



LESSON 23 SOCIAL SYSTEM PART-I

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

23.0 OBJECTIVES

23.1 INTRODUCTION

23.2 CONCEPT OF SOCIAL SYSTEM

23.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL SYSTEM

23.4 ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL SYSTEM

23.5 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL SYSTEM AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

23.6 CONCLUSION

23.7 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED FURTHER READING



23. SOCIAL SYSTEM PART-I

23.0 Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to understand and learn about:

- Concept of Social System
- Characteristics and Elements of Social System
- Relationship Between Social System and Social Structure

23.1 Introduction

The term 'system' implies an orderly arrangement, an interrelationship of parts. In the arrangement, every part has a fixed place and definite role to play. The parts are bound by interaction. To understand the functioning of a system, for example the human body, one has to analyze and identify the sub-systems (e.g. circulatory, nervous, digestive systems etc.) and understand how these various subsystems enter into specific relations in the fulfillment of the organic function of the body.

Likewise, society may be viewed as a system of interrelated mutually dependent parts which cooperate to preserve a recognizable whole and to satisfy some purposes or goal. Social system may be described as an arrangement of social interactions based on shared norms and values. Individuals constitute it and each has place and function to perform within it. A social system is the patterned series of interrelationships existing between individuals, groups, and institutions and forming a whole.

23.2 Concept of Social System

Meaning of Social System:

It is Talcott Parsons who has given the concept of 'system' current in modern sociology. Social system refers to 'an orderly arrangement, an inter relationships of parts. In the arrangement, every part has a fixed place and definite role to play. The parts are bound by interaction. System signifies, thus, patterned relationship among constituent parts of a structure which is based on functional relations and which makes these parts active and binds them into reality.



Society is a system of usages, authority and mutuality based on “We” feeling and likeness. Differences within the society are not excluded. These are, however, subordinated to likeness. Inter-dependence and cooperation are its basis. It is bound by reciprocal awareness. It is essentially a pattern for imparting the social behaviour.

It consists in mutual inter action and interrelation of individuals and of the structure formed by their relations. It is not time bound. It is different from an aggregate of people and community. According to Lapiere, “The term society refers not to group of people, but to the complex pattern of the norms of inter action that arises among and between them.”

Applying these conclusions to society, social system may be described as an arrangement of social interactions based on shared norms and values. Individuals constitute it, and each has place and function to perform within it. In the process, one influences the other; groups are formed and they gain influence, numerous subgroup come into existence.

But all of these are coherent. They function as a whole. Neither individual, nor the group can function in isolation. They are bound in oneness, by norms and values, culture and shared behaviour. The pattern that thus comes into existence becomes the social system.

A social system may be defined, after Parsons, a plurality of social actors who are engaged in more or less stable interaction “according to shared cultural norms and meanings” Individuals constitute the basic interaction units. But the interacting units may be groups or organisation of individuals within the system.

The social system, according to Charles P. Loomis, is composed of the patterned interaction of visual actors whose’ relation to each other are mutually oriented through the definition of the mediation of pattern of structured and shared symbols and expectations.

All social organisations are, therefore, ‘social system’, since they consist of interacting individuals. In the social system each of the interacting individual has function or role to perform in terms of the status he occupies in the system. For example, in the family parents, sons and daughters are required to perform certain socially recognised functions or roles.

Similarly, social organisations function within the frame work of a normative pattern. Thus, a social system presupposes a social structure consisting of different parts which are interrelated in such a way as to perform its functions.

Social system is a comprehensive arrangement. It takes its orbit all the diverse subsystems such as the economic, political, religious and others and their



interrelation too. Social systems are bound by environment such as geography. And this differentiates one system from another.

23.3 Characteristics of Social System

Social system has certain characteristics. These characteristics are as follows:

1. System is connected with the plurality of Individual actors:

It means that a system or social system cannot be borne as a result of the activity of one individual. It is the result of the activities of various individuals. For system, or social system, interaction of several individuals has to be there.

2. Aim and Object:

Human interactions or activities of the individual actors should not be aimless or without object. These activities have to be according to certain aims and objects. The expression of different social relations borne as a result of human interaction.

3. Order and Pattern amongst various Constituent Units:

Mere coming together of various constituent units that form social system does not necessarily create a social system. It has to be according to a pattern, arrangement and order. The underlined unity amongst various constituent units brings about 'social system'.

4. Functional Relationship is the Basis of Unity:

We have already seen different constituent units have a unity in order to form a system. This unity is based on functional relations. As a result of functional relationships between different constituent units an integrated whole is created and this is known as social system.

5. Physical or Environmental Aspect of Social System:

It means that every social system is connected with a definite geographical area or place, time, society etc. In other words it means that social system is not the same at different times, at different place and under different circumstances. This characteristic of the social system again point out towards its dynamic or changeable nature.

6. Linked with Cultural System:



Social system is also linked with cultural system. It means that cultural system bring about unity amongst different members of the society on the basis of cultures, traditions, religions etc.

7. Expressed and implied Aims and Objects:

Social system is also linked with expressed and implied aims. In other words, it means that social system is the coming together of different individual actors who are motivated by their aims and objectives and their needs.

8. Characteristics of Adjustment:

Social system has the characteristic of adjustment. It is a dynamic phenomenon which is influenced by the changes caused in the social form. We have also seen that the social system is influenced by the aims, objects and the needs of the society. It means that the social system shall be relevant only if it changes itself according to the changed objects and needs. It has been seen that change takes place in the social system due to human needs, environment and historical conditions and phenomena.

9. Order, Pattern and Balance:

Social system has the characteristics of pattern, order and balance. Social system is not an integrated whole but putting together of different units. This coming together does not take place in a random and haphazard manner. There is an order and balance.

It is so because different units of the society do not work as independent units but they do not exist in a vacuum but in a socio-cultural pattern. In the pattern different units have different functions and roles. It means that there is a pattern and order in the social system.

23.4 Elements of Social System

The elements of social system are described as under:

1. Faiths and Knowledge:

The faiths and knowledge brings about the uniformity in the behaviour. They act as controlling agency of different types of human societies. The faiths or the faith is the result of the prevalent customs and beliefs. They enjoy the force of the individual are guided towards a particular direction.

2. Sentiment:



Man does not live by reason alone. Sentiments – filial, social, notional etc. have played immense role in investing society with continuity. It is directly linked with the culture of the people.

3. End Goal or object:

Man is born social and dependent. He has to meet his requirements and fulfill his obligations. Man and society exist between needs and satisfactions, end and goal. These determine the nature of social system. They provided the pathway of progress, and the receding horizons.

4. Ideals and Norms:

The society lays down certain norms and ideals for keeping the social system intact and for determining the various functions of different units. These norms prescribe the rules and regulations on the basis of which individuals or persons may acquire their cultural goals and aims.

In other words ideals and norms are responsible for an ideal structure or system of the society. Due to them the human behaviour does not become deviant and they act according to the norms of the society. This leads to organization and stability. These norms and ideals include folkways, customs, traditions, fashions, morality, religion, etc.

5. Status-Role:

Every individual in society is functional. He goes by status-role relation. It may come to the individual by virtue of his birth, sex, caste, or age. One may achieve it on the basis of service rendered.

6. Role:

Like the status, society has prescribed different roles to different individuals. Sometimes we find that there is a role attached to every status. Role is the external expression of the status. While discharging certain jobs or doing certain things, every individual keeps in his mind his status. This thing leads to social integration, organization and unity in the social system. In fact statuses and roles go together. It is not possible to separate them completely from one another.

7. Power:

Conflict is a part of social system, and order is its aim. It is implicit, therefore, that some should be invested with the power to punish the guilty and reward those who set an example. The authority exercising power will differ from group to group; while the authority of father may be supreme in the family, in the state it is that of the ruler.



8. Sanction:

It implies confirmation by the superior in authority, of the acts done by the subordinate or the imposition of penalty for the infringement of the command. The acts done or not done according to norms may bring reward and punishment.

23.5 Relationship Between Social System and Social Structure

The two concepts of social structure and social system are closely related to each other. Social system relates to the functional aspect of social structure. Both social structure and social system go together. Social structure is the means through which social system functions. The value of any structure depends upon the manner in which it accomplishes its functions. When a social structure does not function properly, we try to modify it, for example, if the family does not accomplish its purpose, we modify it. In place of polygamous family we may have monogamous family. The educational system may be modified if it fails to accomplish the purpose of education. Structure is useless without function and function is only accomplished through some structure. In short, social structure and social system go together.

There is another aspect of the relationship between social structure and social system: The nature of functions to be carried out influences the form of structure. And the form of structure will influence the functions it can perform. Thus if we want our social system to function in a democratic way, the parts of social structure will have to be organized on a democratic basis. The state cannot function democratically unless its structure is democratic, or to put it in other words, if our state is dictatorial in its structure, it will function in a dictatorial manner. The traditional family is unsuited to modern needs. Hence there is a change in the structure of family in modern times. A rigid social structure may fail to meet the needs of a changing society. While norms are necessary to regulate the social system, it is also equally necessary that the parts of social structure should be allowed initiative to use their creative capacity.

The terms "social structure" and "social system" are central to sociological and anthropological thought, and while often used interchangeably in common parlance, they carry distinct nuances for different theorists. Generally, social structure refers to the patterned, enduring arrangements of social relationships and institutions that constitute a society, providing a framework for social life. In contrast, a social system is a broader concept, encompassing not only these structures but also the dynamic interactions, processes, and functions that occur within and between them, aiming for equilibrium or adaptation.

Here's how various prominent thinkers have understood and related these concepts:

1. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (Structural Functionalism)



- **Social Structure:** For Radcliffe-Brown, social structure was the empirical reality of social relationships, specifically the network of actually existing social relations among persons and groups. He saw it as the arrangement of persons in relationships, such as kinship, political organization, or economic roles. He emphasized that these structures are observable and can be studied scientifically.
- **Social System:** While he didn't explicitly use "social system" as a separate, overarching term as much as Parsons, his concept of "social function" is inextricably linked. He viewed society as an organic whole, a "system" where each part (the structures) performs a necessary function to maintain the existence and continuity of the whole. The "system" is the integrated and functioning totality of these structural relations. For him, the system *is* the social structure in its dynamic, ongoing operation, ensuring social cohesion and stability.

2. Robert K. Merton (Structural Functionalism, Middle-Range Theory)

- **Social Structure:** Merton refined the concept of social structure by focusing on its **dysfunctions** and unintended consequences. He saw social structure as a complex of patterned statuses and roles, institutions, and norms that guide behavior. He was particularly interested in how certain social structures (e.g., class structure, educational system) could produce social strains and deviance (e.g., his "Strain Theory of Anomie").
- **Social System:** Merton implicitly viewed society as a social system, but he was more critical of the grand, all-encompassing theories of his time (like Parsons'). He advocated for "middle-range theories" that would focus on specific, testable aspects of social systems, rather than attempting to explain the entire system at once. For Merton, the social system is the context in which social structures operate, and he highlighted the inherent tensions and dysfunctions that could arise within it, leading to various adaptations by individuals.

3. Emile Durkheim (Structuralism, Functionalism, Collective Consciousness)

- **Social Structure:** Durkheim emphasized the existence of "social facts" as external and coercive forces that shape individual behavior. These social facts—such as laws, moral rules, religious beliefs, and institutions (like the division of labor)—constitute the social structure. He saw society as having a reality *sui generis* (of its own kind), separate from and prior to individuals. The social structure is the patterned organization of these social facts.
- **Social System:** Durkheim viewed society as a social system characterized by different forms of solidarity (mechanical in traditional societies, organic in modern societies). The "system" is the collective entity sustained by the collective consciousness and the interdependence of its parts. His work on the division of labor, for instance, explores how a complex social structure creates an interdependent social system, where different parts (occupations, institutions) rely on each other to maintain social order and integration.

4. S.F. Nadel (Formal Structuralism)



- **Social Structure:** Nadel sought a more rigorous, almost mathematical, definition of social structure. He defined it as the "articulation" or "ordered arrangement" of parts, focusing on the role system of a society. For Nadel, social structure is the network of social relationships that arise when individuals interact in terms of their roles. He emphasized that structure is about the *patterns* of relationships, abstracting from the concrete individuals.
- **Social System:** Nadel saw social structures as forming a system, in that changes in one part of the structure would necessarily affect other parts. His focus was on the internal coherence and logical consistency of the structural arrangements. The "system" is the framework of roles and their interconnections, which exhibits certain properties as a whole.

5. Talcott Parsons (Structural Functionalism, Action Theory)

- **Social Structure:** For Parsons, social structure consists of patterned relationships of social actors (individuals and collectivities) within a social system. These patterns are institutionalized norms, values, and roles. He saw structures as relatively stable configurations of social action, including institutions like the family, economy, and polity.
- **Social System:** Parsons developed a highly elaborate theory of the social system as a self-regulating, goal-seeking entity. He viewed society as a complex system of interdependent parts, each performing specific functions to maintain the system's equilibrium and survival. His famous AGIL schema (Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration, Latency/Pattern Maintenance) describes the four functional imperatives that any social system must meet to persist. For Parsons, social structures are the components or subsystems within this larger, dynamic social system.

6. E.E. Evans-Pritchard (Descriptive Structuralism/Functionalism)

- **Social Structure:** Evans-Pritchard, through his ethnographic work (e.g., on the Nuer), focused on the concrete, observable patterns of social relationships, particularly kinship, lineage, and political organization. He described social structure as the interrelations between groups and segments of society, showing how these relationships maintained order even in the absence of centralized authority. For him, structure was about the actual organization of social life.
- **Social System:** While he didn't theorize a grand "social system" like Parsons, his detailed ethnographies implicitly revealed how these described structures functioned as a coherent system. The "system" was the way these kinship and political arrangements interacted to produce social order and regulate conflict in specific societies. His approach was less abstract and more rooted in empirical observation of how a particular society *functions* as a whole through its structures.

7. Edmund Leach (Processual Structuralism)



- **Social Structure:** Leach, influenced by Lévi-Strauss but also critical of overly static structuralism, viewed social structure as dynamic and often contradictory. He argued that social structures are not fixed frameworks but rather models that people use to make sense of their world, and these models can be manipulated or even oscillate between different forms (e.g., in his study of the Kachin). He emphasized the role of individual agency and power struggles in shaping and reshaping structures.
- **Social System:** Leach saw the "social system" as being in a constant state of disequilibrium or dynamic oscillation, rather than a stable equilibrium. The system is the ongoing process of interaction, conflict, and negotiation through which structures are enacted and transformed. For Leach, the relationship is one of dynamic interplay: structures are the templates, but the system is the actual lived process that can lead to deviations and changes from these templates.

8. Claude Lévi-Strauss (Structural Anthropology)

- **Social Structure:** Lévi-Strauss moved beyond the observable reality of social relations to focus on the underlying, unconscious mental structures that organize human thought and create cultural patterns. He argued that social structures (like kinship systems, myths, and rituals) are manifestations of these universal cognitive structures, often based on binary oppositions. For him, the "true" social structure is not directly observable but inferred through analysis of cultural phenomena.
- **Social System:** Lévi-Strauss viewed culture itself as a system of communication built upon these fundamental mental structures. The "social system" is the manifestation of these deep-seated structures in the form of patterned social interactions and institutions. He sought to uncover the "grammar" or "logic" of these systems, much like a linguist analyzes language. The system is therefore an expression of the universal workings of the human mind, leading to patterned behaviors and relationships.

Across these thinkers, a general relationship emerges where structure can be seen as a framework and system can be seen as dynamic operation. Social Structure provides the framework, blueprint, or anatomy of a society. It refers to the relatively stable, patterned arrangements of roles, statuses, institutions, and relationships. It's the "what" and "how" of societal organization. Social System refers to the living, dynamic, functional operation of that framework. It encompasses the interactions, processes, functions, and ongoing activities that occur within and are shaped by the social structure. It's the "how" and "why" things work (or don't work) within that structure, often implying a degree of interdependence and striving for some form of equilibrium or adaptation.

In essence, one can't have a social system without a social structure to organize it, and a social structure only becomes a "system" through its dynamic operation and the interactions it facilitates. Some theorists (like Parsons) explicitly articulate this structure-system distinction, while others (like Radcliffe-Brown) may see the functional structure as inherently systemic.



23.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the intricate tapestry of social life can be comprehensively understood by discerning the interplay between the elements that compose a social system, the characteristics that define its operation, and the fundamental relationship between a social system and its underlying social structure.

The elements of a social system – ranging from the shared faith and knowledge that provide meaning and practical guidance, to the collective sentiments fostering cohesion, the guiding end goals and regulating ideals and norms, the organizing units of status-roles, the influential force of power, and the mechanisms of sanction and facility – represent the tangible and intangible components from which social reality is constructed. These elements are not static but are in constant interaction, shaping individual and collective behaviors.

These interacting elements, in turn, give rise to the defining characteristics of a social system. Such a system is fundamentally a plurality of individual actors whose interactions are not random but display discernible order and pattern, often striving for equilibrium or a state of dynamic balance. Its unity is rooted in the functional interdependence of its parts, where specialized components contribute to the maintenance of the whole. Crucially, a social system is always deeply linked with its cultural system, deriving its meaning and guiding principles from shared values and beliefs. Moreover, it possesses an inherent capacity for adjustment and adaptation, allowing it to respond to internal and external pressures while pursuing both expressed and implied aims and objects.

Finally, the relationship between a social system and social structure is one of dynamic embodiment. The social system is the overarching, living, and breathing entity – the complex of all patterned human interactions, institutions, and their functions as they operate and evolve. It is the dynamic process of collective life. Social structure, by contrast, refers to the more enduring, patterned, or skeletal arrangement of roles, statuses, norms, and institutions that gives form to the social system. It is the stable framework or blueprint within which the system's elements are organized and its characteristics manifest. Thus, social structure is the anatomy of the social system, providing the predictable and relatively stable organization that allows the system to function, persist, and transmit itself across generations, even as it constantly adjusts and transforms. Understanding these intertwined concepts is essential for comprehending the profound complexity of human society.

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