

Functionalism the
recent years the
concept of



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Functionalism refers “ to the study of social phenomena from the point of view of the functions that particular institutions or social structures, such as class, serve in a society.

“ This method is based on the assumption that the total social system of the society is made up of parts which are interrelated and interdependent. Each part performs a function necessary to the life of the group. These parts could be understood only in relations to the functions that they perform or the needs they meet with. Since this method, presupposes the interdependence of parts, we can understand and study any one part of the social system only in its relationships with other parts as well as with the whole system. For example, the institution of religion in society has to be understood by means of its relationship with other institutions such as morality, family, state, law, etc., and in its relationship with the entire social system. As this method presupposes, religion has its own function to perform or need to fulfill, (and it may be the expression and reinforcement of social solidarity as Durkheim spoke of).

The 19th Century sociologists such as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer had actually laid the foundations for this functional approach. But it was Durkheim who first gave a rigorous concept of social function in his “ The Division of Labour in Society” and in “ The Rules of Sociological Method. ” Functionalism became quite popular at the hands of Radcliffe Brown and Malinowski.

The extreme form of functionalism was propagated by B. Malinowski whose influence pervaded amongst a good number of social anthropologists. He

spoke in terms of the functional integration of every society and its institutions. He dogmatically asserted that “ every social activity had a function by virtue of its existence, and every activity was so completely integrated with all the others.” During the recent years the concept of functionalism has been put to a very novel use by American sociologists such as R. K. Merton and Talcott Parsons. Because of their greater emphasis on social structures, or institutions, functionalism at their hands came to be known as ‘ structural- functional method.

” R. K. Merton has made functionalist approach less dogmatic and less exclusive. He has presented it as one possible approach to the study of social behaviour.

He has made a distinction between “ function and dysfunction”, and also between “ latent and manifest functions.” These new qualities indicate that any social institution may have several functions any one of which may be of greater importance in a particular society. As Bottomore has pointed out “ what is most valuable in the functionalist approach is the greater emphasis and clarity given to the simple idea that in every particular society the different social activities are interconnected”.