

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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An Introduction to Structural Functionalism

Welcome back to the class. In the previous classes, we had a rather detailed discussion about Marxian perspective in the study of Indian society. And at the risk of repeating myself, let me reiterate that within the sociological tradition of India, there have been multiple approaches, there have been multiple theoretical frameworks or perspectives used by scholars. All of them or each one of them based on different epistemological and methodological basis. And this is something became inevitable because sociology as a discipline itself was founded and later developed on multiple theoretical frameworks. Each one of them putting forward its own versions of social reality, its own versions of objectivity, its own versions of comprehending the social reality.

So we had a discussion about Indological approach. We had a discussion about Marxian approach, where both approach a given reality or given context called as Indian society from very, very different perspectives. If Indology privileged the written text, the ancient text, the Marxian approach kind of looked into the material basis, especially the economic realm of a society and almost kind of a discarded the significance of culture, significance of religion, significance of the kind of a civilizational continuity which the Indological tradition tried to uphold. So now we are coming to another, yet another, maybe the most important or the most influential theoretical influence or theoretical perspective which is still to a large extent is influential in Indian sociology, that is a structural functionalism.

So this is again the mainstay of anthropology to large extent at least till 1960s and 70s and it continues even today in India. And this was a very, very important theoretical tradition in the US till 1960s though qualitatively the structural functional perspective within sociology and anthropology are different. But when it comes to India society, structural functionalism was very important framework to the analysis of India society, more specifically that of caste, religion and family. Some of the most well-known names of Indian sociology which we are going to discuss today or in the coming class including M.N. Srinivas and others were the direct proponents of structural functionalism. Their

studies were heavily influenced by this particular theoretical framework and resultantly it provided a specific understanding, a specific version of Indian social reality which of course came under heavy criticism from various other perspectives.

So it is a very, very fascinating thing to look at what this theory in general offers as an abstract system of propositions and how that was utilized in the Indian context, in the very specific Indian context and for that we have a rather elaborate discussion on M.N. Srinivas, one of the doyen of Indian sociology, maybe one of the most important figures, celebrated Indian scholars, M.N. Srinivas. We have two sessions devoted to analyze his contributions and then critically look at his work. So, before getting into that as I have done in the previous classes, let us try to have some idea about, some very broad and kind of preliminary understanding about what the structural functionalism mean. So as again a very broad background of this presentation, these are, we will have some general discussion about the social systems theories which were a series of theories that emerge along with the emergence of discipline which looked at society in the form of a system, a complex system which is constituted by subsystems and then with a very specific structure. So, all the important people or at least the majority of the important people starting with Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx and Weber, they were all kind of proponents of this particular system theory.

Though, their orientations were different, for example the way Marx understood system was very different from the way Durkheim understood and the way they understood about, their approach towards social stability were very, very different. But nevertheless, all of them, all the scholars had some kind of a preoccupation to understand society as a system as composed of different parts joined together and thereby with a very specific clearer understanding about a structure and a system, we will discuss that. And then we will also discuss its trajectory and its evolution in the discipline of anthropology where this particular framework was modified and then used extensively especially in the British anthropological tradition propounded by Radcliffe Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski and Evans Pritchard is also another important figure in that. So, we look into that and then finally we look into, very briefly look into American sociological tradition of Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton and though these two scholars are of less significance or less importance to Indian society or Indian sociology because Indian sociology has been heavily influenced by the British anthropological tradition. And that is, it is not a surprising fact because India was a colony of Britain and many of these Indian scholars including Srinivas and others were trained in some of the leading British universities and they were the students of some of these very important leading figures of social anthropology back then.

So Indian sociology heavily inherited the British legacy of anthropology and that is

what we are going to look into that. So, some of the very early concerns of sociology when it emerged was this question, how is society possible? Because you must be knowing that when we talk about the socio-historical and cultural context in which sociologists discipline emerged, it emerged as a modern discipline, it emerged with modernity, it emerged in the 18th and 20th century which so unprecedented social transformations in the social fabric of European societies especially that of the Western European societies. So, the society was transforming from a feudal agrarian society into a capitalist industrial society. As we have discussed several times, this particular transition was something so fundamental. It was a comprehensive transition; it was a fundamental transformation because it transformed the cultural and structural realms of the society.

The new social emerged. I think we have discussed it several times. The social emerged as a new sphere, as an independent sphere which deserved to be studied, which required to be studied independently. So that is why sociology emerged as a discipline, not as a residual discipline or not as a residual category of other social sciences but as a discipline with its own standing, with its own subject matter, with its own epistemological and methodological basis. So, some of the fundamental concerns of this early founding fathers of sociology starting with Montesquieu, then Auguste Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, they were all concerned with this question how is this society possible.

In a traditional society we could say that they were all bound together by the ethos of tradition, they were all bound together by the force of tradition but when a modern society presented a very different picture. In a modern society it is all individuals to a large extent, many of the traditional ties were broken but you see individuals, hundreds of millions of individuals living together with some kind of stability, with some kind of an order, with some kind of a status quo. The society was not always in utter chaos, there was not violence all the time. So, they were very much fascinated by this question how the society is possible and what holds the society together. So, there must be something that is holding the society together and it is not tradition definitely then what is that it is holding the society together and what explains the social integration and disintegration.

So this became a very, very important question because there is some sort of integration is possible otherwise society should have fallen apart though society is seen as a collection of individuals, it has some kind of a cohesiveness, it has some kind of an integration. So, what is that holding the society together and at times what is causing disintegration and how to understand and manage change and moral order of society. So, this was a fundamental concern for early sociologists, this was a fundamental concern for sociologists like Durkheim who was preoccupied with this particular question what holds

society together. So, I hope those who have done course on classical sociology will remember his arguments about collective conscience, his argument about social solidarity. How different forms of social solidarity exist in societies characterized by organic solidarity and societies characterized by mechanical solidarity.

So his argument about modern society being characterized by an organic solidarity and how that is constituted or that is constructed through extreme form of division of labour. So, these are all very, very important fundamental assumptions within sociology. So, this was also the time when sociology as a discipline was heavily influenced by biology and starting with Auguste Comte and then the arguments about the similarities between looking at a living organism and looking at a human society. So that is understood as a kind of an organismic understanding of society, there is the organismic analogy when it comes to Herbert Spencer. So, there was a major concern or between the kind of a similarity between social organism and a biological organism.

So society was compared with a living organism maybe of an advanced individual or a mammal or a human being and then try to see the kind of a similarities and then differences. And sociology and biology as examples of true sciences and again you know that sociology was conceived of in the initial periods as a true science. It was seen as a positive science because the founding fathers believed that sociology really represents all the best qualities of a science. Auguste Comte called sociology as a social physics. So, there was a preoccupation about comparing sociology with biology.

So this connection with biological influence was something very heavy, was very important. So, for example Herbert Spencer really represents the most important influence in that particular you know group when it comes to Durkheim that influence comes down. Even in Comte it was not as much as in the case of Herbert Spencer the British sociologist. So, he talks, he argues that there are three basic realms in the world. One is inorganic realm that is you know physical, chemical and the physical, the material realm of the world.

Second is the organic realm which is at a higher level which is constitutive of the biological and psychological realm where you see that you can put all human beings and other animals together which really represents the kind of biological realm. And the third one is the kind of a superorganic or sociological realm. So, the superorganic realm according to Spencer is the space where you are talking about human societies where people come together and they, a collection of thousands of individuals constitutes a society of its own kind, a society of its own nature. So, his basic assumption was these three basic realms. And then he went on theorizing about this kind of an organismic analogy where you know the kind of a comparison between living organism and the

society.

So he argued that there are a lot of similarities between organic and superorganic bodies, the development of an animal and the development of a society has a lot of common things in common. For example, he would say increase in size. When an individual grows it increases in its size and there is internal differentiation. There is internal differentiation because when an organism grows what happens in the body as you know that from an embryo, from single cell, a primate or a human being or any other advanced animal it develops into a highly differentiated entity with different organs with a highly complex network systems of vessels, bones and then you know a large organism is a very, very complex organism. So, he argued that there is a similarity between that development of biological development and that of a social development of a society evolving from a very simple society to a more complex society and integration through mutual dependence being a systemic whole etc.

And he also argued that when a society you know develops there is the quality or the degree of interdependence also increases. The different sections or different parts of the society begin to integrate better and there is an increase mutual dependency and then you look at society as a systemic whole as in the case of an organism. An organism you know, an organism is much more than the sum total of its individual parts. A human body is not of course though it is comprised of different organs, a human body in its totality is much more than that. We know how different organs in human body work together, why each one of them does its own specialized duties, how when they come together, they depend on each other and then as a result human being is able to produce some of the most complex and complicated jobs in the world.

His notion of requisite functionalism, a set of qualities necessary for those bodies to adapt to environment and to ensure basic survival. Now here comes some of the very important features, some of the very important core ideas of functionalism. Certain kind of ideas that for an organism to live or for a society to survive it should meet, it should fulfill certain basic needs. Only when these basic needs are met an organism, or a society will be able to survive. So that is a very, very controversial argument because it has been criticized for being teleological and I am not getting into those complex arguments.

So his notion of a requisite functionalism, a set of qualities necessary for these bodies to adapt to the environment and to ensure basic survival. And you must be knowing that by this time the influence of Darwinian understanding of evolution was very evident among theorists. So, the theory of evolution was understood, and it was adapted and this whole argument about this, about the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest though it was coined by Spencer, it was later, so the kind of a connection between Darwin and

social scientist became very, very prominent. So, there were certain notions of universal needs for identifying these people and one was the securing and circulating of resources, very important for every society as well as every human being or even every organism. You need to secure, and you need to circulate your resources and then you need to produce usable substances basically to survive and regulating and integrating internal activities through power and symbols.

Another very, very important aspect about any society. You need to have regulating mechanisms, you need to have mechanisms that integrate every part, every sections of the society and they must be regulated through power and symbols. Power could be brute power or physical power, physical violence, or threat of violence but as you know many times it is not sustainable. You cannot really run a society always on the basis of threat of violence or use of violence, it becomes unsustainable. And on the other hand, certain traditional beliefs, certain religious beliefs, certain other customary beliefs, they are more powerful, they are more powerful, they are more potential, they have more potential in terms of providing as powerful symbols that are able to control the activities of human beings.

And then coming to Emile Durkheim, you find more elaboration of this particular argument, his argument about division of labour, a very, very fundamental argument of Durkheim, very seminal contribution of Durkheim when he talks about the transition of society from a simple undifferentiated society to a more differentiated society. So, one of his very revolutionary or fundamental argument is that society as *Sui Generis*, society has its own existence and cannot be reduced to the constituent parts. So, one of his very important revolutionary argument is that when people come together and then constitute themselves as a society, what emerges is much beyond the sum total of their coming together or a society has its own existence, it cannot be reduced to the individual. It is a very, very fascinating and provocative argument. A society is not reduced to the sum total of individuals, it is much more than that, it has its own entity.

Though society is constituted by the people, once it gets constituted, it gets much more relevant and significant than the people who constitute that. So that is why his very famous arguments about social facts and other things come into picture. Social facts are products of human beings, but once they are produced, it exerts kind of a cohesive influence on you. You as an individual, you will not be able to fight these social facts because it has become, it has evolved its own existence. And then Durkheim goes on to argue about the system parts as fulfilling certain basic functions needs or prerequisites.

So similar to Spencer's argument, he also talks about how the system, society as a system composed of different parts, how each of these parts are supposed to perform

specific functions as a kind of a need for prerequisite, functional prerequisite. Functional needs and notions of normal and pathological. And this is another very, very important argument, very important and of course been criticized severely by Durkheim is that there are certain functional needs and there are certain normal and pathological functioning of society. A pathological thing, for example, Durkheim would argue that increase in crime rate. At the same time, please keep in mind that he argues that every crime does a function in society.

Every crime contributes or the crime as a category contributes for the sustenance of a society, but if the crime rate goes beyond a point, then he could consider it as pathological. So, he has this very idea about what is good for society, what is bad for society. So that is why he is seen as a functionalist who does not approve of too much of radical and rapid changes and like say, for example, a person like Marx. So, notions of equilibrium where normalcy is maintained. So, all these structural functionalists were preoccupied with this whole question of equilibrium or status quo.

So they were concerned with the question of status quo, how that a society is able to maintain itself, how that society is able to maintain a kind of a balance or an equilibrium or a status quo and Durkheim also was heavily preoccupied or concerned with that. Then we move to anthropological tradition. One of the most important proponents of anthropological tradition is A.R. Radcliffe Brown, British anthropologist, passed away in 1955 and who has conducted a series of anthropological explorations among different tribes and then Malinowski, then Evan Pritchard.

So these three are considered to be very important founding fathers of anthropological tradition in the UK. So, see he talks about the necessary conditions for survival is minimal integration of parts. So, he talks about the question about how a society is composed of different parts and how each of these parts must be exhibiting certain kind of a minimal integration. So, the attention now shifts from these particular individual parts to the way in which they are integrated with each other. So how for example how the kinship system in a society, in a tribal society, how this particular kinship rules and regulations are functioning as an integrative force among the society along with that of production, that of political control, that of religion, that of education, that of other socialization.

So how different parts of society are integrated together and so that there is a kind of equilibrium or there is a kind of a integration for the whole society. So, his focus was on the kind of minimal integration of parts. Then function refers to those processes that maintain necessary integration or solidarity. This is another very, very central argument of structural functionalist.

Function does not mean what it does. So, it does not mean what it does, rather function in structural functionalism understood as the positive contribution rendered for the maintenance of order. The positive contribution rendered for the maintenance of the equilibrium and dysfunctional means for example in the common parlance we say that that is a dysfunctional switch. So, what does it mean? It means that switch does not function, it is a dysfunctional switch. But in structural functional theory, dysfunctional element is something that contributes negatively to the social integration. It does not mean that it is not working but rather it is working against the social integration of a society or social equilibrium of a society.

So every society structural features can be shown to contribute to the solidarity. So, their analysis shifted into trying to understand how different elements of a society, for example their norms, their traditional values, their totems, their kinship systems, their political systems, how each of the systems contribute to the solidarity of that particular society. And another very important person as I told you is again is Bronislaw Malinowski, British anthropologist who introduced two analytical categories, notions of system levels and notions of multiple or different system needs at each level. So, he talks about that every society you must be able to look at different system levels and under each of the system levels you must be able to look at the multiple different system needs at each level. Certain things are biological which are necessary for the very basic survival including food and other things and then social structural and then symbolic.

So the symbolic ones are the ones which are about religion, about authority, about supernatural beliefs and other things. So, he argued that these three must be met at the, are the survival requisites at each system levels. So, in general I hope you must have got an idea that anthropologists were concerned about how a society survives, how a society maintains its equilibrium at different differentiated levels. And functional requisites at structural system levels are for production and distribution of goods, something we are as a basic element of every survival story of a society. Every society must be able to produce and distribute goods and then social control of behaviour.

Every society will have certain mechanism through which its behaviour of the people are controlled and educational people in traditional skills to ensure social continuity and then organization and execution of authority. Again, these are something vital, you need to have a very clearer idea about the authority structure in a society, what is accepted behaviour, what is not accepted behaviour. So, all these things must be very clear. So, he talks about the functional requisites. And functional requisites at cultural or symbolic level according to Malinowski, symbols that provide information necessary to adjust to the environment.

Or knowledge systems about how you as a society must be able to adapt themselves to the society. Symbols that provide sense of control over people's destiny and over chance events. This is about how the symbolic world is necessary to provide certain kind of sense of control to the people and certain explanations on chance events. For example, when somebody dear to you dies in a community and you are emotionally disturbed or you are emotionally shattered, then how are you to be consoled? How that somebody or the elderly people of the group are able to convince you that okay in spite of this great loss to you personally, there is certain positive things associated with that. So, every community requires such kind of stories, such kind of myths, such kind of explanations.

And these explanations are something so vital for them to come to terms with or to come to or get adjusted to or to face the everyday exigencies of the world. So, symbols that provide a sense of control over people's destiny, the whole question of what will happen to my body? what is the meaning of life? So, such larger metaphysical questions are addressed by, must be addressed by the symbolic level. And symbols that a sense of communal rhythm in their daily lives and activities. And then he talks about symbols that provide you with a sense of oneness, a sense of rhythm to the daily life.

It could be social events, it could be religious events that give you a sense of solidarity, a sense of oneness, a sense of movement and other things. For him, the structural analysis is possible only through the analysis of social institutions and for him any social institution needs to have the following elements. So, for Malinowski and to many other social structural functionalists, social anthropologists, how do you use the structural functional analysis to study a particular community? It has to be through the analysis of social institutions. And social institutions are as you know religion, political institutions, family, marriage, kinship, they are all the social institutions that survive a particular society. So, these are the four important elements, one is personal, the people, the charter, the norms, the material apparatus, the activity and function.

Hence study of institutions is vital in studying societies in a comparative framework. So, the fundamental framework adopted by anthropologists including Malinowski are basically a comparative analysis about the social institutions trying to understand how each of these institutions are contributing to the well-being or to the overall integration of a society as a whole. Then we move to the US context where structural functionalism emerged not from the anthropological tradition but from the sociological tradition. And I am not going to, I am just going to mention some of the important concepts, I am not going to elaborate much because Talcott Parsons though was very influential during 1950s and by 1960s, end of 1960s it lost its significance and again it is a very extremely complicated complex theorization. I do not think that we need to really get into the nitty-

gritties of this theorization because it was seen as too cumbersome, too unnecessary kind of a cerebral complex articulation by many people.

So he talks about the Voluntaristic Theory of Action at the individual level, then he talks about social systems and then he brings in this idea of pattern variables. He says that there are, every society there are certain functional imperatives. So, every society, for that society to survive there are certain functional imperatives. So imperative as again you might know that certain things which a society cannot do without, certain things that a society have to have in order to survive. So that is he talks about it as adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency which includes pattern maintenance and tension management.

So these 1, 2, 3, 4, 4 things what he considers it as functional imperatives. So, for Talcott Parsons the structural functionalism basically is to understand what are the functional imperatives of each society. It explains a wide-ranging explanation for many social phenomena, and it has guided a great deal of valuable research and later models allowed not only for stability but also for conflict social change and power relations, he has contributed useful concepts to the field. Now another very important point that I want to highlight is how this Parsonian idea of social change and social structure kind of influenced the notions of development to a large extent.

So he may be perhaps he has given some of the most complicated, sophisticated sociological explanation about why the western societies have developed while the other societies Asian and African societies remain either underdeveloped or developing. That is a very, very fascinating interesting thing. If you were a Parsonian or if you are a follower of Talcott Parsons or a believer or a disciple of Parsonian framework you would be convinced that the European societies or the American societies developed because their personal, social and cultural systems were different from that of the traditional societies or from the non-western societies. So, in a way the structural functionalism was used to justify the development of the west and the non-development of the non-European societies and this is a very, very problematic assumption.

First of all I think we will discuss it in the coming sections. First of all, this does not really take into account very specific historical mechanisms. It does not really take into account for example the process of colonization or the process of slavery or the institution of slavery. So, he provides a very sophisticated broad set of analysis which seems to be self-congratulatory to that of the west and then presents a kind of a dichotomous opposites to that of the non-western society. So, I am not going into the detail. First of all, many of these theorizations have become obsolete and later it became kind of too unwieldy.

So disadvantages of structural functionalism. One is that it presents an ideal model society rather than empirically derived one. Many times, these operational definitions are hard to come by because they go, every structural functionalist goes to a village or goes to a society with a preconceived notion that there exists an equilibrium, there exists an integration and basically my task is to unravel these systems of integration by studying different organization, by studying different social structures or institutions basically try to look into that. So many times, it presents you with an ideal model of a society. At its outset had a tendency to value stability and consensus. And this is a very important point because it preoccupies or it privileges the question of social equilibrium and thereby it kind of sidelines the aspects of instability or instability and social change.

And it cannot the existence of societies in the first place because there are arguments that many of the structural functionalist arguments are tautological, they are circular arguments. There are for example, there are functional needs that is why society exists and exists society exists that is why there are functional needs. So, these arguments kind of seems to be circulatory in its character. And cannot easily explain rapid social changes or breakdown of societies because as we argued they begin with the premise that societies are found or are bound to be privileging social integration and then equilibrium rather than social change.

So it was kind of unable to explain social change. This is one of the most important criticisms. Social change and social conflict became significant topics in the latter period of functionalist dominance. And rests on assumption that are hard and perhaps impossible to test another very important set of criticism. And explanations can be tautological as I mentioned earlier. So many of the explanation seems to be circulatory in its character and it was criticized for being ahistorical as I mentioned earlier.

For example, the criticism that basically came against Talcott Parson was that he can afford to forget era of the episode of colonialism and episode of slavery in the overall progress of Europe. And that is why the later criticism from Latin American scholars, the dependency school by Gunder Frank and Wallerstein, they argued that this theory is kind of ahistorical. It is ahistorical, it does not look into concrete specific historic episodes that happen or historic incidents that happen rather presents a very complicated ahistorical framework which seems to be self-congratulatory to the European context and then puts the blame on the non-Western, non-modern society saying that it is because of your backward traditional cultural system that you are not able to develop. So, as I told you, the structural functionalism kind of lost its significance by end of 1960s. Though in the early 90s there was a kind of revival of something called as a neo-functionalism which we are not going to discuss now.

So let us stop here and then try to understand how this particular theory, theoretical framework found its resonance in India through the work of a person like M.N. Srinivas. Thank you.