
UNIT 9 SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Structure

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit deals with the term social structure. To better understand this term you will also come across a discussion on the concepts of status and role, labour and social stratification.

After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- understand the term social structure;
- explain the concepts of status and role;
- analyse the place of division of labour; and
- comprehend stratification in society.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we will talk about the concept of 'social structure'. The term has been used by several social scientists in various ways, because of its various interpretations the concept of social structure can sometimes be confusing and difficult to grasp.

We will make an attempt to make the term social structure and its associated aspects and concepts as easily understandable as possible. We will start our discussion with the concept of social structure, followed by a discussion on two very important elements of structure – status and role. We will discuss various aspects of these two.

9.2 UNDERSTANDING THE TERM SOCIAL STRUCTURE

When one talks about structure, the image that comes to mind is a frame or shape of a building etc. But in the social field, the word structure, refers to a different thing. It does not refer to a concrete reality like a building frame, for example, it is a frame nevertheless, a pattern of inter-relationships that have been found enduring and long lasting.

Let us examine such a framework called the caste structure.

For example, the caste system in India has a definite structure where the Brahmins are at the top enjoying a priestly role, in the traditional sense, and the Shudras are at the bottom toiling over land, etc. These top and bottom positions also indicate a relationship of do and don't between these Jatis. If we **look** carefully at this structure we find that the relationships and interactions **have** changed overtime. A Brahmin may not be only a practising priest, **he/she** may also be a scientist or a doctor. And a Shudra may have risen up to become a merchant or an influential person in society. Since social structures are created by people, they can change over time. In order to be able to say that a structure exists, it must persist over time. If the structure of a small group changed completely it would be inappropriate to say that the group had a **social structure**. Although change is always possible, small groups and larger organisations do not change easily. Thus, structures do change over time, despite their **enduring** character. If we take the example of caste structure in India, we do find that despite the changes **the** caste structure still gives us a picture of the hierarchical structure of our society. When we talk of hierarchy we mean not just a vertical arrangement such as Brahmin on the top rung, followed by **Kashtriya** and Vaishya with the fourth rung taken up by the Shudras and lastly, the untouchables having the most marginalized positions. But we are also talking about their relative power in society.

These positions are **not** merely classificatory arrangements but indicate a great deal and many aspects of the relative position and power each of these segments enjoy in society. We can say then that when we are **referring** to the caste system we are talking about patterned interactions of a society that reflect an **hierarchical** arrangement, which in turn indicates the economic, political, cultural interaction among groups and their status in society.

From the previous discussion **on** social structure, with caste structure **as an** example, you must have gathered the following when you think of the **term** social **structure**:

- Social structure is a patterned set of rules.
- These rules and frameworks to be considered a social structure must continue and endure over a time.
- Since social structure is a set of **rules** which are made by human beings they are liable to change in the long run.
- Social structures reflect some dimensions of interaction such as power, **economic** resources, prestige, values, etc.

Having come to a basic understanding of social structure you must be wondering