

Subject: Anthropology

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Paper No. : 10 Theories and methods in social and cultural Anthropology

Module : 09 Functionalism: Malinowski



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 **Pathshala**
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Content

1. Introduction
2. Prominent Theorists
 - 2.1. August Comte
 - 2.2. Herbert Spencer
 - 2.3. Bronislaw Malinowski
 - 2.4. Emile Durkhiem
 - 2.5. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown
 - 2.6. E.E. Evans-Pritchard
 - 2.7. Sir Raymond Firth
 - 2.8. Sir Edmund Leach
 - 2.9. Lucy Mair
 - 2.10. Talcott Parsons
 - 2.11. Robert Merton
3. The Concept Of Social Function
 - 3.1. Emile Durkhiem's idea of Function:
 - 3.2: The analogy between social life and organic life
 - 3.3. Modification of Idea of Function
 - 3.4. Different nomenclature for Functionalism
4. Main Schools Of Functionalism
 - 4.1. Malinowski's Functionalism
 - 4.2. Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functional Approach
5. Methodologies

6. Accomplishments
 7. Decline of Functionalism
 8. Criticism
 9. Neo-Functionalism
- Summary

The Learning Outcomes

With the help of following e-text Students will be able

- To build the concepts of functionalism.
- To know about the prominent theorists associated with functionalism.
- To understand various schools of thoughts related to functionalism.
- To know about the causes behind its decline.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Anthropology or in any other discipline, there is always a continuous flow of ideas. One theoretical orientation arises and grows in popularity but as another comes into action; the popularity of the former might get either enhanced or hindered. Mostly the new orientation focuses upon those aspects of a problem which were not considered in the previous one. In social-cultural Anthropology we come across a historical sequence of theoretical approaches as follows:

- a. Evolutionism
- b. Diffusionism
- c. Historical particularism
- d. Functionalism
- e. Neoevolutionism
- f. Structuralism

But here our main concern is **FUNCTIONALISM** which has been considered one of the prominent schools of thoughts in order to understand various aspects of culture and society. Functionalism arose as a reaction to evolutionism and diffusionism in early twentieth century.

Functionalism looks for the function or part that is played by several aspects of culture in order to maintain a social system. It is a framework that considers society as a system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability.

This approach of theoretical orientation looks at both social structure and social function. It describes the inter-relationship between several parts of any society. These parts or the constituent elements of a society could be named as norms, traditions, customs, institutions like economy, kinship, religion etc. These parts are interrelated and interdependent.

Functionalism was mainly led by Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe Brown. Both were purely functionalists but their approach slightly differed as Malinowski is known as functionalist but Radcliffe-Brown is mainly known as Structural Functionalist. Malinowski suggested that individuals have physiological needs (reproduction, food, shelter) and these needs are fulfilled by the social institutions. He talked about four basic "instrumental needs" (economics, social control, education, and political organization), that require institutional devices to get fulfilled. While Radcliffe-Brown focused on social structure rather than biological needs. He considered society as a system. He looked

at institutions as orderly sets of relationships whose function is to maintain the society as a system. Radcliffe-Brown was inspired by August Comte who was also a functionalist.

2. PROMINENT THEORISTS:

2.1. August Comte (1798-1857): He was a French philosopher. He said that science relies upon empirical knowledge. Through his notions of social statistics and social dynamics he established a direction for social research. Through social static's Comte maintained that units of investigation were the individual, family, society and the species. He is known as father of Positivism.

2.2. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903): He was a British Philosopher. He is well known for applying the theory of natural selection in society. His work *Principles of Sociology* is very famous. He used an analogy between society and organism. According to Spencer as the structural parts of the human body like digestive system, muscles, and various other organs function independently to maintain the survival of organism, same way the social structures work together to maintain the society. Spencer's main elements of study included an equilibrium model with respect to the problems of social order and social change. He also focused upon the functional requirements that are common to all societies.

2.3. Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942): He was one of the founding fathers of British social anthropology. He did his honours in subjects like mathematics, physics and philosophy and in 1910 he enrolled in the London School of Economics to study anthropology.

With Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski pushed for a paradigm shift in British Anthropology that brought a change from the historical to the present study of social institutions. This theoretical shift gave rise to functionalism and established fieldwork as the constitutive experience of social anthropology. Malinowski's functionalism was greatly influential in the 1920s and 1930s. As applied methodology, this approach worked, except for situations of social or cultural change. However, Malinowski made his greatest contribution as an ethnographer. He also considered the importance of studying social behavior and social relations in their concrete cultural contexts through participant-observation. He considered it essential to consider the observable differences between what people say they do and what they actually do. His detailed descriptions of Trobriand social life and thoughts are among the

well known ethnographies of world and his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) is one of the most widely read works of anthropology. He was one of the leading Functionalists of 20th century.



Fig1: Malinowski with native, Trobriand Islands 1918

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bronis%C5%82aw_Malinowski#/media/File:Wmalinowski_triobriand_isles_1918.jpg)

2.4. Emile Durkheim(1858-1917): David Émile Durkheim was a French Sociologist and philosopher. He was famous for his views on structure of society. According to Durkheim functionalism emphasizes a societal equilibrium. In case of any disturbance in the social structure, the various interrelated parts of the system tend to maintain the social structure and solidarity. These parts make up the whole of society. Emile Durkheim argues that the functions of a social system should be studied by an ethnographer and it should be understood how these institutions function together to maintain the social whole. He defined the Social Function of a social institution as a correspondence between it and its needs (*besoins*). This idea of need was later on modified by Radcliffe-Brown who found it more biological. Radcliffe-Brown replaced 'need' with the *necessary conditions of existence for human societies*'. He was succeeded in establishing an objective basis for a science of social pathology.

2.5. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955): He is known as founding father of functionalism associated with the branch known as **structural-functional approach**. He studied moral science, which

incorporated philosophy, economics and psychology at Cambridge. He earned the nick-name "Anarchy Brown" during this time because of his political interests and affiliations. After completing his degree in 1904, he conducted fieldwork in the Andaman Islands and Western Australia. Radcliffe-Brown's major emphasis was on the contribution of various phenomena to the maintenance of the social structure. He was mainly focused on the institutions of kinship and descent and argued that these parts (institutions) of a society determine the character of family organization, politics, economy, and inter-group relations. He was influenced by Emile Durkhiem but he modified the idea of need given by Emile Durkhiem. He also pointed out several drawbacks in the analogy drawn between organic life and social life.



Fig2: A.R. Radcliffe-Brown

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Radcliffe-Brown#/media/File:Alfred_Radcliffe-Brown.jpg)

2.6. E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973): He studied history at Oxford and anthropology at the University of London. Evans-Pritchard was considered as one of the most notable British anthropologists after the Second World War. He is best remembered for his work with the Nuer, Azande, Anuak and Shilluk in Africa. His publication *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937) was the first ethnography of an African people that was published by a professionally trained anthropologist. His work among the Nuer is also well known. In opposition to Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard rejected the idea of social anthropology as a science and considered it as a comparative history. His work among African societies neglects to treat women as a significant part of the social whole. In the beginning he followed functionalism but later on shifted to humanistic approach.

2.7. Sir Raymond Firth (1901-2002): He was a social and economic anthropologist from New Zealand. He is well known for establishing a form of British Economic Anthropology. Firth conducted research in most areas of social anthropology, but his intensive fieldwork in Tikopia is well known. Perhaps his greatest contribution to the functionalist paradigm is the distinction he pointed out between social structure and social organization. Firth's other significant contribution to anthropology includes development of a theoretical framework emphasizing choice, decision, organization and process in social and institutional behaviour.

2.8. Sir Edmund Leach (1910-1989) : He was very influential in social anthropology. He was focused upon the complex interrelationship of ideal models and political action in a historical context. He was an ethnographer and his most influential ethnographic works were based on fieldwork in Burma, Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah), and Sri Lanka. His initial theoretical approach was functionalist, Leach then shifted to processual analysis. Leach was later influenced by Claude Levi-Strass and adopted a structuralist approach. His 1962 publication *Rethinking Anthropology* offered a challenge to structural-functionalism.

2.9. Lucy Mair (1901-1986): Lucy Philip Mair was a British anthropologist. She was involved in the subject of social organization. She was an advocate of applied anthropology and argued that it should be a separate discipline. She was more concerned with public affairs.

2.10. Talcott Parsons (1902-1979): He was an American sociologist who contributed to the structural-functional school. He conceptualized the social universe in terms of four types and levels of action systems i.e. culture, society, personality, and behavioural with each system having to meet four functional needs i.e. adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency). He analyzed the operation and interchanges of structures and processes within and between systems by taking these points into consideration. He used the term Structural Functionalism. He valued broad comparative studies.

2.11. Robert Merton (1910-2003): He was an American Sociologist. He always stressed upon the importance of empirical research. His functionalist theories are "middle-range" variety. Middle range theories are applicable to limited range of data.

Merton came to distinguish between two usages for the word **function**:

- Manifest Functions: Those functions that are expected.
- Latent Functions: These are hidden functions and are not intended.

3. THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL FUNCTION

The term 'function' has several meanings ranging from Biological, physical sciences to Social Sciences. In Biological sciences the term acquired a definite meaning in terms of a relationship between an organism and its parts of the organs. The use of this term in Social cultural Anthropology came into light in 19th century. The 19th century sociologists August Comte and Herbert Spencer regarded groups of societies or individual societies as similar to biological organisms.

3.1. Emile Durkhiem's idea of Function:

He argued that any sociological explanation should consist of two major components i.e. 1.) the cause of the phenomena and 2.) its function. In Social cultural anthropology the term function is issued in preference to 'end or purpose'.

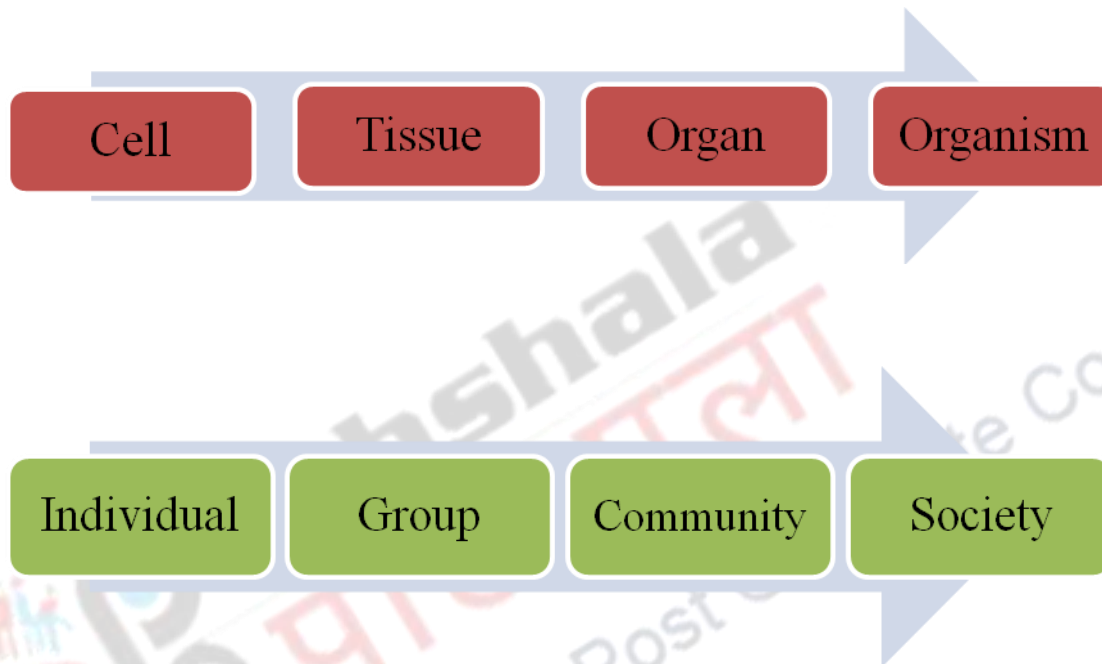
Emile Durkhiem (1895) described the function as follows:

- Function refers to the contribution a part makes to the whole. Here the term whole refers to the social system or society.
- This contribution is for the well being and maintenance of the whole.
- This contribution is to fulfil or satisfy the needs of whole. The French word *besoin* was used to denote these needs.
- Once the needs are fulfilled, the whole endures itself.
- Thus function is a positive contribution.

3.2: The analogy between social life and organic life:

This idea of function came up from *an analogy drawn between an organism and society* (a concept propounded by Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkhiem. There were mainly three analogy in a society as follows.

- Society is like an **organism**



While dealing with the analogy of social life and organic life, one can recognise the **Phenomena of Dysfunction**. This phenomena deal with the efficiency of the function performed by an organism. The Greeks of 5th century B.C. applied the same notion to the society and distinguished between two conditions i.e. *eunomia* and *dysnomia*

- **eunomia**: This is a condition of good social order and social health.
- **dysnomia**: This condition refers to ill social health.

In 19th century Durkhiem in his application of notion of function tried to find a basis for social pathology.

- Society as a **mode of communication** or mode of transferring information
- Society as a **drammatical metaphor**

3.3. Modification of Idea of Function:

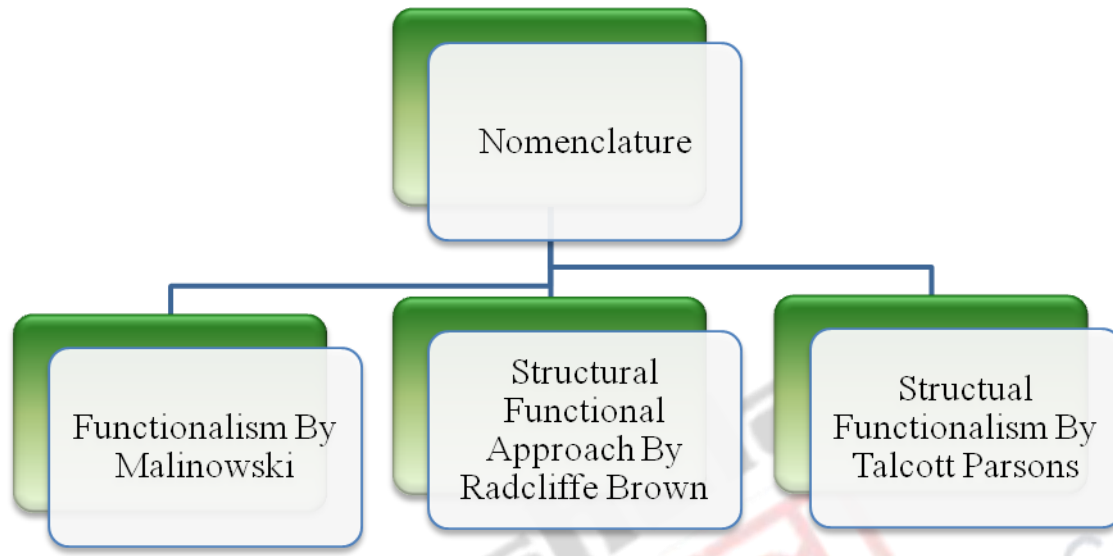
The concept of function that was based upon the analogy drawn between an organism and society was further modified by A.R. Radcliffe Brown. He did not accept the term need as the word is more biological in sense. He argued that the society has to be conceptualised in terms of its own characteristics rather than being perpetually dependent upon biological aspects. He accounted for a difference in society and organism. The major differences that were brought into account between an organism and a society by Radcliffe Brown are as follows:

- He replaced the idea of need (*besoin*) with the idea of ‘*necessary conditions of existence*’. These conditions are to be fulfilled in order to maintain the social structure.
- He also accounted for the major differences between an organism and a society. He said that these differences should be kept into mind lest we become biological in our approach. The main differences noted down by Radcliffe-Brown are:
 - An organism doesn’t change its form while its life time. For example, ‘A pig does not become a hippopotamus’, whereas society during its lifetime may change its form. For example: A totalitarian society may become an egalitarian society.
 - An organism can be studied even after its death or it stops functioning via post mortem but a society can be studied only when its functions.

Radcliffe-Brown considered Structure and Function as inseparable concepts so his approach was named as Structural Functional Approach.

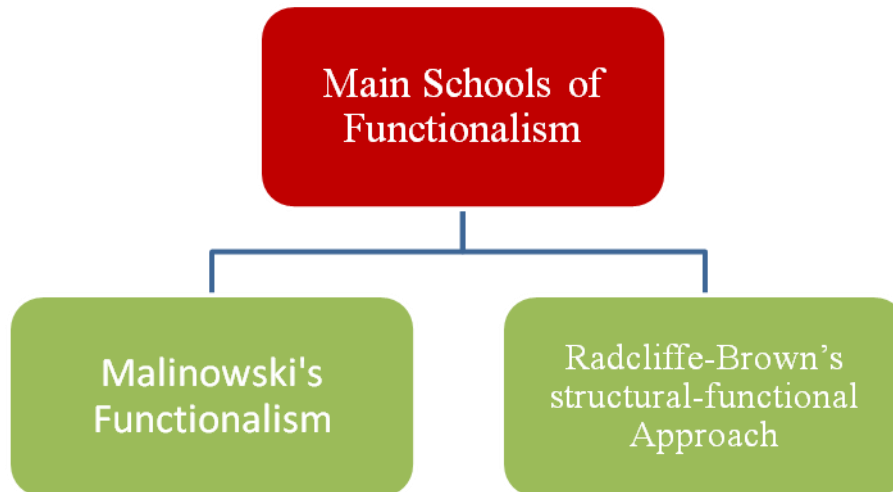
3.4. Different nomenclature for Functionalism

Different functionalists used different terms for this approach. Some of the nomenclature given by prominent functionalists is as follows.



4. MAIN SCHOOLS OF FUNCTIONALISM:

Two versions of functionalism developed between 1910 and 1930: Malinowski's functionalism; and Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalism.



4.1. Malinowski's Functionalism :

Malinowski was an anthropologist from Poland and is one of the most famous anthropologists of 20th century. Malinowski at times is also known as father of Ethnography due to his extensive fieldwork in Trobriand Islands. He was strongly functionalist. This can be understood in following two ways:

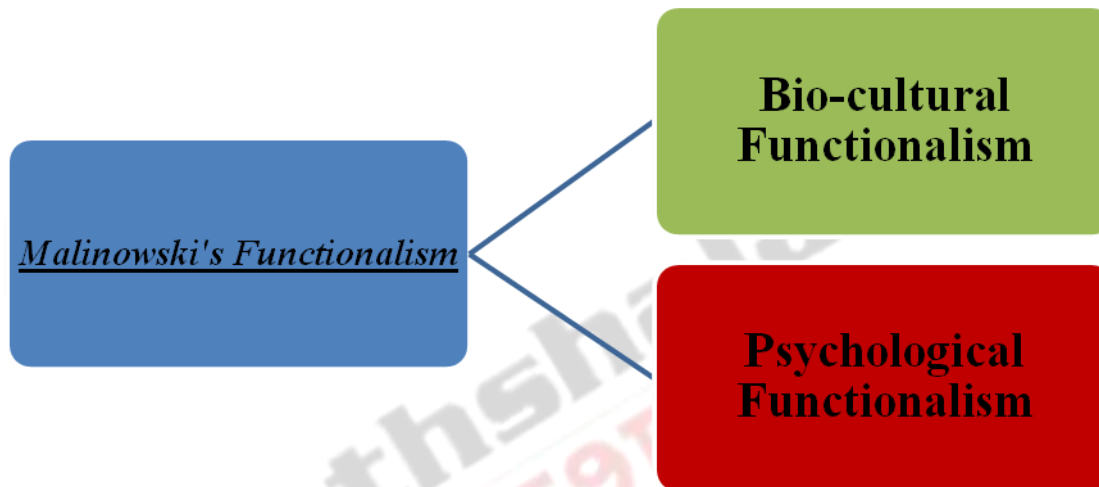
- He believed that all customs and institutions in a society are integrated and interrelated so that if one changes the other would change as well. Each then is a function of the other.

For example: Ethnography could begin from anywhere in a society but eventually get at the rest of the culture. A study of Trobriand fishing could lead to the ethnographer to study the entire economic system say role of magic, religion, myths, trade and kinship etc as all these institutions are interconnected. A change in any of the part of society would ultimate affect the other. So in order to do a holistic study the ethnographer might have to consider other parts of the whole also.

- The second strand of Malinowski's Functionalism is known as 'needs' functionalism'. Malinowski (1944) believed that human beings have a set of universal biological needs and various customs and institutions are developed to fulfil those needs. The function of any practice was the role it played in satisfying these biological needs such as need of food, shelter etc.

Malinowski looked at culture, need of people and thought that the role of culture is to satisfy needs of people. Malinowski identified seven biological needs of individuals. Due to the emphasis on biological needs in Malinowski's approach, his functionalism is also known as **Bio-cultural Functionalism**.

Malinowski said, 'culture is a need surveying system'. Culture is a system which satisfies needs such as food, reproduction, security, health, protection etc. As Malinowski gave importance to individual needs so his functionalism is also known as 'Psychological Functionalism'.



4.2. Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functional Approach:

Radcliffe-Brown was influenced by the French sociological school and emphasised upon the social function. This school developed in the 1890s around the work of Emile Durkheim who argued that "social phenomena constitute a domain, or order, of reality that is independent of psychological and biological facts. As per this sociological school the social phenomena, must be explained in terms of other social phenomena, and not by reference to psychobiological needs.

- Radcliffe-Brown focused on the conditions under which social structures are maintained. He also believed that there are certain laws that regulate the functioning of societies.
- He also modified the idea of need and replaced it with necessary conditions for existence for human societies and these conditions can be discovered by proper scientific enquiry.
- He argued that the organic analogy should be used carefully. In a biological organism the functioning of any organ is termed as the activity of that organ. But in a social system the continuity of structure is maintained by the process of social life.

In Radcliffe-Brown's concept of function, the notion of structure is involved. This structure involves several constituent unit entities which maintain the continuity of social structure.

The year **1922** is known as '*the year of wonders of Functionalism*' (*annus mirabilis*) as both Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown published their work as an outcome of intensive fieldwork in the same year. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown published '*The Andaman Islanders*' and Bronislaw Malinowski published '*Argonauts of the Western Pacific*' in the same year i.e. 1922.

5. METHODOLOGIES

Functionalism had a great contribution in anthropology. Functionalism gave importance to social institutions by considering them as active and integrated parts of a social system which function in order to maintain social solidarity. Though Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown differed in their approaches to functional interpretation, but both of them led to a "shift in the interpretation of social life.

Although functionalism had certain limitations but it had a great methodological contribution. It pronounced **fieldwork** and in-depth studies of societies which resulted into great literature in the form of ethnography and monographs. The functional relationship between institutions and social structure enhanced collection of data.

All the anthropologists who followed functional approach were mainly ethnographers who did intensive field work among tribal societies and tried to understand their social system with the help of several institutions associated with those societies.

6. ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Functionalism had influenced anthropologist to a great extent. The functional approach focuses upon the institutions and customs not just as mere a part of any society but it looks at the functions these parts play in order to maintain the social continuity.
- This school of thoughts has contributed to the concept of culture that the culture plays an important role in fulfilling the needs of individuals.
- The functional approach studies the inter-relationship between parts and the whole. This inter-related study provides a framework for data collection.

7. DECLINE OF FUNCTIONALISM

- Functionalism was at its peak of influence in 1940s and 1950s but by 1960s there was a rapid decline in its influence.

- The place of functionalism was taken up by more conflict-oriented approaches that were arising in Europe.
- More recently the place of functionalism was taken up by Structuralism.
- Although the functionalist themes became absent from empirical sociology but certain functionalist ideas could be still seen in the idea that parts of a society are interdependent, if a part changes, others also change.

8. CRITICISM

- Functionalism became dominant in the 1950s and 1960s but with time, criticism of this approach has come up, resulting in its decline in the early 1970s. Interactionists criticised the functionalism for the complex nature of inter-relatedness.
- Functional theory also has been criticized for its disregard of the historical process and for assuming that societies are in a state of equilibrium by the means of functioning of its parts.
- Functionalism considers the functions of parts of a whole to fulfil the needs but it did not look into the matter why and how these needs emerged.
- Functionalism was greatly criticised for neglecting the historical perspective. Its anti historical approach made it almost impossible to understand the social processes.
- Ecological factors were also ignored in functional approach.
- Functionalism ignored inequalities like race, gender, class which are the main causative agent of conflict and tension.

9. NEO-FUNCTIONALISM

Neo-functionalism arose as a revision of Structural functionalism during 1960s. Neo-functionalists tried to analyze phenomena in terms of specific functional requisites. They examined variety of phenomena. Neo-functionalism shares certain similarities with functionalism as it considers issues of social differentiation, integration, and social evolution. Some neo-functionalists also examined how cultural processes (including ritual, ideology, and values) integrate social structures. In neo-functionalism there is little emphasis on how the needs of whole are fulfilled.

Neo-functionalism differs from structural functionalism by focusing on the modelling of systems-level interactions. The former deals with environmental systems and took the ecosystem into consideration. Structural functionalism considers culture as a system while neo-functionalism considers ecosystem.

Neo-functionalists are concerned with issues that relate directly to fitness similar to that in evolutionary biology. Rather than separating humans from other animals, neo-functionalists focus on groups as biologically constituted populations that live in cooperative social groups.

Some well known neo-functionalists are:

- Niklas Luhmann
- Anthony Giddens
- Jeffrey C. Alexander

SUMMARY

Functionalism arose as the dominant school of thoughts in early 20th century in social cultural anthropology. It came into consideration with Bronislaw Malinowski's ethnographic account the Argonauts of Western Pacific which was published in 1922, the same year when Radcliffe Brown published his work that he did on Andaman Islanders. Malinowski focussed upon biological needs that are fulfilled by various parts of a whole. He recognised several biological needs. He argued that the function of the culture is to fulfil these needs. Malinowski's approach is known as functionalism.

Radcliffe-Brown was influenced by the concept of function given by Emile Durkhiem who also talked about analogy between organic and social life. He was also focused upon the social structure and how this structure is maintained by units of whole. His approach got famous by the name of Structural-functionalism.

Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown are two leading figures of functional analysis that influenced many other sociologist and philosophers in the light of functionalism. Other prominent functionalists are Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, Edmund Leach, Sir Raymond Firth, etc. There are certain ideas there are common to all functional approaches, these are:

- Society or culture may be conceptualised as a system.
- As a system, society or culture consists of parts. These parts could be groups, associations, institutions, organisations. These parts are interconnected, interrelated or interdependent. Each part is equally important.
- Each part has duties which are assigned to it.

- A change in one part brings about a subsequent change in other parts.
- Whole is greater than mere summation of parts.

During 1960s-1970s the functionalism was criticised as a result of rise of conflict theory in Europe. The reason behind the decline of this approach was the lack of several elements into it. It lacks inequalities. It did not consider historical perspective and ecological factors etc. Neo-functionalism arose in which the theorists tried to overcome the drawbacks of functionalism. Main neo-functionalists are Niklas Luhmann, Anthony Giddens, Jeffrey C. Alexander.

