

Structural functionalism in india essay sample

[Countries](#), [India](#)



Introduction

Functional approach to the study of phenomena emerged at first in biological sciences and later on adopted social sciences. Structural-Functional approach in the study of society emerged from the writings of early thinkers like August Comte, Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim during the later part of 19th century and became a predominant trend in sociology during the first half of 20th century.

Drawing this model from the west, Indian sociologists began to study Indian society within the framework of structural functional approach. Indology, 'dominant' perspective till 1940s gave way to more systematic study of the Indian society. Structural functional approach was since then predominant in the Indian sociological circle till the end of the 20th century. Students of Indian society, both sociologists and social anthropologists, have undertaken extensive analysis of the caste and village systems in order to understand the unique nature of the Indian society. Among the Indian scholars, G. S. Ghurye, M. N. Srinivas and S. C. Dube may be considered to be in the forefront of structural-functional approach in the study of Indian society.

In this essay, structural functional approach in India has been explained. In order to understand clearly how structural functional approach has been used to explicate the Indian social reality, MN Srinivas's seminal work 'Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India' has been discussed with special emphasis on Sanskritisation process. No perspective is beyond criticism and this approach is no exception. Few of the shortcomings of this perspective has been discussed at the end of the essay.

Structural functional perspective:

Before proceeding to understand Structural functionalist perspective in India, let's first put forth the basic tenets of the approach. The key points of the functionalist perspective may be summarized by a comparison drawn from biology. A biologist carries out the study of an organism, say human body, by analyzing various parts, such as brain, lungs, heart and liver. However if each part is examined in isolation, it will not reveal the entire working and maintenance of the part unless studied in relation to other parts comprising the whole organism. Functionalism as an approach adopts a similar view.

Functional approach to the study of society views society in terms of its constituent parts and their relationship with each other in order to maintain the society as a whole. Radcliffe-Brown defines function of any social institution in terms of the contribution it makes to the maintenance of the whole society. Functionalism begins with the observation that behaviour in society is structured. Relationships between the members of society are organized in terms of rules or norms and hence patterned and recurrent. Values provide general guidelines for behaviour. The structure of the society may be seen as the sum total of normative behavior - sum total of social relationships, which are governed by norms.

According to Radcliffe-Brown, social structure refers to ' person to person relationship institutionally defined'. The main parts of society, its institutions such as the family, the economy, the educational and political systems are major aspects of social structure. These parts of the social structure have their contribution to make for the maintenance and survival of the society. In

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other words, each part of social structure has a specific function to perform towards maintenance of the society. From a functional perspective, society is regarded as a system. A system is an entity made up of interrelated parts which are interdependent. Changes in the functioning of any part will in some way, affect every other part and the system as a whole. These parts are integrated and collectively contribute towards the maintenance of the order and stability of the system. Functionalists believe in consensus, order and stability of the system. Unlike the evolutionists, the functionalists search for the origin of institutions in terms of the essential functions they perform.

Structural functionalist perspective in India

The structural- functionalists view that the Indian society is made up of castes as significant parts that collectively constitute the social system. Castes form the units or the building blocks of Indian social structure since they have been enduring or lasting groups that determine the person to person institutionally defined relationship in the society. Ghurye underlines the basic features of castes as units of Indian social system.

Methodological approach:

Dominant ' book view' of Indology is replaced with ' field view' of the structural functional approach. Here, Book view indicates the understanding of the society from the books and literature available and is otherwise known as Indological approach. Field view indicates mainly the method of participant observation. This has changed the way in which knowledge is produced in the Indian sociology. Methods adopted increasingly tilted

towards the qualitative methods in order to get the comprehensive, holistic understanding of the society. Few of the structural functionalist approach has been discussed here.

M N Srinivas:

Srinivas was basically interested not to understand the countrymen through the Western books or through sacred books and literature rather was interested to study them from direct observation and his field experiences. So he made an intensive study on the Coorgs. Srinivas studied mostly about the caste and religion to highlight the structural-functional aspects and the dynamics of caste system.

SC Dube:

Dube has mostly focused his writings on India's changing villages. His later writings also maintained the same insight into India's social reality, gained from a macro-perspective, while simultaneously demanding precision in theoretical formulations and empirical verification of these propositions. Dube has always advocated for the interdisciplinary orientation and a promoter of research interest. So he had always looked at things in a different perspective, which reflects his multidimensional personality. Dube proposed a more comprehensive frame of reference for the study of 'complex cultures' to understand Indian reality. He applied deductive-positivistic rather than inductive-inferential approach, based on null situation like 'no change in modern India' or 'India's unchanging villages'.

Explicating social reality

In this part of the essay, few aspects of MN Srinivas's study of the Coorg is

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discussed. The study cleared the misconception of timelessness in the Indian society. Social structure in traditional India was considered immutable. There was the strong notion of timelessness and changelessness as far as traditional Indian society was concerned, although, this is largely the construction of Orientalism. Caste in India is often cited as enduring institution which allow no social mobility, for both individual and group. It was viewed as rigid and closed stratification system where status was ascribed not acquired one. This view is buttressed by the 'book view' of the Indian society. In this context, through field study in Coorg, Karnataka, M N Srinivas puts forth the concept of Sanskritization through which he captured the processes of change that occur in traditional Indian Society.

Caste and Sanskritization:

Sanskritization occurs in the structural framework of caste. Generally speaking the castes which occupies the higher hierarchy are more sanskritized than the castes that occupy lower hierarchy. Emulation is not without any barriers. Barriers such as , sanctions against imitation of the norms, hostile attitude of the locally dominant caste, or of the king of the region, failed to deter the processes of Sanskritization. Certain innovations by the local castes help them to transcend these barriers. For example, ban on vedic ritual is circumvented by restricting the ban only to the chanting of mantras from the Vedas. This is called as 'legal fictions' by Srinivas.

Sanskritization occurs through chain reaction also. That is, each group took from the one higher to it, and in turn gave to the group below. Sometimes, however, as in the case of the Vishwakarma brahmins, Smiths of South India,

a caste tried to jump over all its structural neighbors, and claimed equality with the Brahmins. Upward movement in the hierarchy generally gives higher ritual status. But there could be hiatus between ritual and economic and political status of that particular caste. Thus M N Srinivas effectively used the structural approach to provide understanding of the social change in the traditional Indian society.

Criticism:

Structural functionalist view points are often coloured by dominant class and caste interests. Although Srinivas has talked about the economic and technological development, he has not focused of the lower segment of society. His ideas on Sanskritization and Dominant caste has made him closer to Hindutva ideology of cultural nationalism. The two processes of social change, Sanskritization and Westernization are regarded as “ limited processes in modern India and it is not possible to understand one without reference to the other.” This approach does not explain the presence of the conflict of the society in the effective manner. Various social movements that sprung across India since independence can not be explained by this approach. Feminist perspective is almost absent in this approach although MN Srinivas made few passing references in the study of Rampura village. This approach cannot adequately capture the various processes that happen in diverse India. For example, Sansritisation in one part of India may altogether happen in a different way.

Conclusion

This essay has made an attempt for understanding of the Structural-Functional perspective. While understanding the Indian Society it was a made an attempt through various studies Indian villages reflecting both the structural and the fictional aspects of Indian Villages. Both the scholars have made the effort to make it clear that Indian Villages are structurally and functionally reflected as a whole through this approach.

Despite its inadequacies, Structural functional approach has contributed to the growth of Indian sociology.