



SYM 101

Sociological Concepts

Unit : 4

Topic – Social structure Part I

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Introduction

- The concept of 'social structure' is widely used but is also most elusive concept in the social sciences. There is little agreement on a precise definition and general meaning of this concept. It can be conceived of in a variety of ways. However, the enduring, orderly and patterned relationships between elements (groups, institutions etc.) of a society are usually described as social structure. It directs attention to their internal configurations (such as the status and role relations), to the interrelations of component parts to a designated whole and external relations (such as whether in horizontal or vertical order, degree of interconnectedness and stability).

Concept of Structure

- Every science deals with structure. In simple terms, the formal arrangement or ordering of elements, parts, events or facts is known as structure. It is the way in which the things we are analyzing are put together, or the relationship of its parts to one another. A botanist will describe the structure of a leaf the way it is put together. A chemist is concerned with the Structure of a compound, or the relationship of the elements in the compound to one another.

- A biologist refers to the structure of an organism, meaning a relatively stable arrangement of tissues and organs and the relationships between the different cells and interstitial fluids. When a builder speaks of the structure of a building, he is talking about the materials (sand, bricks, lime, cement, stone, timber, etc.) of which it is composed, the relationships between the parts (walls, rooms, stairs, passages, open space and their arrangement) and the building as a unit and as a whole.

- Thus, structure generally refers to a set of relatively stable patterns of relationship between interdependent elements or parts of any given unit (biological, physical or social). An important term closely related with the concept of structure is 'function', which refers to those consequences of any activity that make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given structure or its parts. In other words, 'structure' refers to a system with relatively enduring patterns, and 'function' refers to the dynamic process within the structure.

The main features of structure are:

Constituent elements

Parts and sub-parts

Interrelation between parts

Arrangement of parts in a particular order

Parts are relatively stable and permanent

Changing character

Concept of Social Structure

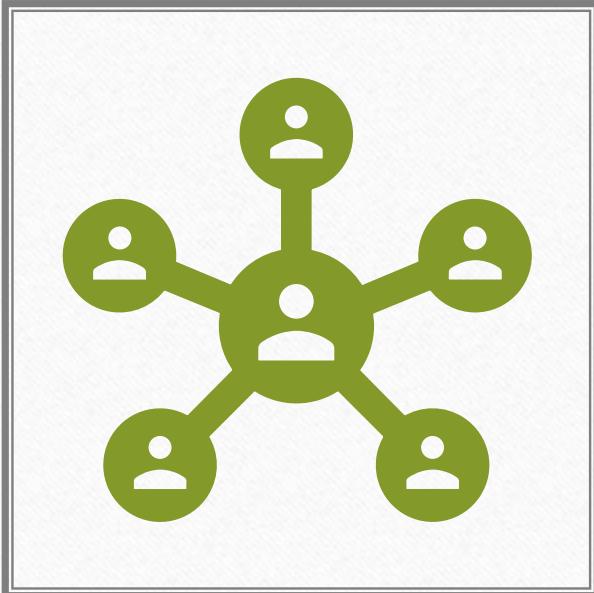
- The credit goes to Herbert Spencer to introduced concept of social structure in Sociology.
- 'Social Structure ' is one of the basic concepts of sociology. But it has not been used consistently or unambiguously. In the decade following the Second World War the concept 'Social Structure' became extremely fashionable in social anthropological studies. it became so general that it could be applied to almost any ordered arrangement of social phenomena.

- Social Structure is a **pattern or arrangement of elements of a society in an organized and collective way**. The Interaction and behavior of the members of a society are stable and are in pattern. These stable pattern of interaction are called social structure. Social Structure is the framework of society that sets limits and establish standards for our behavior. It is thus, define simply as any **recurring pattern of social behaviour**. A social Structure includes or is made-up of elements, such as institutions, status, roles, groups and social classes. Sociologist study social structure by examining the elements or parts that comprise it.

Definitions of Social Structure

- **Radcliffe-Brown** (Structure and Function in Primitive Society; 1952) defined social structure as “**an arrangement of parts of components related to one another in some sort of a larger unity**”. It is “**an arrangement of persons in relationships institutionally defined and regulated**”. He has described the “institutionally defined and regulated” relationship as that between the King and his subject, between husband and wife, etc. Thus, relationships within society are ordered by various mores and norms.

- According to **Talcott Parsons (The Structure of Social Action, 1937)**, “social structure is a term applied to the particular arrangement of interrelated institutions, agencies and social patterns as well as status and roles which each person assumes in the group”. Talcott Parsons defines social structure as a natural persistent system which maintain its continuity despite internal changes from time to time, in the same way as the organism does in reality. By natural persistent system, we mean that it has a life of its own. For him, social system is a much wider concept, including both the functional and structural aspect than just social structure.



Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (1994) defines it as "a term loosely applied to any recurring pattern of social behaviour, or more specifically, to the ordered interrelationships between the different elements of a social system or society". For example, different kinship, religious, economic, political and other institutions of a society may be said to comprise its structure as might such components as its norms, values, and social roles.



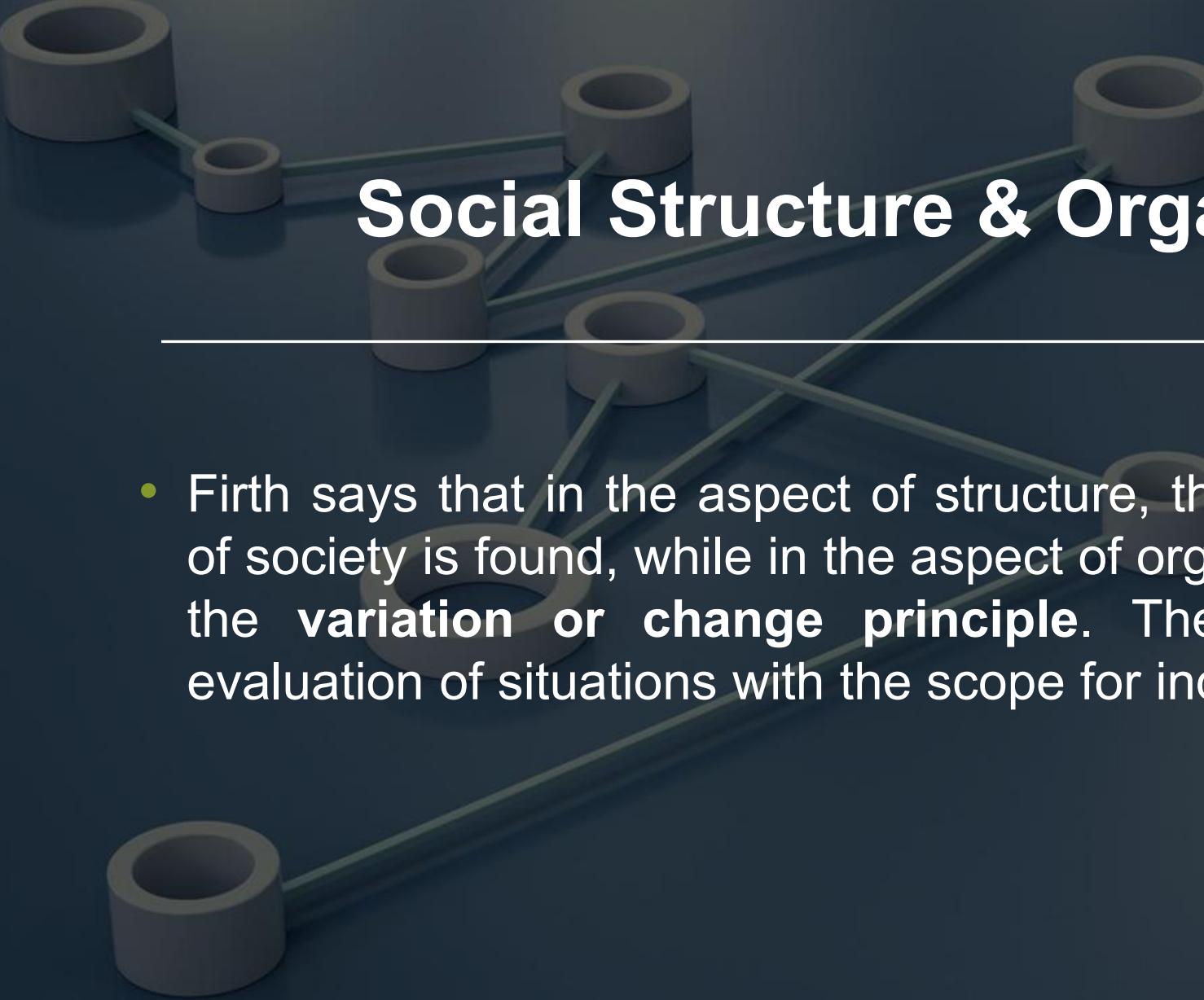
According to **Anthony Giddens** (The Constitution of Society, 1984), "the structuring of social relations across time and space, in virtue of the duality of the structure".

- **S.F. Nadel(The Theory of Social Structure,1969):** “We arrive at the structure of society through abstracting from the concrete population, and its behaviour, the pattern or network of relationship obtaining between actors in their capacity of playing role relative to one another”. **He has understood social structure in terms of the roles played by individual actors in society and in their consequent social status.**
- **Karl Mannheim(Systematic Sociology: An Introduction to the Study of Society,1957):** “ Social structure is the web of interacting social forces from which have arisen the various modes of observing and thinking”.
- **MacIver(Society,1949):** “The various modes of grouping together comprises the complex pattern of social structure. In the analysis of the social structure the role of diverse attitudes and interest of social beings is revealed”.

• The meaning of social structure can be easily understood if we take the example of organic structure. An organic structure known as body is an arrangement of different parts like hands, legs, mouth, nose, ears etc. these parts are arranged in a particular and systematic way so as to create a pattern. The body works through these parts which are inter-dependent and inter-related. Though the parts of organic structure are the same in every case, yet the form of organic structure of the people differs. Some are longer, others are short, some are fat, others are lean and thin. Similar is the case with social structure. **The parts of all the social structures are the same, that is every social structure has a family, religion, political organization, economic institution, land, area, etc. But the form of social structure differ as the form of body differ**, for example, the form of family is not similar in all the social structure. Some have families of several wives, one husband and their children. Thus, the part of social structure being the same, their specific forms vary. It may, therefore, be concluded that social structure is about the pattern of arrangement of human relationships.

Social Structure & Organization

- The term “social organization” has often been used interchangeably for “social structure”. Some scholars, like **Raymond Firth**, have clearly distinguished between both these terms. In his book, **Elements of Social Organization (1956)**, Firth has made this distinction very clear. He regards both these terms as only heuristic devices or tools rather than precise concepts. According to him, social organization is concerned with the choices and decisions involved in actual social relations; while the concept of social structure deals with the more fundamental social relations which give a society its basic form, and which provide limits to the range of action organizationally possible within it.



Social Structure & Organization

- Firth says that in the aspect of structure, the **continuity principle** of society is found, while in the aspect of organization is to be found the **variation or change principle**. The latter aspect allows evaluation of situations with the scope for individual choice.

Social Structure & Social Groups

- There are some scholars who use the term social structure for only persistent social groups in society like nation, tribe, clan, etc. One of them is **E.E. Evans-Pritchard**.
- His theory of social structure arose as a reaction to Radcliffe-Brown's understanding of social structure. His work bridged functionalism and interpretive anthropology, setting the stage for later thinkers like **Victor Turner** and **Clifford Geertz**.

Social Structure & Social Groups

- In his book, **The Nuer (1940)**, he has dealt with these persistent and permanent groups, whose individual membership keeps on changing, but whose structural form remains approximately the same throughout time. His definition of social structure differs from Radcliffe-Brown's, in the sense that **he is not concerned with the social behavior of person**. He has concentrated his attention in his study of the Nuer of Sudan, on the relationship of the homestead with the wider group of the village. Evans-Pritchard's conception of social structure has the family or the homestead (as in the case of the Nuer society) as its basic unit, rather than the individuals.

Characteristics of Social Structure



Social structure is not monolithic whole but made up of parts and sub-parts. It is not mere sum of its parts but there is a **definite arrangement between parts**. These parts cannot be explained outside the structure.



It is an abstract and intangible phenomenon.



As individuals are units of associations and institutions, so these institutions and associations (groups) are the units of social structure.

- These institutions and associations are interrelated in a particular arrangement and this arrangement creates the pattern of social structure.
- It refers to the external aspect of society which is relatively stable as compared to the internal (functional) aspect of Society. It is not static but dynamic yet there is not much change in its basic form. It is relatively permanent through time.
- There is a systematic and orderly relationship between parts which gives a special shape to its outer form. Statuses and roles along with norms and values that govern social roles form the main constituents in the formation of social structure.
- There is a functional unity among the units of structure.

Elements of Social Structure

- In a social structure the human beings organize themselves into associations for the pursuit of some object or objects. The aim can be fulfilled only if the social structure is based upon certain principles. These principles set the elements of social structure in motions which are as follows:
- (i) **Normative System**- Normative system presents the society with the ideals and values. **The people attach emotional importance to these norms.** The institutions and associations are inter-related according to these norms. The individuals perform their roles in accordance with the accepted norms of society.

- (ii) **Position System-** Position system refers to the **statuses and role of the individuals**. The desires, aspirations and expectations are multiple and unlimited. So, these can be fulfilled only if the members of society are assigned different roles according to their capacities and capabilities. The proper functioning of social structure depends upon proper assignment of roles and statuses.

- iii) **Sanction-System-** For the proper enforcement of norms, every society has a sanction system. The integration and coordination of the different parts of social structure depend upon conformity to social norms. The non-conformists are punished by the society. It however does not mean that there are no non-conformists in a well-organized society. Non-conformity is also an essential feature of society; otherwise, there would be no progress. But the number of non-conformists is smaller than the number of conformists. The stability of a social structure depends upon the effectiveness of its sanction system.

- (iv) **A system of Anticipated Response**-The anticipated response system calls upon the individuals to participate in the social system. His preparation sets the social structure in motion. The successful working of social structure depends upon the realization of his duties by the individual and his efforts to fulfill these duties.
- (v) **Action System**- it is the object or goal to be arrived at by the social structure. The whole structure revolves around it. The Action is the root Cause which weaves the web of social relationships and sets the social structure in motion.
- It may be emphasized that social structure is an abstract entity. It cannot be seen. Its parts are dynamic and constantly changing. They are spatially widespread and, therefore, difficult to see as whole. Scientific understanding of social structure would require structural- functional approach.

Thankyou
