



SYM 101

Sociological Concepts

Unit : 04

Topic: Social Structure - Part IV



Content

- Marxist View of Social Structure
- Types of Social Structure

The Marxist Point of View

- The Marxist theories regarding the concept of social structure are free from the bias of organic analogy of the structure functionalists. Karl Marx (1877) has written about the relations of production as constituting “the economic structure, the real basis on which is erected a judicial and political superstructure and to which correspond the forms of the determined social conscience”. In this explanation Marx has used the term structure, not in the biological sense, but in the sense of a building or construction. But his notion of structure cannot be clearly distinguished from the other related concepts.
- Edmund Leach (1968: 482-88) a British social anthropologist, says that “in Marx’s work there are references made to political, juridical, religious, and philosophical system. But here the term “system” is almost indistinguishable from the above uses of “structure”, “superstructure”, and “form”.

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- Marx had viewed the historical development of societies in terms of stages such as the primitive, ancient, feudal, capitalist and, finally communist according to their distinctive modes of production. This historical development is governed by the law of “dialectical materialism”. In each stage of social development, society is divided into social classes on the basis of ownership or non-ownership of property. The owners as a class have a dominant position in society and they exploit the class of non-owners. The owners are in minority in all societies while the non-owners are in majority.

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- Yet the owners as a class are able to exploit the masses by extracting surplus value of their labour. This exploitation goes on till the masses become united and the 'seeds of revolution' becomes ripe. When a revolution occurs, the mode of production changes. According to Marx, societies will develop till the stage of communism where there will not be any classes; where society will be based on equality in all respects. This view gives an ideal picture of society and is not yet found in reality. Even the Russian and Chinese societies, which are generally referred to as socialist societies, do not reach up to this ideal. Most of the Marxist sociologists, both in India and abroad, use the concept of class in studying the structure and process of a society.

The Base and Superstructure: This is the foundational model for understanding Marxist social structure: **The base refers to the mode of production**, which consists of two key components: **Forces of Production(FOP) and Relations of Production (ROP)**. FOP are the means by which society produces its material necessities. This includes **Labor power and Means of production**. ROP are the social relationships people enter into in order to produce and distribute goods and services. They are defined by the ownership and control of the means of production. In a capitalist society, these relations are primarily between:

Bourgeoisie (Capitalists): Those who own the means of production.

Proletariat (Workers): Those who do not own the means of production and must sell their labor power to survive.

The Superstructure: This encompasses all other aspects of society, which are shaped and determined by the economic base. It includes:

Political institutions: The state, laws, government.

Ideologies: Belief systems, philosophies, moral values, religion, art, culture, and education.

Social consciousness: The prevailing ideas and beliefs within a society.

Types of Social Structure

- Talcott Parsons has described four principal types of social structure. His classification is based on four social values universalistic social values, particularistic social values, achieved social values, and ascribed social values.
- Universalistic social values are those which are found almost in every society and are applicable to everybody. For example, every society, values the expert craftsmen as in that case production is both cheaper and superior and thus the efficient craftsmen are selected in every society.

Particularistic social values are the features of societies, and these differ from society to society. If, for example, selection is made on the basis of caste, religion, state etc., it means that in such societies particularistic social values are considered more important. When the statuses are achieved on the basis of efforts, it means that such societies attach importance to achieved social values. When the statuses are hereditary then the society gives consideration to ascribed social statuses.

(i) **The Universalistic-Achievement Pattern:** This is the combination of the value patterns which sometimes are opposed to the values of a social structure built mostly on kinship, community, class and race. Universalism by itself favors status determination on the basis of generalized rules independently of one's achievement. When universalism is combined with achievement values, it produces a social structure of universalistic-achievement pattern. Under this type of social structure, the choice of goal by the individual must be in accord with the universalistic values. One's pursuits are defined by universalistic moral arms. Such a system is dynamically developing system with an encouragement for initiative. On the one hand, it has to resort to adoptive structures which are in conflict with its major value patterns; on the other hand, it cannot allow the adoptive structures to become too important, lest the social structure shift into another type.

(ii) **The Universalistic-Ascription Pattern:** Under this type of social structure, the elements of value-orientation are dominated by the elements of ascription. Therefore, in such a social structure strong emphasis is laid on the status of the individual, rather than on one's specific achievements. Status is ascribed to the group than to the individual. The individual derives his status from his group. Hence in such a structure are found the concepts of aristocracy and ethnic superiority. Nazi Germany was such a type of society. In this type of social structure all resources are mobilized in the interest of the collective ideal. It tends to have a "political" accent as distinguished from the "economic" accent. There is a strong emphasis on the state as the primary organ for the realization of the ideal states of collective affairs. Collective morality as distinguished from the individual morality has a particularly central place. To sum up, it may be said that the **universalistic-achievement type of social structure is "individualistic" whereas the universalistic-ascription type is "collectivistic"**.

(iii) **The Particularistic-Achievement Pattern:** This type combines achievement values with particularism. The primary criterion of valued achievement is found not in universalistic terms such as conformity to a generalized ideal or efficiency, but these are focused on certain points of reference within the relational system itself or are inherent in the situation. The emphasis on achievement leads to the conception of a proper pattern of adaptation which is the product of human achievement, and which can be maintained by continuous effort. This type involves a far more unequivocal acceptance of kinship ties than is the case, with either of the universalistic types. It is more traditionalistic. **Parsons has kept the Indian and the Chinese social structure under this category.**

(iv) **The Particularistic-Ascriptive Pattern:** In this type, the social structure is organized around the **relational reference points notably those of kinship and local community**, but it differs from the particularistic-achievement type in as much as the relational values are taken as given and passively “adapted to” rather than made for an actively organized system. The structure tends to be traditionalistic, and emphasis is laid on its stability. According to Parsons, the Spanish social structure is the example of such a type.



Thank You