus a continuing element of development.

This industrial revolution both coincided with and contributed to the strengthening of the democratic revolution in Europe. The French Revolution particularly ushered in the values of equality, universal brotherhood, liberty and set the pace for the abolition of kingship and replaced it by the democratic process of elected government. In England also the reformation and political movement took away the authoritarian powers of the king and transferred it to the people's elected representative.

The democratic movement had a revolutionary consequence for the emergence of a new system of society in which not birth related status and power but acquired individual merit governed the place of individual in the power and prestige scale of society. Together with industrial revolution it set in motion a process of social mobility which ensured greater participation and egalitarianism in matters of access to opportunities. But this was largely possible through the third revolutionary development, in European society, that of education.

The educational revolution in Europe resulted primarily from the separation of education from the Church and its progressive secularisation and universalisation. The emergence of university systems of education where both teaching and research could be conducted allowed the pursuit of knowledge to take place free from any religious or sectarian presumptions. This was a great social and cultural movement in the life of the European society. It liberated the production and communication of knowledge from sectarian control and made it available to the entire society, or humanity, without any favour or prejudice. Similarly, the universalisation of elementary education strengthened the foundations of higher education in Western society. This reinforced the democratic and industrial institutions of those societies. The industrial, the democratic, and the educational revolutions were thus, according to Parsons, a unique contribution of the West to humanity.

Activity 2

Read the section on Changes of social systems: Evolutionary universals carefully. Now keeping the different characteristics of the three types of evolutionary universals described by Parsons in mind, write a note of one page on the stage of evolutionary development you find in society in India at present. State the type in which you will place Indian society.

Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

Following the impact of these three types of revolutions the modern system of society emerged. Its main features in Parsons views are:

i) the growth of universalistic laws

ii) the evolution of modern institutions of money and banking

iii) the institution of rational bureaucracy and

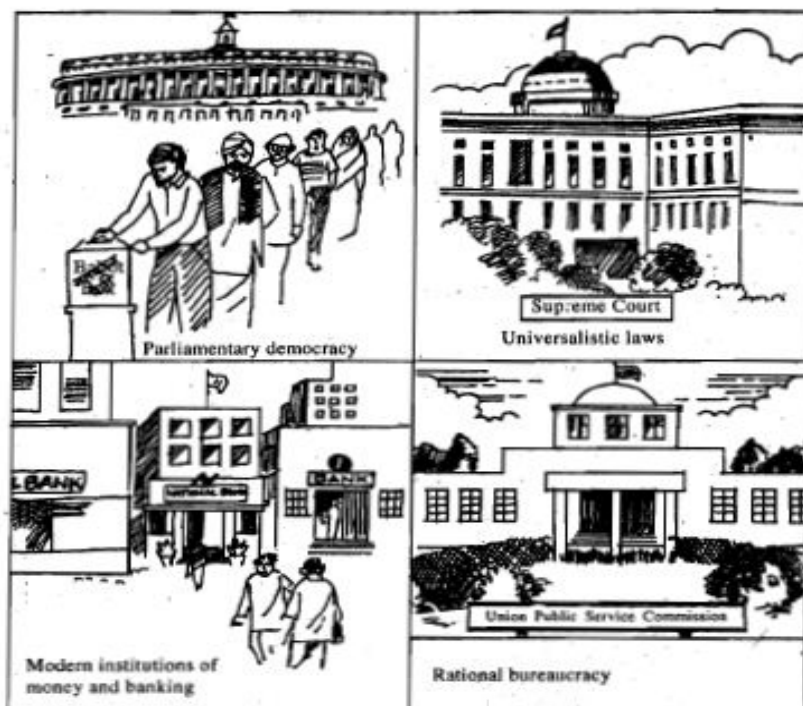iv) the growth of democractic society.

Figure 28.2: Features of a Modern Society

According to Parsons, for a society to qualify as a modern society these institutional prerequisites or pre-conditions have to be met. The universalistic laws are based on universal brotherhood and freedom of human kind. It makes for the rational and uniform application of law to all human beings without favour or prejudice based on faith, colour, birth, etc. A major feature of these universalistic legal norms is the emergence of the concept of "fundamental rights" or civic rights, available to all human beings in the society. This protects an individual from the arbitrary application of state power. Similarly, the invention of money and banking rationalises the scope of trade and commerce and makes it truly global in character. One can talk about the world market rather than a city or town market. These also intensify and widen the scope of industrial and economic activities of society. The role of a rational bureaucracy is most crucial in this process. Rational bureaucracy is a concept, which was first introduced by Max Weber. It means among other things, the selection of executive or government officials on the basis of merit through examination, and the precise allocation of responsibilities and legal accountability in the realms of official duty. It also safeguards the bureaucrat from the wielders of political or economic power in the event of the latter trying to misuse their authority. Rational bureaucracy thus, is an essential institutional requirement for the implementation of public policy, for it invokes the principles of equality, universality and justice.

But Parsons also held the view that even after a society has achieved great heights in the spheres of money and banking or bureaucratic rationality it cannot yet claim to be a modern society without the institution of democracy. By democracy he meant the freedom of participation in political processes of society by contending groups of political parties with multiple and contradictory ideologies. Without such a democracy the institutions of universalistic legal norms, or rational bureaucracy might exist only in form but not in substance. Parsons also felt that as soon as a society begins to develop other social attributes of modernisation a time comes when the

pressure for real democratic reform mounts. Therefore, modern social systems are ultimately democratic in nature.

It was assumed by Parsons that in spite of historical gaps and unevenness in the process of evolutionary social change all societies would achieve the level of a modern system of society. All of them would go through the institutionalisation of "evolutionary universals", and in due course of time would establish universalistic legal norms, money and banking, rational bureaucracy, and finally, democracy.

Check Your Progress 3

i)   Describe what is meant by Evolutionary Universals using about five lines

ii) In the evolution of modern societies, three types of revolutions played a major role. Name them using about five lines.

iii) List the major features of a modern system of society described by Parsons. Use about five lines.

28.6   LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have learnt about Talcott Parsons' concept of functionalism. The relationship between functionalism and social change has been described in some detail. Then you learnt about the two main types of social change described by Parsons. First, were changes within social systems, and the second, of changes of social systems. He has described the latter through his concept of evolutionary universals. He has classified the evolution of societies into three categories, the primitive or **archaic**, the intermediate societies, and the modern.

28.7   KEYWORDS

Archaic	Any society which is antiquated or old fashioned
Diffusion	The spread of cultural items, objects and ideas through contact between different cultures.
Evolutionary Universals	When social systems are viewed in a longer time scale some general directions of evolutionary developments are observed. The direction and nature of this historical process of evolution is called Evolutionary Universal.
Homeostasis	The vital functions which the different organs, such as the respiratory, digestive, etc. perform in the human body leading to its survival and maintenance. This self-regulatory process of the body is called homeostasis.

Rationalisation	It is the process by which rational, individualistic and innovative attitude towards work, personal commitments and social institutions develop.
Teleology	It is the explanation for the existence of a process or institution or any object or ideas in terms of the purpose it fulfils, such as, to say that we eat to live, we are giving the purpose for eating.
Traditionalisation	It is the process by which the values, beliefs, ideas, attitudes, etc. became institutionalised in societies leading to the rise of vested interest(s) in maintaining them.

28.8 FURTHER READING

Hamilton, Peter, 1983. *Talcott Parsons. Routledge:* London and New York

Parsons, Talcott. 1966. *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives.* Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Parsons, Talcott, 1977. *The Evolution of Societies.* (Ed. with an introduction, by Jackson Toby). Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs

28.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i)   Functionalism is an approach which views all social systems as having elements or parts such as processes and institutions which operate leading thereby to the maintenance and survival of the system. This approach is influenced deeply by the biological sciences and draws an analogy between organisms and society.

ii) Teleology is the belief that the purpose of the existence of an institution or a process is that it fulfils a necessary function, which maintains the survival of the social system. This belief is central to the functionalist theory.

iii) a)   historical

     b)   harmony, strain, change.

Check Your Progress 2

i)   Population is a primary factor in bringing about change within a social system because with the increase of population social differentiation, i.e., division of labour, occurs. People do different functions in order to produce more. Growing command over food resources and production technology leads to increasing complexity of the social

system. This is proved historically in the development of caste system in India or the guild system in Europe.

ii) Factors, which contribute towards the increase of strain in a social system, are

    a) When the demographic constitution of a population changes through migration, social intermixture, etc.

    b) When the physical environment such as, the quality of soil, water, weather, etc. deteriorates, or changes.

    c) When there is more production of food and more resources available to individuals in a social system.

    d) When there is change in the technology used in a society and when scientific knowledge is applied for the advancement of society, and

    e) When there is a change in "cultural configuration" which brings about new religious values, ideologies, science and technology, etc.

iii) b)

Check Your Progress 3

i) Every social system has its own specific historical features. But in spite of this uniqueness when seen in a longer time span there are some general directions of evolution through which all social systems pass. It is the direction and nature of this historical process of evolution of societies which Parsons calls Evolutionary Universals.

ii) In the evolution of modern societies, three types of revolutions which played a significant role are

    a) the Industrial Revolution

    b) the Democratic revolution lead by the French Revolution, and

    c) the Educational revolution.

iii) The major features of a modern social system are

    a) growth of universalistic laws

    b) evolution of modern institutions of money and banking

    c) evolution of the institution of rational bureaucracy; and

    d) the growth of a democratic society.

UNIT 29 MANIFEST AND LATENT FUNCTION — MERTON

Structure

29.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you should be able to

● distinguish between the concepts of manifest and latent function

● discuss why and how Robert K. Merton gives a new meaning to functional analysis and differs from its conventional postulates and paradigms

● show how a concept like latent function enriches our perception of the social world

● look at our own social institutions and cultural practices from a refreshingly innovative angle.

29.1   INTRODUCTION

In the previous Units 27 and 28 of this Block you learnt about the contributions of Talcott Parsons to the field of sociology. This unit intends to make you familiar with the contribution Robert Merton made to the subject. Merton is another eminent American Sociologist and a student of Parsons. He has contributed significantly to the growth of functional analysis in sociology. You already know something about functionalism.

In this unit, particularly in the first section, i.e. section 29.2 you will learn about the special meaning that sociologists attach to the word 'function'. You will learn not solely about the meaning of function; but also about its two types, viz, manifest and latent function. In addition you will be told about the negation of function i.e. dysfunction.

In the second section, i.e. section 29.3 we will discuss the postulates of traditional functionalism, particularly the kind of functionalism propagated by social anthropologists like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. Then, we will discuss how Robert Merton disagrees with the conventional postulates and proposed new changes.

In the third section, section 29.4 you will learn about the paradigm for functional analysis, which Merton believes, enables the social scientist to be clear about his or her priorities, the areas to be explored, and the questions to be raised. A paradigm, as you will learn, is needed to avoid chaos and confusion in your research.

And, finally, in the fourth section, i.e. section 29.5 you will learn how a concept like latent function, as Merton emphasises, enables the sociologist to expand the realm of knowledge and explore new areas of sociological enquiry.

29.2   CONCEPTS OF FUNCTION

Perhaps it is not difficult to describe the term function. You already know how your society functions. You read a newspaper. And you know that it informs you of the world around you. You go to your university or to your workplace. And you know that it provides education and knowledge and prepares you for the world you are going to enter. In the case of your workplace, it has a certain organisation and way of functioning. Or as a voter you cast your vote and elect your representatives, because you would like your views to be represented. In other words, it is not difficult for you to understand that all that constitutes of your society, be it the newspaper you read, the university you rely on for your studies, the place of your work, the democratic institutions in which you participate, helps you to relate creatively and positively to your society. In other words, social institutions tend to intensify the degree of your participation in your society as an insider, as an active member. The result is that the cohesiveness of the society is established. This is precisely the function of social institutions.

Before you begin to read Robert Merton's functional analysis, you can safely conclude that, as a sociologist, when you use the word 'function'

you are referring to how a social institution or a cultural practice intensifies the cohesiveness of the society. In other words, society functions because its constituent parts, its various institutions or cultural practices, do contribute to the formation of social unity and to order and cohesiveness. Function is precisely this contribution that brings order, unity and cohesiveness in a society.

Again there are some functions you are aware of and there are some other functions you are not aware of. Ask yourself why, as a student, you are regularly asked to sit for examinations. The examinations, you know, test your knowledge, enable you to work hard and, as a result, you get stimulated to sharpen your skill and intelligence so that you can become a better member of the society. This is undoubtedly the manifest function of the examinations. We are sure that you are aware of it.

But that is not all. The examinations serve another function which you may not be aware of. The examinations tend to convince you that there are 'good' students and 'not so good' students; not everyone is equal; merit or intelligence or knowledge is not evenly distributed. In other words, these examinations, in the ultimate analysis, induce you to accept that even in a democracy some kind of hierarchy is unavoidable. This acceptance reduces the possibility of conflict. In fact, this is a lesson of adjustment. Society retains its order, unity, and cohesiveness, despite its inherent inequality or hierarchy. This is the latent function of the examination system, the deeper meaning of which you may not always be aware of.

This brief introduction is likely to arouse your interest. You are now eager to know how Merton redefines functional analysis. But before that you ought to be clear about the concept of function. Merton wants you to examine and re-examine this concept from different perspectives so that its analytical significance comes through clearly. You will find a detailed elaboration of this in his famous book (1949) *Social Theory and Social Structure*.

29.2.0 Different Meanings of Function

Remember when, as a student of sociology, you are using the word 'function', you have to be aware of its difference from other connotations assigned to the same word. As Merton says, there are generally five connotations assigned to the word 'function'.

First, function often refers to some public gathering or festive occasion, usually conducted with ceremonial overtones. And as Merton says, and you too may well anticipate, this popular usage of function does not have the slightest similarity with the sociological concept you are dealing with.

Secondly, the term is often equated with occupation. But this is not what a sociologist is interested in.

Thirdly, function is often used to refer to the activities assigned to the incumbent of a social status. For example, the function of a kindergarten teacher is to educate the child; the function of a doctor is to cure his or her patient and so on. Yet, says Merton, this definition is not sufficient. According to Merton such an understanding diverts attention from the fact

that functions are performed not only by the occupant of designated positions, but by a whole range of standardised activities, social processes, cultural patterns and belief systems found in society,

Fourthly, function has got a mathematical meaning. It refers to a variable in relation to one or more variables in terms of which it may be expressed.
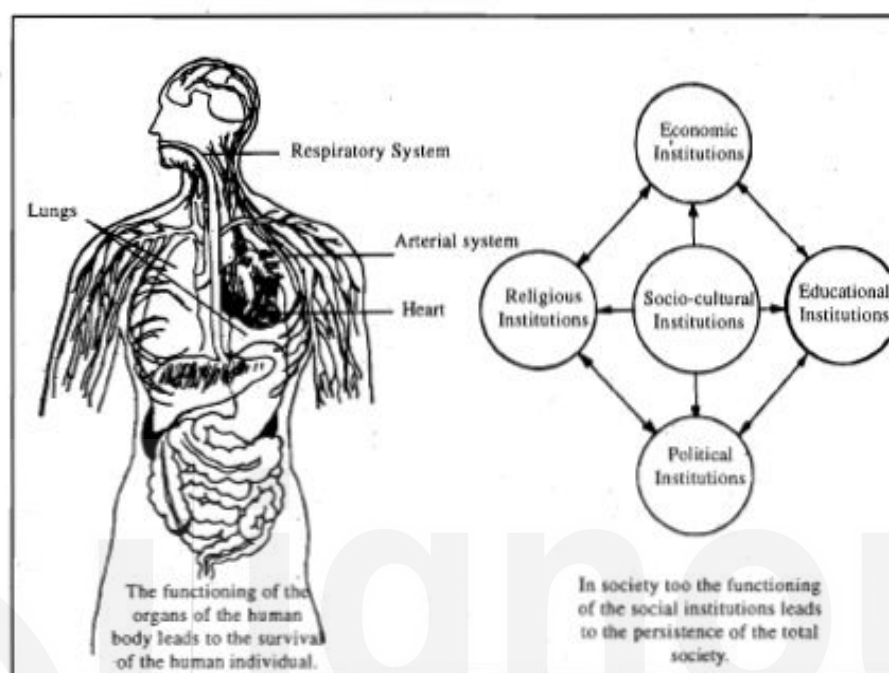
Figure 29.1: Concept of Function in Sociology Adopted from the Biological Sciences

But, as Merton says, it is the fifth connotation, which is central to functional analysis. The inspiration behind this usage has been the biological sciences, where the term function is used to refer to these 'vital or organic processes which contribute to the maintenance of the organism'.

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, the noted social anthropologist, used this connotation in social sciences. 'The function of any recurrent activity', according to Radcliffe-Brown, 'is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it makes to the maintenance of structural continuity'. According to Malinowski, another noted anthropologist, the function of social or cultural items is the part they play within the integral system of culture by the manner in which they are related to each other within the system.

Now it is for you to reflect on this special connotation of 'function' which, as a student of sociology, you are expected to use time and again. There are two things that you ought to remember.

● First, what you call society is not chaotic. It has an order, a structure. In other words, all that constitutes your society, its innumerable parts like polity, economy, religion, family, education cannot be seen in isolation. All parts are integrally related. It is this inherent relationship that sustains the society.

● Secondly, in order to appreciate the inherent relationship, you have to see how each part contributes to the maintenance of the inherent order and structure. It is this contribution that is called function. So you can say, education has got a function, precisely because the contribution of education is that it gives you knowledge and skill and, as a result, society both coheres and progresses.

29.2.1 Objective Consequences and Subjective Dispositions

It is at this juncture that Merton would invite you to raise a meaningful question, Who would decide the function of a social institution or a cultural practice? The participant or the observer?

It would be easier for you to appreciate the meaning of this question if you think of a living example. For instance, someone is about to get married and you ask her why is she getting herself into it. What is its function? It is quite possible that she, the participant, may tell you that she is marrying for the fulfilment of her human needs and her need for love. But, then, Merton would say that the participant is confusing her own subjective motives with the real, objective function of marriage. The objective function of marriage or family is not love but the socialisation of the child.

That is why, says Merton, the concept of function involves the standpoint of the observer, not necessarily that of the participant. In other words, social function refers to observable objective consequences, not subjective dispositions. A school child may think that he goes to school because he finds his friends there; but the function of school is something else; it is to add to and aid in the growth of knowledge that the society needs in order to sustain itself.

In other words, in order to see the function of a social institution or a cultural practice, it is not sufficient for the social scientist to remain contented with the subjective dispositions or the motives an actor attaches to it. Instead, the social scientist has to see the objective consequences: how really does the institution contribute to the cohesiveness of the society.

29.2.2 Function, Dysfunction, Manifest Function and Latent Function

It is now clear that functions are those observed consequences, which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system. But, then not everything is functional. Not everything helps to make for the adaptation of a system. So Merton uses another concept called dysfunction. Dysfunctions, according to Merton, are those observed consequences, which lesson the adaptation or adjustment of the system.

Imagine your own society. Modern India, you would agree, intends to be mobile, democratic, participatory and egalitarian. In such a society the institution of caste, far from having a function, has dysfunctions. Instead of intensifying the democratic ideal, caste tends to lessen the degree of mobility, democratisation and participation. That is why, castes may be classified as dysfunctional.

With these clarifications it is no longer difficult for you to come to the main problem, manifest function and latent function. Be it a manifest function or a latent function, it is the objective, observed consequence which makes for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system. There is, however, only one difference and it goes to the credit of Merton that he is able to bring it out sharply and intelligently. Whereas the participants are aware of the manifest function, they are not aware of the latent function. In other words, the latent function is neither intended nor recognised.

Why is this so? This is because the participants can see what is immediately visible; they cannot always see the deeper or latent meaning of what they do. But for social scientists, the task is to go beyond the common sense perception of the participants and see the latent consequences of social practices.

Think of Emile Durkheim's famous analysis of the social functions of punishment. Its immediate, manifest function is obvious. Everyone knows it. It reminds the criminal that society would not permit his **deviance**. But, then, it has a latent function too, which is not generally recognised. The latent function of punishment, Durkheim would argue, is not what happens to the criminal; instead, it is deeper; it intensifies society's faith in its collective conscience; the punishment of the criminal is an occasion that reminds the society of its force and its collective morals.

Check Your Progress 1

i)   Write in about six lines how sociologists use the word 'function'.

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ii) What is the difference between latent and manifest function? Write in about four lines.

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iii) Give a simple example of 'dysfunction'? Use about three lines.

....

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29.3   POSTULATES OF FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

Robert Merton, you would realise, is no ordinary functionalist. What separates him from the traditional ones is his new insights, the way he goes beyond the boundaries of traditional functionalism. That is why it is important to know how Merton refutes the postulates of traditional

functionalism, the postulates of unity, universalism and indispensability and proposes refreshingly innovative changes, the changes that enable him to see that everything is not functional. Merton argues that society is divided into groups and sub-groups and what is functional for a particular group may be dysfunctional for others. Moreover, nothing is indispensable; there are always functional alternatives and equivalents.

29.3.1 Postulate of Functional Unity

Radcliffe-Brown, says Merton, is one of the chief exponents of the postulate of functional unity. To quote from Radcliffe-Brown, 'The function of a particular social usage is the contribution it makes to the total social life as the functioning of the total social system' (Merton 1968: 25). What is implicit in such a postulate is that a social function has a certain kind of unity and all parts of the social system work together with a sufficient degree of harmony or internal consistency.

Perhaps the postulate of functional unity makes sense and remains valid in relatively homogeneous, non-literate civilisation. But in a modern complex society, the postulate of functional unity, as Merton argues, needs to be redefined. First, Merton doubts whether all societies are solidly integrated and hence every culturally standardised practice or belief is functional for the society as a whole. Secondly, Merton wants the sociologists to remember that social usages or beliefs may be functional for some groups and dysfunctional for others in the same society.

Merton's critique is very interesting. You have to understand its implications. Think of a social practice from your own society. What function, for example, does the kind of religion propagated by fundamentalists fulfil? It is true, as Durkheim showed that in a non-literate civilisation religion might have integrative functions. But in multi-ethnic, multi-religious society the religion of the kind that the fundamentalists propagate is likely to have disastrous consequences for the minorities. So you can understand that what the fundamentalists regard as a necessity is not necessary or functional for the whole society. It may be functional for the political interests of the fundamentalists, but dysfunctional for others.

This example is likely to incline you to the critique that Merton evolves. The postulate of functional unity does not make much sense in a complex world. As a result, the functionalists, says Merton, ought to specify the unit for which the given social or cultural item is functional. Moreover, they must make it clear, as the example of fundamentalism shows, that a given item may have diverse consequences, functional as well as dysfunctional for individuals or sub-groups.

29.3.2 Postulate of Universal Functionalism

This postulate holds that all social or cultural forms have positive functions. Malinowski, says Merton, advances this in its most extreme form. As Malinowski says, 'In every type of civilisation, every custom, material object, idea and belief fulfils some vital function'.

What does this postulate mean? All social or cultural forms have necessarily positive functions. A moment's reflection is enough to make you see the

shortcomings of such a. postulate. Because, as you have already learned, an item a social belief or a cultural practice may have dysfunctions also. And it may happen that a net balance of functional consequences is negative, not positive.

You can once again think of an example and evolve, as Merton does, a critique of this postulate. Many of you are perhaps fond of cricket. Cricket, you would argue, is a lovely game; it has got positive functions in the sense that it enables you to appreciate the beauty and art of the game, truly, a harmless experience'. It may also arouse your national identity (imagine India playing against Pakistan!); and enhance your patriotism! But at the same time, the positive functions of cricket should not prevent you from seeing its dysfunctions. Cricket has damaged other games like football or hockey, which are relatively neglected by the media. The media projects a cricketer as a star with wealth and opportunity for foreign travel, which is indeed dysfunctional for a true sports culture to evolve. So you have to see the net balance of the consequences and only then can one conclude whether an institution is functionally positive or negative.

This is precisely the reason why Merton refuses to give his consent to the postulate of universal functionalism. Merton argues and, it seems, you would agree with him that the functionalists must focus on a net balance of functional consequences, positive as well as negative, but, by no means, positive only.

29.3.3 Postulate of Indispensability

Implicit in this postulate is the belief and Malinowski asserts it that whatever fulfils some vital function, be it a custom, a cultural practice, is indispensable in that society. In other words, all that persists in a society is indispensable and nothing, it seems, can be altered.

Before you understand how Robert Merton evolves a critique of this postulate, it is necessary for you to think of an example and reflect on it. Education, for instance, remains an indispensable function and unless it is fulfilled, no society can survive. This is because without education society cannot produce knowledge, wisdom, skills and trained personnel. But the question is what are the ways to fulfil this indispensable function? Now think of the prevalent education system, a system in which there is neither reciprocity nor mutual understanding between the teacher and the student. The student remains a passive recipient while the teacher imparts to him or her techniques, information, knowledge subskills. The proponents of such an impersonal system may argue that it is indispensable because it disciplines the mind of the student, it makes him obedient and therefore it results in order.

Yet, as Paulo Freire said beautifully in his masterpiece The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, there is an alternative form of education, dialogical education, in which both the student and the teacher are equally active. The student, instead of remaining a passive receiver, participates and intervenes in the process of learning. This, said Freire, is more creative, more humane. So you understand that although education is a functional necessity, there are different ways to fulfil it. In other words no cultural form is indispensable

forever because the function it claims to fulfil can be fulfilled better by alternative cultural forms.

A functional analyst, Merton says, should assume that nothing, in fact, is indispensable. There are functional alternatives, equivalents or substitutes. In other words, the same function served by a given item, under changed circumstances, may be fulfilled by another item. For example, in modern societies where women too work outside the home, some functions of the family such as, childcare can be performed by other institutions like creches, daycare centres, and so on.

Check Your Progress 2

i)   Who was one of the chief proponents of the postulate of functional unity?

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ii) Why did Merton refute the postulate of universal functionalism? Explain in about six lines.

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iii) What according to Merton, is the concept of functional alternative? Write in about five lines.

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29.4   A PARADIGM FOR FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

Robert K. Merton was extremely particular about the necessity of a paradigm as the paradigm contains the minimum set of concepts without which the sociologist cannot adequately carry out a functional analysis. Moreover, the paradigm says Merton, is intended to lead directly to the postulates and often to the tacit assumptions underlying functional analysis. Finally, the paradigm seeks to sensitise the sociologist to the political and ideological implications of functional analysis.

In other words, without a paradigm, it is difficult to properly codify a theory. The paradigm brings out into open the array of assumptions, concepts and basic propositions employed in a sociological analysis. It reduces the possibility of randomness and arbitrariness in sociological research.

A paradigm for functional analysis therefore helps to make clear how to conduct functional analysis, what to study, what to emphasise upon and how to locate one's analysis in the ideological struggle between conservatism and radicalism.

29.4.0 The Items to which Functions are Imputed

It is necessary for you to know the nature of the sociological data that can be subjected to functional analysis. Can you include anything and everything for functional analysis such as cultural practices, rituals, social institutions, machines, persons? As Merton clarifies, the basic requirement in functional analysis is that the object of analysis should represent a standardised, patterned item such as social roles, institutional patterns, social processes, cultural patterns, culturally patterned emotions, social norms, group organisation, social structure, devices for social control, etc.

In other words, something that is a regular practice can be included for functional analysis. For example, you can include cricket as well as marriage, a religious rite as well as the coercive machinery of the state. This is because all of the above are standardised social items. But you cannot include the idiosyncracies or peculiarities of a single individual for functional analysis because we ate not talking now i.e., in this case, of standardised and regular social practice.

29.4.1 Concepts of Objective Consequences

You have already learned from Merton that an item may have both functional as well as dysfunctional consequences. As a sociologist, your task is to see the net balance of the aggregate of consequences.

Imagine yourself doing a functional analysis of Doordarshan. Its positive functions are obvious; it brings the world closer and informs you of the happenings on this planet. But its dysfunctions too have to be seen. It breeds consumerism and tends to stimulate violence. So your task is to balance the functions and the dysfunctions of Doordarshan and then arrive, at a reasonable conclusion.

Activity 1

Think of casteism in your own society. Try to examine its functions as well as dysfunctions. Write a note of about two pages listing the functions and dysfunctions of casteism. Compare if possible your note with those of other students at your Study Centre

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29.4.2 Concept of the Unit Subserved by the Function

Every item does not necessarily have functions or dysfunctions for the whole society. Something might be functional for one group and dysfunctional for another group or sub-system.

For instance, the continual coverage of cricket by Doordarshan may have function of lowering the crime rate during those hours, but on the other hand it may breed and promote inefficiency in the work place. That is why, says Merton, it is necessary to be particularly specific about the unit for which one wants to study the functional consequences of an item. So a sociologist should be absolutely clear whether he or she is studying the functional consequences of a given item for the whole society or only for a sub-group.

A functional analyst should not assume that her or his task is to focus only on the static aspects of social structure and neglect the study of structural change in society. Merton believes that a functional analyst should be equally concerned about social change. First, as you know, nothing is indispensable; so also one might add that nothing is static either. Functional alternatives are possible. Secondly, a functional analyst should know that not everything is functional; there are many social and cultural items, which have dysfunctional consequences. Dysfunctions, according to Merton, imply the concept of strain, stress and tension on the structural level and, therefore, provide an analytical approach to the study of dynamics and change.

It has often been alleged that functional analysis is inevitably committed to a 'conservative' or a 'reactionary' perspective. But Merton says that it has no intrinsic commitment to any ideological position. It all depends, in Merlon's opinion, on how you do your analysis and how you want to use it. For instance, if you concentrate solely on positive functional consequences, it leads towards an ultra-conservative ideology. But, on the other hand, if you concentrate solely on dysfunctional consequences, it leads you towards an ultra-radical **Utopia**, because you are excessively critical of all the institutions present in your society.

Choose a living example; reflect on it. If, as a sociologist, you see only the functional consequences of caste, 'how caste restricts competition and, therefore, maintains order or how caste enables one to choose one's *swadharma* and therefore reduces the possibility of career anxiety or identity confusion, you are indeed adopting an ultra-conservative ideology. But once you begin to see the dysfunctions of caste, you can no longer be accused of conservatism. Because by seeing the dysfunctions you are essentially pleading for change. That's why, Merton argues, functional analysis has no intrinsic commitment to any ideological position.

29.5 MANIFEST AND LATENT FUNCTION - PURPOSE OF DISTINCTION

What gives a new meaning to Merton's functional analysis is the way he evolves the notion of latent function and distinguishes it from manifest function. This distinction, Merton forcefully argues, helps us to go beyond the common sense perception of the world. A notion like latent function, opens your eyes, it enables you to see the deeper, hidden meaning of many of your social practices and cultural beliefs. In this fashion you are almost forced to alter the prevalent notion of 'rationality' and 'irrationality', 'morality' and 'immorality' that you had taken for granted. Because even

in an 'irrational' or an 'immoral' practice you would see a latent and necessary social function being fulfilled. The result is that the realm of social knowledge and enquiry would begin to expand.

29.5.0 What Appears 'Irrational' Becomes Meaningful

The distinction between latent function and manifest function helps the sociologist to make his or her presence felt as a critical analyst. Once you are aware of the notion of latent function, you would not be easily tempted to regard everything that does not have an immediate, manifest function as simply 'irrational'. Instead, you would ask a deeper question! Why is it that what appears 'irrational' continues to exist? Only then, perhaps, you would begin to see the hidden or latent meaning of the so-called irrational act or belief.

A concrete example that Merton suggests would help you to appreciate the point. With your secular rationality how do you look at the Hopi ceremonials? The Hopi ceremonials are designed to produce abundant rainfall. But it is not as if rain really falls on account of the ceremonials performed by the Hopis. Rainfall does not depend on ceremonials. This may tempt you to conclude that the Hopi ceremonials reflect nothing except an irrational, superstitious belief of the primitive folk.

Now it is at this juncture that Merton would ask you to resist temptation. Don't draw such an easy conclusion. Merton wants you to see something deeper in these ceremonials. Well, the ceremonials do not produce rainfall. But the ceremonials enable the scattered members of the group to assemble together and engage in a common activity. This reinforces their group identity and solidarity, which is no mean achievement. This is the latent function of the ceremony.

Activity 2

Imagine yourself participating in a socio-religious festival like Holi. And try to see its latent function and ask yourself how it helps you to increase your perception about rituals and festivals. Write a note of one page about the latent and manifest functions of Holi. Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

29.5.0 New Horizons of Enquiry Begin to Emerge

You have already come to realise that sociologists are not lay persons. With their special skills, particularly with their awareness of the notion of latent function, they rediscover new areas of enquiry worthy of exploration. Generally, the social actors are content with immediate, manifest functions and do not bother about things having hidden, latent, and deeper consequences. But sociologists are not satisfied by external appearance alone. They delve into the hidden meanings and aspects of cultural items and social practices. Thus, they are interested even in those realms that may not have the slightest appeal to the clever pragmatist, that is, a practical person who is concerned more with the here and now of the manifest world.

There are many examples. Imagine yourself having a dialogue with an intellectual who is fond of only serious, 'art' films. He or she may tell you that all that takes place in the name of 'commercial' films is absurd and meaningless. But if you read Merton and begin to appreciate the notion of latent function, you are unlikely to be persuaded by the intellectual's arguments. Though commercial films may be absurd, what with their implausible stories, music, dances, romances and fight scenes, they may still have some positive functions. These films may strengthen the role of motherhood, celebrate the ultimate triumph of good over evil, and reinforce ideals which many fear may get lost in a rapidly changing world. It is in this regard that, commercial films may have a latent function and act like a safety valve, restoring faith. When seen in this way, a way suggested by Merton, a new area of sociological enquiry emerges, e.g. the study of commercial films.

29.5.2 The Realm of Sociological Knowledge Expands

It is now quite obvious that a sociologist with his notion of latent function contributes positively to the growth of knowledge. Had he been contented merely with the manifest function, he could not have said anything new. That's why, says Merton, the distinction between the latent function and the manifest function helps the sociologist to open the horizons of sociological knowledge.

It is at this juncture that you need to know about a very interesting example that Merton has discussed in detail. The example is from Veblen's famous book, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) in which the author sought to examine the latent function of the pattern of conspicuous consumption. Before you understand Veblen, it would be better, if you ask a simple question. Why do some people attach so much importance to new models of car, television, washing machine or even detergent powder?

Why do some people want to buy expensive and attractively packaged consumer goods all the time? Well, it is always possible to say that people buy cars because cars provide transportation; people buy TV sets because TV programmes help them to know about the world, its politics, culture etc. These are undoubtedly the manifest functions of the consumer goods and the consumers are well aware of these functions.

Everyone knows this. Wherein, then, lies the contribution of a sociologist? As Merton says, Veblen's analysis shows how a sociologist can go beyond the manifest functions of the pattern of consumption and tell us something new that seems strikingly different from one's common sense perception. Veblen says that people buy new models of car or TV sets not solely because they want transportation facilities or they want to know about the world, but also because it helps them to reaffirm their social status. In other words, buying costly goods serves the latent function of reaffirming one's social status. It is in this sense, says Merton, that sociologists help us to increase our knowledge about the world, the consequences of our beliefs, cultural practices, life-styles, etc.

29.5.3 Established Morals Get Challenged

What appears 'immoral' then may have a latent function, though that does not necessarily make it moral. And hence, says Merton, it is not always

desirable to agree with the established morals of the society. Because unless the functions, i.e., the latent functions of 'immoral' practices or institutions are fulfilled by alternative practices or institutions, a moral critique, remains empty; it serves nothing. It is just a social ritual rather than a piece of social engineering.

Merton gives a revealing example from the American society. The 'immoral' political machine, says Merton, serves what the official democracy fails to accomplish. In the impersonal American democracy the voters are regarded as amorphous, undifferentiated masses. But the political machine with its keen sociological awareness regards the voter as a person living in a specific neighbourhood with specific personal problems and personal wants. In other words, in an impersonal society, the political machine fulfils the important social function of humanising and personalising, the manner of assistance to those in need.

The message Merton wants to convey is clear. It is futile to be critical of an 'immoral' practice unless one can think of a 'moral' alternative that can take its place in functional terms. A moral critique on its own is simply insufficient.

Check Your Progress 3

i)   What are the four reasons behind the distinction between the latent function and the manifest function? Use about four lines.

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ii) How does the concept of latent function increase the realm of sociological knowledge? Give an example. Write in about eight lines.

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iii) Which among the following statements is true?

     a)   Functional analysis is necessarily conservative.

     b)   Functional analysis is necessarily radical.

     c)   Functional analysis has no intrinsic commitment to any ideological position.

29.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have learned how Robert K. Merton redefines functionalism as well as his disagreement with the conventional postulates and paradigms of functional analysis. You have also come to know how Merton comes forward with his own brand of functionalism which is more elastic, less dogmatic and hence capable of incorporating the societal experience of dynamics, change and dysfunctions. And what is particularly important is that you have also learned how, armed with the notion of latent function, Robert Merton proposes to expand the realm of sociological knowledge and enquiry. Essentially, he enables you to see the latent or hidden functions of many social practices, which our common sense perceptions fail to comprehend.

29.7 KEYWORDS

Deviance The word, sociologically speaking, implies an immoral practice, something that goes against society's established moral ideals. Drug-addiction, for instance, is a kind of deviance from socially approved normal and healthy existence.

Hegemony A process through which a particular section of the society, for instance, the ruling class, succeeds in imposing its values and ideas on the rest of the society. As a result, it seems that there is a consensus in the society, although, objectively, it remains divided.

Utopia The vision of a perfect, ideal society, something that seems strikingly different from the prevalent reality for which the revolutionaries and the oppressed often fight their battles.

29.8 FURTHER READING

Merton, Robert K.1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure.* Free Press: New York

Turner, J.H. 1987. *Structure of Sociological Theory.* Rawat Publications: Jaipur

29.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) When sociologists use the word 'function' they mean the contribution a social institution or a cultural practice makes to the maintenance of social order, unity and cohesiveness. And, moreover, for a sociologist, function need not be confused with the subjective meaning that a participant attaches to a social item; instead, it is observed, objective

consequence, how really a social item brings about order and cohesiveness in a given system.

ii) Whereas the participants remain aware of the manifest function of a social item, they are ignorant of its latent function. In other words, the manifest function is immediately visible; but the latent function remains hidden that need a sociologist to get explored.

iii) Dysfunction is the negation of function. Instead of bringing about order and unity, it causes chaos and disorder. Caste, for example, is dysfunctional for a modern society, because it is against participatory and egalitarian democracy.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Radcliffe-Brown

ii) The postulate of universal functionalism means that all social or cultural forms have positive functions. Merton refutes this postulate because with his critical awareness he can see clearly that social or cultural forms may have negative functions, i.e., dysfunctions also. That's why, says Merton, it is necessary to focus on a net balance of functional consequences, positive as well as negative but, by no means, positive only.

iii) Merton refutes the postulate of indispensability. No cultural form, according to Merton, is indispensable for ever because the function it claims to fulfil can be fulfilled better by alternative cultural forms. In other words, the same function can be fulfilled by alternative items. This is, according to Merton, the concept of functional alternative.

Check Your Progress 3

i) a) What appears 'irrational' becomes meaningful.

b) New horizons of enquiry begin to emerge.

c) The realm of sociological knowledge expands.

d) Established morals get challenged,

ii) The phenomenal growth of consumerism in our society, for instance, can be explained better by the concept of latent function. Because men are buying consumer items-cars, TV sets or detergent powder - not solely because of their manifest functions, the facilities these items provide. Behind the aggressive urge to consume more and more lies the desire to reaffirm one's social status.

This is the latent function; consumerism sustains a competitive, materialistic culture, which the capitalists need to retain their hegemony. And this is where a concept like latent function increases the realm of sociological knowledge.

iii) (c).

UNIT 30   THEORY OF REFERENCE GROUP — MERTON

Structure

30.0   OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you should be able to

- understand the concept of reference group

- explain why human beings, in order to evaluate their role-performance and achievements, choose different reference groups: membership groups as well as, non-membership groups

- appreciate the continual possibility of an experience of relative deprivation and human restlessness because of human beings' perpetual inclination to different reference groups

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- look at your own biography, creatively and critically: how you choose your reference individuals and reference groups and accordingly, shape your life-style, **worldview** and behaviour.

30.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit you learnt about Merton's contribution to functional analysis. This unit intends to make you familiar with the theory of reference group behaviour particularly, the way Robert Merton has elaborated and substantiated it in his famous book (1949) *Social Theory and Social Structure*.

To begin with, an attempt has been made to make you appreciate the concept of reference group, its many varieties in Section 30.2.

Then, you would come to know the determinants, structural, institutional, cultural and psychological factors that continue to stimulate human beings to choose different reference groups, membership as well as non-membership groups. This is elaborated in Section 30.3

And, finally, you would learn the structural elements of reference group behaviour the possibility of observability and visibility of the norms, values and role-performance of group members, the impact of non-conformity and the dynamics of role-sets and status-sets.

30.2 CONCEPT OF REFERENCE GROUP

Not much need to be said about the fact that you live in groups. You are a social being and to live in a society is to live amidst relationships. What else is a group? It is a network of relationships.

As a student, for example, you belong to a group of other students with whom you continually interact. You know what kind of relationship you expect from your group members; you also know what others expect from you. In other words, the way you conduct yourself, the way you behave and relate is always being guided by the group you belong to. As a student you cannot conduct yourself unless your behaviour is being shaped by the patterned expectations of the group of students. This is what stabilises your identity as a student.

Likewise, you belong to a family. The family, as you already know, is an important primary group that shapes your behaviour and expectations. Unless you are absolutely rootless, you cannot think of your being without imagining yourself in series of relationships with your parents, brothers, sisters, cousins and colleagues.

You must, therefore, realise that to lead a normal existence is not to live in isolation. You live amidst relationships and you give your consent to the expectations of the groups to which you belong. Now we are close to an understanding of reference groups.

What is a reference group all about? A reference group is one to which you always refer in order to evaluate your achievements, your role-performance, your aspirations and ambitions. It is only a reference group that tells you whether you are right or wrong, whether whatever you are doing, you are doing badly or well. So one might say that the membership groups to which you belong are your reference groups.

The problem does not, however, end here. Life is more complex. Even non-membership groups, the groups to which you do not belong, may act like reference groups. This is not really very surprising. Because life is mobile and time and again you come to know of the lives and ways of those who do not belong to your group. At times, this makes you wonder and ask why it is that there are others who are more powerful, more prestigious than you.

It if, because of this comparison that you often tend to feel deprived. You aspire to become a member of a group to which you do not belong but which is more powerful, or more prestigious. As a result, this time in order to evaluate your achievements, performance, you refer to a non-membership group.

Take an example. You are a student. You remain burdened with your course materials and examinations. You are really working hard and you have no time to relax. Then you come to know an altogether different group, say, a group of cricketers who are as young as you are. Yet, you see that cricketers play cricket, go abroad, enjoy life, earn money, and newspapers write about them. The 'success story' of the group of cricketers fascinates you. While comparing yourself with them you feel that as a student you are deprived. The cricketers, then, begin to act like your reference group. As a result, you begin to give more time to cricket than to your course materials with a hope that one day you too would become a cricketer and lead that kind of life.

The fact, therefore, is that not solely membership groups, even non-membership groups act like reference groups. Human beings look at themselves not solely through the eyes of their group members, but also through the eyes of those who belong to other groups.

With these clarifications it would not be difficult for you to understand how Robert Merton evolves his theory of reference groups in his famous book *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949).

30.2.0 Concept of Relative Deprivation

Merton's understanding of relative deprivation is closely tied to his treatment of reference group and reference group behaviour. Essentially, Merton speaks of relative deprivation while examining the findings of *The American Soldier*, a work published in 1949. In this work an attempt was made to examine how the American soldiers looked at themselves and evaluated their role-performance, career achievements, etc.

Now reflect on the simple, yet meaningful finding of The American Soldier from which the meaning of relative deprivation will become clear:

"Comparing himself with his unmarried associates in the Army, the married man could feel that induction demanded greater sacrifice from him than from them; and comparing himself with the married Soldiers, he could feel that he had been called on for sacrifices which they were escaping altogether". Herein we find the kernel of what Merton called relative deprivation. This is not surprising. Happiness or deprivation are not absolutes, they depend on the scale of measure as well as on the frame of reference. The married soldier is not asking, what he gets and what other married soldiers like him get. Instead, he is asking what he is deprived of. Now his unmarried associates in the army are relatively free. They don't have wives and children, so they are free from the responsibility from which married soldiers cannot escape. In other words, married soldiers are deprived of the kind of freedom that their unmarried associates are enjoying. Likewise, the married soldier feels deprived when he compares himself with his civilian married friend. Because the civilian friend can live with his wife and children and fulfil his responsibility. The married soldier therefore, feels deprived that by virtue of being a soldier he cannot afford to enjoy the normal, day to day family life of a civilian.

It is precisely because of the kind of reference group with which the married soldier compares his lot that he feels deprived. Likewise, as another finding shows, "The overseas soldier, relative to soldiers still at home, suffered a greater break with home ties and with many of the amenities of life in the United States to which he was accustomed".

Figure 30.1: Concept of Relative Deprivation

An Indian student in a prestigious university in the United States may have sufficient reasons to feel happy. He has access to a better academic atmosphere - more books, more research materials, more seminars, and so on. But if he refuses to remain contented with this academic world and thinks of an alternative scale of evaluation which values above all else a home life with his parents, brothers and sisters then his 'happiness' would begin to disappear. So while comparing himself with his Indian friends enjoying the intimate company of their family members, he may feel deprived. This is what makes the study of reference group pretty interesting. Men and women always compare their lot with others. This explains their restlessness and continual search for change and mobility.

30.2.1 Concept of Group and Group Membership

Perhaps a study of reference group requires an elementary understanding of what a group is all about. Merton speaks of three characteristics of a group and group memberships.

i) First, there is an objective criterion, viz., the frequency of interaction. In other words, the sociological concept of a group refers to a number of people frequently interact with one another.

ii) A second criterion is that the interacting persons define themselves as members. In other words, they feel that they have patterned expectations or forms of interaction, which are morally binding on them and on other members.

iii) The third criterion is that the persons in interaction are defined by others as 'belonging to the group'. These others include fellow members as well as non-members.

It is in this context that you should know how groups differ from collectivities and social categories. There is no doubt that all groups are collectivities, but all collectivities are not groups. The collectivities that lack the criterion of frequent interaction among members are not groups. Nation, for example, is a collectivity, not a group, because all those who belong to a nation do not interact with one another. Nation as a collectivity contains groups and sub-groups within it.

Again social categories are aggregates of social statuses, the occupants of which are not necessarily in social interaction. For instance, all those who have got the same sex or age or marital condition or income form social categories but not groups.

In other words, unlike collectivities or social categories, membership groups shape human beings' day-to-day behaviour more clearly and more concretely. Group members are conscious of their identities, they are aware of what to do and what not to do. As a result, for them, group norms are morally binding.

30.2.2 Concept of Non-Membership

As Merton says, there is nothing new in the fact that men and women conform to their own group. But what makes the study of reference group particularly interesting is that "they frequently orient themselves to groups other than their own in shaping their behaviour and evaluations".

It is at this juncture that Merton wants you to appreciate the dynamics of non-membership. It is true that non-members are those who do not meet the interactional and definitional criteria of membership. But, at the same time, as Merton says, all non-members are not of the same kind. Broadly speaking. non-members can be divided into three categories.

i) Some may aspire to membership in the group

ii) Others may be indifferent toward such affiliation

iii) Still others may be motivated to remain unaffiliated with the group.

Think of an example. Suppose your father is an industrialist owning a factory. Naturally, as far as the workers in the factory are concerned, you are a non-member. You do not belong to their group. There are, however, three possibilities. Suppose you are deeply sensitive, you have read Marx and you tend to believe seriously that it is the working class that alone can create a new world free from injustice and exploitation. In other words, despite being a non-member, you want to belong to the workers, share their experiences and, accordingly, alter your life-style. Then, as Merton would say, a non-membership group becomes a positive reference group for you.

Then, there is another possibility. You do not bother. You are contented with your contemporary existence and as a result the workers do not have any impact on your life. In other words, you remain a non-member and never do you want to belong to the group of the workers.

Now think of the third possibility. You remain a non-member, but instead of remaining indifferent you hate the workers, you feel that the workers are neither intelligent nor educated, and that there is nothing to admire in their culture. In order to retain your status and separate yourself from the workers, you evolve counter-norms. Then, the workers, Merton would say, constitute a negative reference group.

Check Your Progress 1

i)   What is 'relative deprivation'? Give an example. Write in about six lines.

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ii)   Give an example of a non-membership reference group. Use about three lines.

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30.2.3 Anticipatory Socialisation

Merton speaks of anticipatory socialisation in the context of non-membership reference groups. It is simple. It is like preparing oneself for the group to which an individual aspires but does not belong. It is like adopting the values, life-styles of a non-membership reference group. For an individual, says Merton, anticipatory socialisation 'may serve the twin functions of aiding his rise into that group and of easing his adjustment after he has become part of it'.

Think of a living example and then what Merton says would become clearer to you. Suppose a village boy born in a lower middle class household accepts Doon School boys as his reference group. As a process of anticipatory socialisation he begins to emulate the 'smartness' of Doon School boys. Now if this village boy really succeeds in getting an entry into Doon School, his anticipatory socialisation would indeed be functional, it would be easier for him to adjust himself to his new role.

While Merton speaks of the possibility of functional consequences of anticipatory socialisation, he however, does not fail to see its dysfunctional consequences. If the system is very closed (and it is for you to see whether it is really so) then this lower middle class village boy would never get an entry into Doon School. In that case anticipatory socialisation would be dysfunctional for him. There are two reasons. First, he would not be able to become a member of the group to which he aspires. And secondly, because of anticipatory socialisation, imitation of the values of a non-membership group, he would be disliked by the members of his own group. As Merton says, he would be reduced to being a 'marginal man'! That is why, says Merton, anticipatory socialisation is functional for the individual only 'within a relatively open social structure providing for mobility'. By the same token it would be dysfunctional, in a 'relatively closed social structure'.

Merton makes another interesting point. In a closed system the individual is unlikely to choose a non-membership group as a reference group. That is why, in a closed system where the rights, prerequisites and obligations of each stratum are generally held to be morally right, an individual even if his objective conditions are not good, would feel less deprived. But in an open system in which the individual always compares his lot with relatively better off and the more privileged non-membership reference groups he remains perpetually unhappy and discontented.

Activity 1

Look at your friends. And try to examine what kind of non-membership reference groups they choose. Write a note of about one page. Compare, if possible, your answer with those of other students at your Study Centre.

30.2.4 Positive and Negative Reference Groups

Reference groups, says Merton, are of two kinds. First, a positive reference group is one, which one likes and takes seriously in order to shape one's behaviour and evaluate one's achievements and performance. Secondly, there is also a negative reference group which one dislikes and rejects and which, instead of providing norms to follow, provokes one to create counter-norms. As Merton says, "the positive type involves motivated assimilation of the norms of the group or the standards of the group as a basis for self-appraisal; the negative type involves motivated rejection, i.e., not merely non-acceptance of norms but the formation of counter-norms".

It is not difficult to think of an example. Imagine reaction of the colonised to their **colonial masters**. Now you would always find some "natives"

who get hypnotised by the success story of the colonisers, they follow their life-style, speak their language, emulate their food habit. In other words, for them, the colonisers act like a positive reference group.

But then again you would find some natives who hate the colonisers for their exploitation, arrogance, and brutality. Instead of emulating their norms, they create counter-norms in order to separate themselves from the colonisers. In other words, for them, the colonisers act like a negative reference group.

Check Your Progress 2

i)   Which of the following statement is true?

    a)   Under all circumstances, anticipatory socialisation is functional for the individual.

    b)   Anticipatory socialisation is functional in a closed social structure.

    c)   Anticipatory socialisation is functional only within a relatively open social structure providing for mobility.

ii) What is the difference between positive and negative reference groups? Write in about four lines.

30.3   DETERMINANTS OF REFERENCE GROUP

It is necessary to know the factors that determine one's choice of reference groups. That is why, Merton speaks of innumerable possibilities, the way men choose reference individuals, select among different membership groups and finally even their choice of non-membership group. Merton goes on to elaborate on the determinants that stimulate the same individual to choose different reference groups for different purposes. An understanding of all these determinants would definitely help you to comprehend the dynamics of reference group behaviour.

30.3.0 Reference Individuals

It is necessary to remember that men select not only reference groups, they select reference individuals also. This is because individuals with their charisma, status, glamour often attract people. For instance, cricketers as a group may not have much appeal to you, but Sachin Tendulkar as an individual does. Thus, in spite of the fact that cricketers as such do not constitute your reference group. Sachin Tendulkar may, however, become a reference individual.

The reference individual has often been described as a role-model. Yet, says Merton, there is a difference. The concept of role-model can be thought of as more restricted in scope, denoting a more limited identification with an individual in only one or a few selected roles. But the person who identifies himself with a reference individual will seek to "approximate the behaviour and values of that individual in his several roles".

Figure 30.2: Concept of Role Model

In other words, when you accept Sachin Tendulkar as a reference individual, you tend to identify yourself with the innumerable roles and habits of Sachin Tendulkar, the way he speaks and smiles, the kind of clothes he wears, the way he deals with women, the way he acts like a model! As Merton says, biographers, editors of 'fan magazines' and gossip columnists' further encourage people to choose their reference individuals.

Take up a glossy magazine at random. You will see that the columnists do not write solely about the professional activity of a film star, a cricketer, or a musician but they also write about their "affairs", their "private lives". The assumption is obvious. When a celebrity is chosen as a reference individual, one tends to accept everything he or she does, from their hair style to their food habit.

30.3.1 Selection of Reference Groups among Membership Groups

You belong to innumerable groups, right from your own family to a neighbourhood club, to a caste group, to a political party, to a religious organisation. The question is do you take all groups seriously while shaping your behaviour or evaluating your achievements and role-performance? As you know, not all membership groups are equally important, only some of them are selected as reference groups by you.

How do you select? A question of this kind cannot be answered unless you know that there are different kinds of membership groups. As Merton says, a "suitable classification" of groups is therefore necessary. Merton evolves a provisional list of twenty six group properties.

For instance, Merton says, groups differ widely in the degree of distinctness with which membership can be defined, ranging from some informal groups with indistinct boundaries to those with clear-cut and formalised processes of "admission" to membership.

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Again group may differ on the degree of engagement that the group encourages or promotes among its members. There are many other properties on the basis of which groups can differ; expected duration of the group, its open or closed character, degree of social differentiation, and degree of expected conformity to the norms of the group.

Now once you understand the nature of non-membership groups, it is for you to decide how and why you select some of these as reference groups. You need examples. Your engagement with your family members is much more than, say, with the members of a film club and so it is quite likely that, as far as the major decisions of life are concerned, not the film club, but your family is likely to serve as a reference group.

Likewise, a membership group which is not going to last for long (for instance, a class of undergraduate students which is not going to last for more than three years) is unlikely to be chosen as a reference group. But, instead, a group, which is, really going to last, a kinship, or a caste group, or a professional group, does indeed serve as a reference group. This is perhaps the reason why there are many for whom not their college friends (college is, after all, a temporary affair) but their caste or kinship groups play a decisive role in shaping their lives. A Brahmin boy, despite being a student of a modern institution, prefers to marry a Brahmin girl!

30.3.2 Selection of Non-membership Groups

You must understand why and under what circumstances men choose non-membership groups as their reference groups. According to Merton, there are primarily three factors. First, the selection of reference groups is largely governed by the capacity of certain groups to 'confer some prestige in terms of the institutional structure of that society'. This is simple. Not all groups are equally powerful or prestigious in the society. For instance, it has often been found that the university teachers in India often compare their lot with the IAS Officers. In other words, for the university teachers, the IAS officers become a reference group. The reason is simple. In terms of the institutional structure of modern Indian society, the IAS officers enjoy more power, more prestige than the university teachers do. The non-membership group that does not have much power or prestige hardly becomes a reference group.

Secondly, it has to be examined, what kind of people generally accept non-membership groups as their reference groups. As Merton says, it is generally the "isolates" in a group who may be particularly motivated to adopt the values of non-membership group as 'normative frames of reference'. The reason is obvious. The 'isolates', because of their sensitivity or rebelliousness or because of their intense urge for mobility, do not remain contented with the groups to which they belong. As a result, it is more likely that they would be stimulated to adopt the values of non-membership groups. For example, Merton speaks of 'the disenchanted member of the elite' who adopts the political orientation of a class less powerful than his own.

Thirdly, as has already been discussed, a 'social system with relatively high rate of social mobility' will tend to make far widespread orientation to non-membership groups as reference groups. This is naturally so for

only in an open system people come to know of groups other than their own and feel tempted to alter their positions continually.

Activity 2

Draw a list of possible reference individuals you may like to choose in order to give a new meaning to your life. For example, a film star, a politician, a cricketer, etc. Write a note of one page. Compare, if possible, your answer with those of other students at your Study Centre.

30.3.3 Variation in Reference Groups for Differing Values and Norms

Why do you choose a reference group? There may be many reasons. For instance, you choose the Gandhians as your reference group because you feel that the Gandhians are a dedicated lot and you accept their politico-economic ideals. But that does not mean that you give your consent to everything that the Gandhians do. You may not agree with their 'conservative' attitude towards life - brahmacharya, vegetarianism etc. Regarding your life-style, food habit or sexual morals, you may take the liberals as your reference group.

That is why, says Merton, "it should not be assumed that the same groups uniformly serve as reference groups for the same individuals in every phase of their behaviour"

So, ultimately, the choice of reference groups depends on the nature and quality of norms and values one is interested in. The group that serves as a reference group for one's political ideal may not have any meaning as far as one's religious ideals are concerned. It is, therefore, not difficult to see that the same individuals who vote for the Communist Party may have positive inclination towards a religious institution like the Ramakrishna Mission!

30.3.4 Selection of Reference Groups among Status-categories or Sub-groups involving Sustained Interaction

Think of a student's dilemma, having two identities. First, she is a member of a status category of students. Secondly, she is also a member of a sub-group along with her parents, husband, brothers, sisters and friends as co-members.

Now is it always reasonable to assume that the student's union may provoke her to boycott classes in defiance of her sub-group's opinions. Because of her direct and sustained interaction with the members of her sub-group - parents, husband, brothers, sisters and friends - she may eventually be convinced that it is not correct to boycott classes no matter what the provocation. In other words, not her status-category (student as a different group), but her sub-group becomes a reference group, as far as the question of student politics is concerned.

In other words, the selection of reference groups is complex. That is why, while speaking of voting behaviour, Merton says that a formal organisation

like a trade union as a whole serves as a potential reference group for only some members of the union, while for others immediate associates in the union serve as the reference function.

This, however, does not mean that a sub-group (a primary group such as, the family for instance) always serves as a reference group. Merton says when conflicting value orientations obtain in the primary group, its mediating role becomes lessened or even negligible and the influence of the larger society becomes much more binding.

You can perhaps experience the truth of this statement from your own life. There may be divergent opinions on love marriage in your own family. Your parents perhaps dislike it, your elder brother is ambivalent, and your sister gives her consent to it. Under these circumstances, it is quite likely that instead of relying on your own family, you tend to give your consent to what your generation thinks, the way young boys and girls like you think of marriage. This explains a phenomenon called '**generation gap**'.

Check Your Progress 3

i) What are the factors behind the selection of non-membership reference groups? Write in about five lines.

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ii) Is it true that a 'status-category' always serves as a reference group? State your reasons. Write in about five lines.

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30.4 STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF REFERENCE GROUPS

Not to know the structural elements of reference groups is to miss a great deal. Without this awareness you would not be able to appreciate the fullness of Robert Merton's contribution to the study of reference groups. He questions how, for example, the structure of a group allows its authorities and members to have knowledge, partial or complete of the norms, values and role-performance. Merton demonstrates how non-conformity to the in-group (which is not the same as deviant behaviour) shows the possibility

of non-membership groups serving as reference groups. Moreover, Merton clarifies how one minimises the degree of conflict resulting from the structural consequences of role-sets and status-sets.

30.4.0 Observability and Visibility: Patterned Avenues of Information about Norms, Values and Role-performance

It is quite obvious that while comparing one's lot with that of others one must have some knowledge of the situation in which those others find themselves. In other words, as Merton says, the theory of reference group behaviour must include some treatment of channels of communication through which this knowledge is gained.

Before you go further, think of a concrete situation. Suppose as a student you belong to an institution having its own norms and values. Naturally, you would like to behave and orient yourself according to the norms and values of that institution. The question you can no longer escape is whether your role-performance can be compared to that of others in the same institution.

But how do you really know how other group members are performing? How do you really know what sort of norms and values others have accepted? It is really difficult to have complete knowledge of these norms and of actual role-performances. Your own friends, other students or co-workers in the same institution may not always be willing to tell you what they are really doing and how seriously they take the norms and values of that institution. So it all depends on the structure of the group. Perhaps in a democratic or egalitarian group in which members are free and open, uninhibited communication is possible and it is easier to have knowledge of the actual happenings of the group. But does it always happen this way?

It is at this juncture that Merton raises an important point. Not everyone can have equal knowledge. Generally those in authority have substantial knowledge of these norms, far greater than those held by other individual members of the group. Merton believes this happens because both norms and role-performance have to be visible if the structure of authority is to operate effectively. The head of your institution and other authorities have access to a series of mechanisms through which they observe the students and have better knowledge of their actual role-performance.

Yet, Merton says, there is a limit to the degree of visibility and observability. There is also the "need for privacy". For example, the student members are likely to resist if the university authorities exceed their limits and try to keep themselves informed about every detail of student life. What is, therefore, needed is a "functionally optimum degree of visibility".

So, as you can see it is very difficult to have complete knowledge of the norms and values of a group as well as of the actual role-performance of its members. The impossibility of complete visibility is likely to make you somewhat skeptical or uncertain about the norms and values of the membership group.

Perhaps one tends to feel that there is a gap between the ideal and the real. But this uncertainty or disillusionment about one's own membership group does not prevail while one looks at non-membership groups. This is what is meant by the saying that the grass appears greener on the other side of the fence. Generally, the outsiders tend to develop unrealistic images of non-membership groups.

Think of a simple example. As non-members, there are many Indians who believe that the Americans have resolved all their problems, and that there is no scarcity, or corruption in America. But this is not true since we can tell from a closer look that American society too has its own problems. There is a high crime rate there with a rising rate of divorce, delinquency, etc.

30.4.1 Non-Conformity as Type of Reference Group Behaviour

The study of reference group is going to make you aware of another structural consequence, the impact of non-conformity.

First, you should understand what non-conformity is all about. Non-conformity to the norms of an in-group is equivalent to conformity to the norms of an out-group. But, as Merton says, non-conformity should not be equated with deviant behaviour. There are many differences between the two.

First, unlike the criminal, the non-conformist announces his dissent. Secondly, the non-conformist is not an opportunist. They challenge the legitimacy of the norms and expectations and reject them. But the criminal does not have the courage to reject their legitimacy. He does not agree that theft is right and murder virtuous, he or she simply finds it expedient to violate the norms and evade them. Thirdly, the non-conformists believe that they are gifted with a 'higher morality' and want to alter the norms of the group accordingly. The criminal does not have, however, any such vision of morality.

The experiences of the non-conformists in the context of non-membership reference groups are likely to have structural implications for the membership group. In Merton's view, the non-conformists are often considered to be 'masters'. They are felt to have courage and have demonstrated the capacity to run large risks.

The fact that the non-conformist "tends to elicit some measure of respect" implies that the membership group begins to become uncertain about itself, about its norms, and values. The non-conformists conformity to the non-membership group is the beginning of conflict and tension in the membership group. It is in this regard that one can say that the non-conformists with their conformity to the non-membership reference group begin to initiate the possibility of change and conflict in their own membership group.

30.4.2 Role-sets, Status-sets and Status Sequences

The study of reference group behaviour needs an understanding of the dynamics of role-sets, status-sets and status-sequences. Suppose, for

example, the teachers as a reference group attracts you, and you intend to become a teacher. Not surprisingly then, you should try to understand what the status of a teacher implies, the kind of people he or she has to continually interact with, the difficulties involved in the process of fulfilling his or her responsibility.

It is in this context that Merton speaks of role-sets. Merton says that a particular social status involves not a single associated role, but an array of associated roles. This is called role-set. For example, the single status of a teacher entails not only the role of a teacher in relation to the students, but also an array of other roles relating the occupant of that status to other teachers, the authorities, the parents of the students, etc.

An understanding of role-sets is important. It makes you realise how difficult it is to satisfy everyone in the role-set. It is in this context that Merton speaks of, 'structural sources of instability in the role-set'. The basic source of disturbance in the role-set is the structural circumstance that anyone occupying a particular status has role-partners who are 'differently located in the social structure'. A teacher's role-set, for example includes not solely his or her professional colleagues, but also the influential members of the school board. Now what the influential members of the school board expect from the teacher need not coincide with what the professional colleagues expect from the teacher. And this is the source of conflict.

But Merton says that there are ways to minimise the degree of conflict. First, not all role-partners are equally concerned with the behaviour of those in a particular social status, so the occupant of a particular status need not bother much about the expectations of those who are not directly involved.

Secondly, the occupant of a status does not engage in continuous interaction with all those in his or her role-set. For instance, while teaching in the classroom the teacher is engaged only with the students, not with other members of the role-set. This 'exemption from observability', as Merton would argue, helps the teacher to avoid a conflict that may emerge because of divergent expectations from role-partners.

Thirdly, the occupant of a social status is not alone, there are many like him or her. And as Merton says, occupational and professional associates constitute a structural response to the problems of coping with the power structure and with the conflicting demands made by those in the role-set of the status.

Not solely role-sets, even status-sets constitute a problem that needs to be understood in- the context of reference group theory. But what is a status-set?

The same individual may find himself or herself in different statuses: teacher, husband, mother, father, brother, sister, political worker etc. This complement of social statuses of an individual may be designated as his or her status-set. Each of the statuses in turn has its distinctive role-set.

The fact that one occupies not a single status, but a status-set makes one's task difficult. It is not always possible to reconcile the demands of all the statuses one is occupying. For instance, a politician, because of his commitment to a larger public cause may not do Justice to his other statuses, the status of a husband or the status of a father. Therefore if for instance, the politicians become your reference group, then you must know of the conflict inherent in the status-set of a politician and the possible ways by which such conflict could be resolved.

Merton suggests that there are many ways of avoiding the tension in the status-set. First, people are not perceived by others as occupying only one status. Even an employer, Merton would argue understands that an employee is not just an employee, he is a father, a husband, and a son. That is why, an employee who is known to have experienced a death in his immediate family is held to "less demanding occupational requirements".

Secondly, there is something called empathy, which helps you to sympathetically understand the lot of others. Empathy serves to reduce the pressures exerted upon people caught up in conflicts of status obligations. Because everyone faces the same problem as they all have a status-set, there is a sense of shared destiny, which facilitates the development of empathy.

Thirdly, the components of status-set are not combined at random. This form of combination reduces the possibility of conflict. According to Merton, "Values internalised by people in prior dominant statuses are such as to make it less likely that they will be motivated to enter statuses with values incompatible with their own".

This is an interesting point to note in the context of reference group theory. An example would make it clear. Suppose you are born and brought up in a family with a culture of learning. Let us understand that because of this family socialisation you become a scholar. Now it is unlikely that with such a background, you would choose to become an army officer because you realise how difficult it would be to reconcile your two statuses, the status of an army officer and the status of a scholar. Perhaps you would like to become a professor and then it would not be difficult for you to reconcile your two statuses, the status of a professor and the status of a scholar! In other words, behind the choice of a reference individual or the desire to occupy a status lies a design, a symmetry. So all statuses in the status-set need not necessarily be in conflict with one another.

Check Your Progress 4

i)   Why does Merton say that a 'non-conformist' is not a criminal? Write in about six lines.

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ii) Which of the following statements are true?

a) All role-partners remain equally concerned with the behaviour of those in a particular social status.

b) It is empathy that, to a large extent, reduces the pressures exerted upon people caught up in conflicts of status obligations.

c) The components of a status-set are necessarily combined at random.

30.5 LET US SUM UP

To conclude we can safely say that the study of the reference group behaviour is important chiefly because

i) it helps you to understand when and why men compare their lot with that of others and, how this helps to shape their behaviour, life-styles, and role-performances.

ii) it helps you to understand when and how membership and non-membership groups serve the function of reference groups.

iii) it helps you to examine the structural consequences and implications of reference group behaviour, how a relatively open social system stimulates men and women to choose non-membership groups as their reference groups and, as a result, how non-conformity to the in-group causes the possibility of change, conflict and further mobility.

30.6 KEYWORDS

Colonial Masters   The colonisers often think that they are great masters, great educators; it is their duty to 'civilise' the world! That is 'the white man's burden'

Generation Gap   Sociologically speaking, it means the conflict between the young and the old, how their values, morals, ideals differ.

Worldview   Generally, it is assumed that each social group, be it a gender group or a caste or a class or an ethnic group or a nationality, has its own distinctive ways of looking at the world. As a result, one's worldview implies one's political attitude, religious belief, cultural ideal - in short a set of ideas about the world and the society. Worldviews differ from group to group and helps in distinguishing one group from the other.

30.7   FURTHER READING

Merton, Robert K., 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure.* Free Press: New York

Turner, J.H., 1987. *Structure of Sociological Theory.* Rawat Publications: Jaipur

30.8   SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i)   If a human being compares his or her destiny with others - as they often do it is quite likely that, at times, they may feel relatively deprived because others may look happier, more powerful, more prestigious than they may. An example is the experience of a bright Indian scientist who, while comparing his lot with another Indian scientist settled in the United States, begins to feel deprived of many infrastructural facilities conducive to research.

ii) When a college teacher in order to evaluate his status, power or prestige in the society compares himself with the IAS officers, he, as Merton would argue, is choosing a non-membership group as his reference group.

Check Your Progress 2

i)   C

ii) A positive reference group is one that a person accepts with admiration and, accordingly, internalises its values and norms. But a negative reference group is one that a person hates and rejects and, instead of accepting its norms, evolves counter-norms to distinguish his or her separate identity.

Check Your Progress 3

i)   When a non-membership group appears to acquire more power and prestige in terms of the institutional structure of the society, it is selected as a reference group. Moreover, the isolates, i.e., those who feel discontented and marginalised within their membership groups are provoked on account of this alienation to select non-membership groups as their reference groups.

ii) No, it is not true that a 'status-category' always serves as a reference group. As Merton demonstrates, a status-category, being too large and too impersonal may not always have a direct impact on its members. Instead, a sub-group, which is characterised by sustained interaction among its member is likely to be accepted as a reference group.

Check Your Progress 4

i)   A non-conformist is not a criminal because, unlike a criminal, a non-conformist does not hide his or her dissent or disagreement. While a criminal is weak and is an opportunist, a non-conformist is courageous enough to challenge the norms and values he/she rejects and questions their legitimacy. Moreover, unlike a criminal, a non-conformist is gifted with a 'higher morality' out of which he/she intends to create a new value system.

ii) b

UNIT 31 CRITIQUE OF PARSONS AND MERTON

Structure

31.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you will be able to give a critique of Parsons and Merton on such themes as their

- perspective on sociology

- functional approach of social analysis

- understanding of social system and social structure

- sociological theory and social change.

31.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous four units you have learnt about the contributions of Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton. You learnt about the concept of social systems and about functionalism and social change as enunciated by Parsons in Units 27 and 28. In Units 29 and 30 you learnt about Merton's concept of latent and manifest function and of his theory of reference group.

In this unit you will be presented with a comparative critique of Parsons and Merton on some selected areas, in their functional approach. The varying perspective of Parsons and Merton in their study of sociology is discussed in sub-section 31.2.0. The similarities and differences between Parsons and Merton in respect of their approach to functionalism are discussed in sub-section 31.2.1. The sub-section 31.2.2 explains their views regarding the concept of social system and social structure. Finally, sub-section 31.2.3 gives a general perspective on how Parsons and Merton understand sociological theory and social change.

31.2 PARSONS AND MERTON: A CRITIQUE

You have read about some important sociological contributions made by Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton. Both of them are considered to be the two most outstanding American sociologists who have left a lasting mark on our understanding of concepts, theories and methods of sociology. Both of them give us an insight, through their contributions, into the mainstream concerns of American sociology during the decades 1940s to 1960s. It was a historical stage in the developments in sociology when American contributions held a sway over most of the traditions of sociology in Europe, Latin America and the Asian countries. Though Parsons and Merton were contemporaries and shared many common concerns in sociology, they were drawn into this discipline from different traditions and backgrounds. Moreover, their styles were different as also the scope of their concerns with social problems and social theory. Their views, too, on the role and relevance of sociology in contemporary world were quite divergent.

In order to have an understanding of some of these commonalities and differences in the contributions of the two sociologists, especially in the context of what you have studied in the previous four units (i.e., Units 27, 28, 29 and 30), the discussion has been organised around selected themes. The themes selected are perspective on sociology, functional approach, social system and social structure, and the sociological theory and social change. Let us now discuss each of these themes separately.

31.2.0 Perspective on Sociology

The common elements in the perspective on sociology in the writings of Parsons and Merton are that both considered sociology to be a scientific discipline. This meant that sociologists not only had a set of concepts and hypotheses about social structure and change but that these hypotheses were also subjected to continual tests. Subjected to, in order to establish their validity through objective empirical studies. For this sociology used it's own specialised methods. Sociological studies were therefore explanatory and also diagnostic, i.e., they could also identify problems. The emphasis in the writings of Parsons and Merton on the scientific character of sociology has been criticised by many later sociologists as 'positivism'. These later authors accuse the two sociologists of neglecting the unique historical and symbolic features of social reality which require entirely different methods of study than what is available through empirical methods of science. In particular, they attack the implicit assumption in Parsons and Merton that there exists a similarity between a biological system and a social system.

Activity 1

Read the newspapers of the past one week. Keeping in mind the various socio-political events taking place in the country, write a note of about two pages on 'The Role of Consensus or Agreement and Role of Conflict in the Contemporary Indian Society'. Keep in mind Parsons' and Merton's functionalist approach of social analysis and state in this note whether you agree or disagree with this approach.

Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

Apart from these elements in the perspective on sociology which are common in the writings of the two sociologists you will also notice differences in their vision, of sociology. Parsons has a universal and general approach to theory in sociology. His conceptual schemes are more abstract and relatively free from the limitations of space and time. Merton, on the other hand, takes a more modest view of sociological theory. His emphasis is on specific and not universal questions of theory and methodology. For instance, Merton illustrates his application of sociological theory to such specific issues as "reference group", "anomie" or "nature of science". Parsons on the other hand talks of a "general theory of action".

31.2.1 Functional Approach

Both Parsons and Merton have followed a functional approach of analysis in their sociology. But functionalism as dealt with by Merton is located in time and space. It deals with empirical reality. He particularly draws our attention to the reasons why functional theories of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski which were formulated to deal with the realities of a simpler tribal society, isolated from rest of the world, could not be applied to contemporary societies of our own time which are complex and where historical traditions have overlapped on social institutions over several centuries. Therefore, Merton says that an institution such as religion, which is universally integrative in simpler tribal societies, may cause disharmony in our own society where there are many religions, which often compete against one another. So religion instead of being functional (integrative), may become dysfunctional (disintegrative) in society. Similarly his concepts of latent and manifest functions are also based on the historical experience of modern society. Parsons on the other hand does not take such a specific or historical view on the issues of functionalism. His concepts of functional prerequisites such as "adaptation", "goal-orientation", "integration" and "latency" which you have studied in Unit 27 are independent of time or place. They are general and a historical, that is, they are found in all societies at any point of time.

Functionalism of Parsons and Merton have been criticised by many sociologists for their various limitations. One of the major limitations pointed out by critics is the over-dependence of functionalism on the assumption that a social system is based on principles of agreement or consensus. Functionalism thus assumes that all institutions largely reflect values and goals, which are commonly accepted by most of the members of the society. It thus neglects aspects of dissent and conflict in the social system. Marxist sociologists criticise functionalism for its neglect of class conflict or class antagonism that exist in society. Political sociologists have criticised it for neglecting the role of power and domination in the structure and function of social institutions. But the main drawback in functionalism is not of total omission of these issues because both Merton, and also Parsons, deal with aspects of dissent and conflict in society. What is neglected perhaps is the balance in the role played by both consensus and conflict in society. This is a question, which remains largely unresolved in their sociological theory.

Check Your Progress 1

i)   Fill in the blanks.

a)   Both Parsons and Merton considered sociology to be a …………………………. discipline.

b)   Their emphasis on scientific character of sociology has been criticised as …………………………

c)   In their vision of sociology, Parsons has a much more …………………….. and ………………………… approach to theory while Merton has emphasised the ………………………….. questions of theory and methodology.

d)   The Marxist sociologists have criticised Parsons' and Merton's functionalism for its neglect of the class ……………………….. in society.

ii) Compare and contrast Parsons' and Merton's functional approach of analysis. Use about seven lines.

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31.2.2 Social System and Social Structure

Both Parsons and Merton have dealt with the concepts of "role", "status", "social structure", "social system",' "group" and so on. These are the basic units for understanding the nature of society. But you will notice behind this commonality there lies a subtle difference between the approaches of the two sociologists. This difference is probably due to the difference in their vision of sociology. For Merton the basic problem in sociology is to utilise the conceptual packages of sociology and its methods for the understanding of social problems. These problems can be more clearly resolved given the existing state of theory in sociology. Therefore, he is more modest and specific in his analysis of social structures, as we found in his theory of "reference group". Like Parsons, Merton takes not only social but also psychological factors into account in defining social structure, status and role. Particularly you may have noticed his emphasis on the psychological element in the membership of a group (marginality and centrality), or again in his concept of "anticipatory socialisation". Parsons also places a lot of emphasis on motivational orientation in his understanding of social action.

But unlike Parsons' general and highly abstract approach to the understanding of social system, Merton talks of theories of the "middle

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range". In middle range theories conceptual abstractions emerge from the need to understand certain concrete empirical situations. There is no presumption in this case of providing an overall theoretical scheme for societies in general.

31.2.3 Sociological Theory and Social Change

Considerable importance is given, both by Parsons and Merton, to the role of theory in sociology and what should be the nature of such theories. Merton approaches the problem more cautiously emphasising the need for limitations of empirical verification of hypotheses. He cautions sociologists not to indulge in too general or abstract constructions of theory. Such a view of theory neither has a clearly defined sets of hypotheses nor the tools for their empirical verification. For this reason Merton does not favour a general theory in sociology but prefers the "middle range theory" instead, which is of a limited but well-defined nature and covers a specific problem of study. The "reference group theory" that you have studied in Unit 30 is a good example of this kind of theory. According to Merton, tools of logical classification called paradigms are necessary steps in constructing such theories of the middle range.

Parsons on the other hand treats theory in a very general and abstract manner. He favours a rigorous logical method of classification of concepts such as you studied in his formulation of "pattern variables" or "types of orientations" in Unit 27. He considers a general and universally applicable theory possible in sociology, which can be applied to any society at any period of time. This is particularly so in the understanding and analysis of social system. However, in the analysis of social change, and especially when he discusses the evolutionary universals he is talking about specific societies at different evolutionary stages in history. Also when he is talking about types of social systems he is referring to specific societies. Yet these specificities do not stand on their own but are part of a broader and more general scheme. Evolutionary universal, for instance, tells us of the stately progression of stages through which all societies must necessarily pass at different points of time. His delineation of different types of social systems also rests on his abstract and general formulations of pattern variables.

The explanatory sweep in Parsons' general theory of action is indeed very vast ranging from the study of personality systems to the examination of social systems and cultural systems. This indeed covers the total gamut of social reality. Parsons' view of theory is also cross-disciplinary with relevance not only for sociology but also for psychology, political science, economics, cultural anthropology and other social science disciplines. His perspective on theory therefore is much wider than that of Merton.

This is also true in respect of the analysis of social change. Parsons makes a distinction between "changes in systems" and "changes of systems". He puts forward his analysis of both these aspects of change, as you have already studied in Unit 28.

Merton on the other hand takes into account mainly the changes in social structure. He does not, like Parsons, propose a direction of "evolutionary universals" in the process of systemic social transformation. However, in the analysis of changes within social systems on which both Parsons and

Merton focus, there is much commonality of approach. Both sociologists explain changes within the social system as arising out of "strain" or pressure on members of groups in society to constantly relocate their roles and statuses. Role and status mobility arises out of tension of redefinition of aspirations, which Merton called "anticipatory socialisation". According to Parsons strain arises because of conflicting motivational orientations in the context of a plurality of interests. Thus essentially both Parsons and Merton share a common view of why there is a continual tendency in social systems or social structures for internal differentiation and social change. Parsons, however, also brings in the forces of social movement and mobilisation of interest groups to bear upon the processes of social change. He in addition attempts to advance a general evolutionary direction of social change through a set of stages of transformation as you studied in Unit 28. Merton has largely ignored such aspects in his study of social change

Check Your Progress 2

i) Discuss the main similiarities and differences between Parsons and Merton in their study of social system and social structure Use about seven lines

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ii) Fill in the blanks

a) According to Merton constructing too general and abstract theories neither has clearly defined sets of hypotheses nor the tools for their ………………………... verification

b) He feels that testing a single hypothesis does not lead to ……………………. of theory in sociology

c) Tools of logical classification called ………………….. are necessary steps in constructing thrones of the middle range, according to Merton

d) Parsons favours a rigorous ………………… method of classification of concepts, such as his concept of ………………………….. .

e) Parsons' general and abstract theory is best illustrated by his general theory of ……………………….. .

f) Unlike Merton, Parsons has also discussed changes of social systems through his …………………… universals

31.3   LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have read the critique of Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton on such selected themes as

i)   their perspective on sociology

ii)   their functional approach

iii)   their understanding of the concept of social system and social structure and finally

iv)   their sociological theory and social change.

Both Parsons and Merton considered sociology to be a scientific discipline. But both of them had a different vision of sociology. Parsons' approach is much more universal and general than Merton's is. Merton's approach is much more empirical and application oriented than Parsons' formulations. In their functional analysis too they had a lot of similarity. Yet, Merton's approach is time and space bound while Parsons' is universal and can be applied to any social system at any point of time.

In this unit you have learnt about the common ways in which both Parsons and Merton have studied social systems and social structure. Both studied concepts of role, status, social structure, etc. However, Parsons gives a general abstract theory while Merton provides a theory of the "middle range". Finally, both of them have a theory of social change. Parsons described social change within the social system as well as change of social systems. Merton however, has given theory of social change within the system and has largely ignored the changes of social systems

31.4   KEYWORDS

Ahistorical	It refers to any aspect of knowledge, which is not rooted in time or place and therefore has no history.
Diagnostic	The process of deciding the nature of a diseased condition by examining the symptoms. In this context the reference is made to social diseases or problems.
Hypothesis	A theory or a proposition, which is tentatively accepted to explain certain facts and which is not yet verified.
Methodology	It refers to the study of methods, such as the tools and techniques of conducting research in sociology.
Positivism	A term originally used by Auguste Comte (1798-1857) refers to two facts. First that it takes natural sciences, such as Physics, Chemistry, Biology etc. as the paradigm of human knowledge. Second that it involves taking a particular view of natural sciences.
Vision	It refers to the mental image that Parsons and Merton had of sociology, which includes their perspective on sociology and also what they expected from it.

31.5   FURTHER READING

Hamilton, Peter, 1983. *Talcott Parsons.* Routledge: London and New York

Turner, J.H., 1987. *The Structure of Sociological Theory.* Rawat Publications, 4th Edition Jaipur

31.6   SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) a) scientific

b) positivism

c) universal, general, specific

d) antagonism

ii) In both Parsons and Merton functionalism assumes that there is similarity between a biological system and social system. But while Merton deals with functionalism in a more specific way, which is both time and space bound or rooted in empirical reality Parsons' functionalism is highly abstract and general. For instance, his functional prerequisites of a social system, namely, Adaptation, goal-orientation, integration and latency are not time and place bound. They are found in all social systems at alt points of time.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Parsons' and Merton's concepts of social system and social structure have certain similarities. They both use concepts like role, status, groups etc. and considered psychological factors in their analysis of social behaviour. For example, Parsons used "motivational orientations" and Merton used "anticipatory socialisation". However, they differ in their approach to the study of social system and social structure. Parsons is general and highly abstract, while Merton is modest and specific in the development of his theory.

ii) a) empirical

b) verification

c) paradigm

d) logical, pattern-variables

e) action

f) evolutionary

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