

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Introduction to Structuralism

Welcome back to the class. We are starting the seventh week of lectures. This week, we are looking into a very interesting, mighty theoretical tradition that came to dominate Indian Sociology for a brief period called the 'Structuralist approach'. For the past 2-3 weeks, we have been looking into various theoretical traditions or theoretical frameworks that became influential in different periods in Indian history or instead in the history of Indian Sociology, which prompted scholars to look into Indian society, its culture, its structure from various vantage points. So, we looked at the Marxian and Indological traditions. In the previous class, we had a detailed look into structural-functionalist theorisation. We spent 2 or 3 hours looking into the contributions of the approach adopted by one of the doyens of Indian Sociology, M.N. Srinivas. Structural functionalism, as we have seen, emerged along with the emergence of Sociology as a discipline, and it can be traced back to people like Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim. Then, it took a very different take on the British anthropological tradition and the US sociological tradition.

M.N. Srinivas was a critical scholar trained in the UK in the British Anthropological tradition under Evans Pritchard and Radcliffe Brown. He became a very influential, dominant figure in the Indian Sociological scenario, setting the tone for further research and teaching firmly rooted in the structural functionalist theory. We are moving to another important theoretical tradition called the structuralist approach. Here, we focus primarily on Louis Dumont, one of the very provocative and important scholars who revolutionised our understanding of what Indian society, Indian social structure and caste system mean. So, in this class, we will have a broad understanding of what a structuralist approach is. Moreover, in the coming classes, we could spend 2 or 3 hours or 1 hour specifically on the criticism of Louis Dumont. However, there are

three classes on Louis Dumont's arguments about Indian social structure and how it was studied or can be studied using a structuralist approach.

At the outset, structuralism is very distinct and different from structural functionalism. They are related in some particular sense, but they are very different; their origins are different, their influence is different, their ideas are different, and how they look at society is different. So, they have very different theoretical orientations. As we mentioned, structural functionalism emerged along with the emergence of Sociology with Spencer, Durkheim, and others. It was heavily influenced by Biology, especially with theories of evolution. This organismic analogy was a significant foundation stone on which structural functionalism emerged.

However, structuralism, which emerged as an intellectual movement, began in the 1950s in France and not in the UK. It originated in Linguistics with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure from 1857 to 1913, and it acquired widespread popularity in the 1970s among social scientists, especially anthropologists. So, even though structuralism emerged within Linguistics, it had a sweeping influence or appeal among various other Social Sciences. In Anthropology, structuralism became a very important framework during the 1970s, and we will touch upon a couple of critical arguments. Lévi-Strauss is considered to be the founder of structuralism in Anthropology. So, now, let us try to understand what structuralism is.

There are multiple definitions provided for structuralism. However, one of the very foundational tenets of structuralism is this argument that a system in which each element in a group can only be understood by its relation to other elements as part of a larger structure. Please remember the discussion about structural functionalism, where we discussed an argument about social structure and how every part supposedly contributes to the equilibrium of the social structure. We talked about functions and dysfunctions. So, function is understood as that part that plays or positively contributes to the maintenance of the social order or equilibrium. Dysfunction is understood as something that negatively affects the equilibrium or social order of the social system. So, here, it is also a similar proposition. He looks at society as an interconnected set of parts. It is a system in which each element in a group can only be understood by its relation to other elements as part of a larger structure. The fundamental point in which it differs from structural functionalism is

that the emphasis here is the particular subsystems or the part we usually understand in the structural-functionalist parlance.

Instead, the focus is on understanding the nature of these relationships. So, the argument is that you must be able to, or you will be able to understand the nature of a particular part only by looking into how it is related to other parts of this particular system. So, the independent part is, for example, in the structural functionalist theory, which focuses on institutions; they look into the institutions of kinship, religion, family, or marriage. Here, these parts are essential, but they are not the focus of analysis. Instead, they are understood as having already been determined by much deeper rules that provide their specific structure and their specific place in the larger structure of a society.

So, things cannot be understood in isolation. That is a very important argument. You cannot undertake an independent enquiry or an independent analysis of a particular social organisation or social institution. Rather, it must be understood in its larger complex whole. So, this logic of a larger complex whole provides the salience or importance to the individual unit of this more extensive system. The focus must be on trying to understand the larger logic of this rather than focusing on the individual unit. It gives primacy to the patterns and relations over substance, which is the same point that we argued about, and it will become clearer and more evident. Structuralism argues that there are underlying structures that provide salience or importance to individual subsystems or individual parts. Moreover, the primary task of a social scientist is to understand that this pattern and meaning is the product of structure. So, what a particular part does or the meaning of that particular part, subsystem, institution, or social organisation becomes legible only once you understand the larger structure of that particular society. So, it wants a holistic understanding, demands a comprehensive understanding of society, and is against a more narrowed understanding of specific things. Furthermore, methodologically, this also means a criticism of empiricism and dependency on observable phenomena. This is a very important point because structural functionalism believes in the ability of the researcher to observe things. To observe things and to capture the social reality through your senses, through the senses of an observer.

So, whatever the observable phenomena become the data for a structural functionalist or any scholar who believes in empiricism and then, to a large extent, positivism because they are very closely connected. So, social reality is seen as something that is amenable to human experience and sensory perceptions. You collect data through your empirical observations, whether you are seeing or hearing, listening or tasting, and then that becomes the data for your analysis and then do that. However, structuralism is a vital criticism of that. Structuralism argues that through empirical observation, what you are seeing is only the kind of epiphenomena, the kind of peripheral things that are making themselves more evident for you to see. Nevertheless, society has a structure that is deeply buried inside. The social structure is not amenable to your empirical investigation. The social structure needs to be more amenable for you to see. It is not available for you to hear. You cannot get direct access to that and not mistake the observable phenomenon for the social structure.

So, it is a belief that underlying structure shapes human behaviour and culture. Structuralists view society and cultures as systems of interconnected elements that work together to create meaning. A fundamental principle of structural functionalism is the belief that the underlying structure shapes human behaviour and culture. So, they argue that every human society or cutting across human societies has deep structures. When it comes to the application of structuralism in Language, Linguistics or Anthropology, their arguments are almost the same. There are singular structures that characterise every society. Whether it is a particular society or another, a modern society, a less civilised society or a primitive society, the underlying structures are similar. Underlying structures are the same, but they manifest in different forms. Structuralists view society and cultures as systems of interconnected elements that work together to create meaning. That is the exact point that we mentioned. They look into how they strike these particular relationships, which are essential, not the individual parts.

The focus on binary oppositions is a fundamental aspect of human thought. Structuralists believe that people understand the world through binary oppositions, such as good versus evil or male versus female. Another crucial and maybe even intriguing element of structuralism is that structuralism extensively uses binary categories. So, they argue that deep structures, something like a deep grammar, influence human understanding, and people understand the world through a

series of binary oppositions. So, people across cultures, as I mentioned, whether advanced or primitive, modern or agrarian, industrialist or agrarian society, everywhere deep inside these perceivable differences, people understand society and understand the world through the kind of binary categories.

Moreover, some of these examples are good versus evil or male versus female, nature versus culture, cooked versus raw, Or not? So, Dumont would talk about so many kinds of binaries, such as pure and impure. So, they argue that these binaries, which are among the binaries, of course, are specific categories, and certain binaries are always preferred. For example, between good and evil, good is always preferred. Between, you know, cooked and raw, cooked is always preferred. Between pure and impure, pure is always preferred. So, these binary categories are essential. The use of Language and signs creates meaning. Structuralists believe that Language is a system of signs that we use to communicate with each other and that underlying rules and structures govern these signs. So, when it comes to the structuralist application and understanding of Language, they would argue every Language and every sign, the use of Language sign are used to create meaning, and the Language system of Science that we use to communicate with each other and these signs are governed by underlying rules and structures. So, in the structuralist understanding of Language and linguistic analysis, they argue that there are deeper structures that govern every Language's outward appearance. When you listen to specific languages, it is different if you are unfamiliar with them. The languages appear very different, but there is underlying similar logic behind each of them, or there are underlying rules and structures behind that.

Ferdinand de Saussure revolutionised the study of Language before Saussure. The Language was generally seen as a way of naming things. Saussure was a contemporary to people like Freud and then Durkheim. Thus, he belonged to a very influential family in France and made a substantial contribution to the intellectual world, especially in the area of Linguistics. So, his intervention was supposed to have revolutionised how Language was understood. He identified Language as a system in which all the elements fit together, and the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all other elements. So, he was deeply dissatisfied with how linguists understood and taught language. Saussure was an influential scholar of Sanskrit. He studied

Sanskrit at Leipzig University and then taught in various other places. So, he was considered to be an authority in the Sanskrit language. He understood it as a system in which the elements fit together, and the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of others. He is known as the founder of semiotics, and thus, he calls it Semiology. He argues that Language is made of signs. Language, or a particular language, does not have an inherent ability. It is composed of different kinds of signs. Signs not only make Language but every other aspect of your social life is composed of signs. Language is only one particular way in which signs are composed. A system of signs is composed of a signifier, a plane of expression and signified, a plane of content. So, he breaks it down into two things: the kind of phenomenon that you want to explain and the signs that you use, the signifier, the plane of expression, whether it could be a sound or a word or a letter that signifies the existence of something that needs to be signified. When signs are put together, they communicate complex messages. That is how all the modern complex languages work.

Saussure examined Language as a structure, as Language and his ideas about the basic structure of Language apply to any system of making meaning, whether it is an official language or just a set of signals or codes like football referee signals. So, he argues that when you look, for example, when you listen to sophisticated Language or look at how a referee regulates a football match, he argues that the fundamental application or the fundamental basis of both these situations are similar because they use signals, it is just signals or codes. These codes are used to communicate whatever needs to be communicated. Such a system is called a signifying system and can include any structural system of organisation that creates meaning out of cultural signs. It could be gestures, it could be songs, it could be signals, it could be, you know, sounds, it could be anything.

Just about any part of culture constitutes a signifying system as long as that system contains signs that can be read and interpreted along the lines Saussure laid out by determining signification, seeing how signifiers are connected to signified and determining value, seeing how a sign differs from all other signs in that system. He says that in every Language, there must be a set of signifiers, and these signifiers must show how signifiers are connected to the signified. When you say a table, A table is composed of different sounds, and this table is used as a

signifier to indicate the existence of a table. This is part of a much larger set of terms that exist in that particular thing and in how a sign differs from other signs in that system. So, there has to be exclusivity concerning a sign and a signifier and signified; the meaning is communicated to other people based on this exclusivity.

So, Language has two components. Langue is the body of rules and conventions governing a signifying system, and Parol is the concrete instance of the use of Language. So, langue, Saussure argues, is the kind of universal larger structure you might find in different manifestations in different places, Parol. Parol is a concrete instance of the use of Language. It is a concrete way in which language manifests itself. Meanwhile, the langue is the underlying deep structure that would be more or less the same across the globe and in societies. So, the argument is that whether the Language of a primitive society or the Language of the most modern languages, their underlying structures are the same. However, they appear differently. The parol is the specific, historically constant, temporal manifestation of a specific type of Language. The three principles of Language are arbitrariness, and the meaning given to the words is arbitrary. There is no specific connection between the word table and the table in reality; they are pretty arbitrary. So, there is nothing inherent about their being entirely arbitrary and their relationality; the meanings of the words are relational to each other and constitutively. Rather than merely labelling or recording, Language constitutes a word. Language is a fundamental argument that a language not only labels a particular thing but also constitutes it.

Claude Lévis-Strauss

Our most important person is Claude Lévis-Strauss because he used the structuralist principle to understand human society; he was an anthropologist. A French anthropologist and the leading proponent of structuralism influenced by the works of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. Marcel Mauss is another critical French anthropologist who has done extensive work among primitive societies and was heavily influenced by Strauss. His works offered a new approach to understanding cultural systems, specifically kinship and myths, in terms of their structural relations.

Moreover, he proposed an alliance theory to study kinship relations. We will look into that briefly. Lévi-Strauss has worked extensively on some of the fundamental anthropological categories by significantly revising the existing understanding. His works on kinship and myths have to be understood because myths are important. They are part of every tribal society or every society. So, he undertook this analysis of myths in many of the tribal societies.

So, it presents a cultural pattern due to the subconscious of the universal human knowledge. Similar to the Saussurean argument that there is a universal structure for every Language. They all look different and sound different, but they all have a universal structure. Similarly, Lévi-Strauss would argue that though the cultural patterns of societies are different at the level of the subconscious, deep inside the human psyche, there is universal human knowledge. As the link between social norms and the mind's thought process is deeply rooted within individual cultures, it becomes logical thought, taking specific actions, thoughts and activities and conceptualising them. So, the link between social norms and the mind's thought process is deeply rooted within individual culture.

So, how certain social norms appear, certain customs appear, and specific manifestations appear themselves are only locally diverse manifestations of these social norms and the deeper thought process of human beings inside each culture. So, you cannot be misled by looking only at the outward manifestation. Even with this universal knowledge, every culture retains its specific cultural structure. Lévi-Strauss argued that there are universal cultures, but above these universal cultures are more specific regional variations.

He presented the idea of binary oppositions; as we mentioned, these binary oppositions are crucial for structuralists, who argue that human beings make sense of the world through these binaries with a specific preference for one over the other. Each concept has an opposite concept that is co-dependent on it: life versus death, self versus other, and culture versus nature. As we mentioned yesterday, male versus female, cooked versus raw, and cooked versus raw is an essential terminology used by Lévi-Strauss. So, no one of such concepts can exist without the other, known as the unity of opposites. Now, life loses all its meaning, relevance and salience in the absence of death. Similarly, the self, you know that the self does not exist in the absence of another, and the other does not exist in the absence of a self. So, why are they the opposite? They

are connected, they are constitutive of each other, and each derives their salience only in the presence of the other. And that is why he talks about the unity of opposites. Every community taker takes these concepts, makes them specific to their culture, and unites them under a unique cultural standpoint to form a structured and organised society. So, he argues that these deeper structural dimensions of every society are not amenable to individual people. However, every society has learned to manifest these deeper structures differently. And for a social scientist to observe things only through their empirical means, what is observable are only these kinds of manifested things. So, things that are deeper inside, things that are the deep structural dimensions, are beyond the sensory perceptions of human beings. The major works are *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, *The Savage Mind* and *Structural Anthropology*, *Myth and Meaning*. His *Savage Mind* is a very, very celebrated work, and his specific works on kinship and myths are considered significant contributions to the anthropology of work.

So, Levi-Staruss's analysis of kinship systems in his book, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, points out two critical things. The first is that the kinship system structures how goods, ideas and people are exchanged within a culture. He notes that the kinship system explains what he calls the exchange of women, wherein family groups give women to another family to be a wife and receive something of value, a dowry, for example. So, his analysis of the kinship system is something significant. He understands the kinship system as a kind of exchange within culture, where he basically talks about how women are exchanged.

Moreover, if you look into the rules in every society, you know that it is a truism that every society has elaborate rules governing marriage. Who can marry whom? Who are the permitted categories? Who are the forbidden categories? So, there are rules regarding how you are not supposed to marry some of the women or how you are expected to marry specific other categories of women. So, his analysis of the kinship system looks into this particular argument. Then, he comes up with fascinating arguments about how particular rules about exchange govern this marriage system. How women are exchanged within a community and between different communities and how they are often exchanged in the receipt of certain other things of value, such as dowry, for example.

Levi-Strauss suggested that the elementary structure or unit of kinship on which all systems are built is a set of four organically linked relationships: brother, sister, husband, wife, father, son and mother's brother or sister's son. So, he talks about the four types of organically linked relationships around which this entire kinship system is built. Levi-Strauss stressed that the emphasis in structural analysis of kinship must be on human consciousness, not objective ties of descent or consanguinity. For him, all forms of social life represent the operation of universal laws regulating the activities of the mind. So, the argument is that certain more profound things define and then control the collective mind of human beings. Which human beings are unaware of, and these rules are only manifestations of these rules.

Another critical area in which he contributed was myth. Levi-Strauss argued that myths could be studied to reveal the universal opposition, such as dead versus living or nature versus culture, that organise human interpretations of and beliefs about the world. As we mentioned, myths are present in every society. If you look into every community, there is a vast, rich repository of myths, and each of these myths might look very different. The local context names and incidents could be different, the historical context could be different, and the descriptions could be different. However, Levi-Strauss is not interested in these diversities; instead, he says that these myths, deeper inside them, are all similar. They are all trying to tell the same thing. They all reflect some of these fundamental things. So, they all depict the difference between two opposites: dead versus living, nature versus culture, or a number of other binaries. In the structured study of myths, Levi-Strauss is interested in explaining why myths from different cultures worldwide seem so similar. He answers this question by looking at the structure of myths rather than their content. Levi-Strauss insists that myth is a language because myth has to be told to exist. It is also a language with the same structures that Saussure described as belonging to any language. So, he understands myths as a language that wants to convey certain kinds of things and wants to give a kind of concreteness to certain things. Myths as a Language consist of both Langue and Parol, both the synchronic and ahistorical structure and the specific diachronic detail within the structure. He says that similar to Saussurean argument, every language has an unchanging deeper structure which is not amenable to human perception and also a more visible, amenable thing in which they appear in front of us, which is historical, context-specific, and more concrete. Similarly, he says that myth also has these two things. One

is the kind of unchanging synchronic historical structure, and there are specific diachronic details within the structure. So, that is the kind of regional differences that you see. Levi-Strauss adds a new dimension to Saussure's Languge and Parol, pointing out that the Languge belongs to what he calls the reversible time and Parol to non-reversible time. Because Parol is the kind of specific one that happens in a specific socio-temporal, spatiotemporal framework, a myth that is told and retold in a tribal community is more historical, which is why it is a non-reversible time. It has a diachronic character, whereas the other one, the Languge, belongs to what he calls a reversible time, which is not specific to any temporal frame or spatial frame.

He means that Parol, a specific instance of example or event, can only exist in linear time. Because a myth has to be told, a myth in its most specific articulation is more time-dependent than space-dependent, and that myth has to be spoken as if it takes in linear time, which is unidirectional. You cannot turn the clock back. Conversely, Languge is simply the structure in itself that can exist in the past, present or future.

A myth, according to Levi-Strauss, is both historically specific. It is almost always set in some time long ago and ahistorical, meaning this story is timeless as history myth is a Parol, as timeless it is Languge. So, as history myth is Parol because when you talk about history, you will have to be concerned with the specific historical context and as timeless it is Languge. Levi-Strauss proposed structuralism to reveal the underlying structures of cultural forms. It focuses on the effects of universal patterns in human thought on cultural phenomena, which is the same point we have discussed.

Now, what kinds of criticisms are there? Structuralism has often been criticised for being ahistorical and favouring deterministic structural forces over the ability of people to act. So, one of structuralism's fundamental, shocking or very important arguments is that we are all defined and determined by some deep structures. So, every society across the globe is decided and determined. It is a very deterministic model. It is determined by specific deep structures on which we have no direct access. This is a very pessimistic understanding of human agency, how human societies can transform, and how human beings can understand themselves. So, it is criticised for being ahistorical because it tells you the story, not the story of human development over some time. However, he would say that human beings who existed, say, thousands of years ago and today are ultimately the same; their cultures are the same, which is a very problematic

argument. And for favouring deterministic structural forces over the ability of people to move. As the political turbulence of the 1960s and 70s, especially the student uprising of May 1968 and then later the Vietnam War and the kind of uprising in the US began affecting the academia, issues of power and political struggle moved to the centre of people's attention. So, this particular status quo argument lowered its significance during the late '70s, and questions of power and authority began to assume the centre stage. In the 1980s, deconstruction and its emphasis on the fundamental ambiguity of Language rather than its crystalline logical structure became popular, proving fatal to structuralism. So, by the 1980s, deconstruction assumed significance, as did the theory of deconstruction and its emphasis on the fundamental ambiguity of language. How can power present language in different forms? What is the connection between knowledge and power? We discussed this earlier. So, all these things became essential, and then structuralism began to lose significance.

This was a brief introduction and broad overview of structuralism. Let us discuss Louis Dumont in the coming classes. Thank you.