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## **UNIT 29 MANIFEST AND LATENT FUNCTION — MERTON**

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### **29.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After studying this unit you should be able to

- distinguish between the concepts of manifest and latent function
- discuss why and how Robert K. Merton gives a new meaning to functional analysis and differs from its conventional postulates and paradigms
- show how a concept like latent function enriches our perception of the social world
- look at our own social institutions and cultural practices from a refreshingly innovative angle.

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## 29.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous Units 27 and 28 of this Block you learnt about the contributions of Talcott Parsons to the field of sociology. This unit intends to make you familiar with the contribution Robert Merton made to the subject. Merton is another eminent American Sociologist and a student of Parsons. He has contributed significantly to the growth of functional analysis in sociology. You already know something about functionalism.

In this unit, particularly in the first section, i.e. section 29.2 you will learn about the special meaning that sociologists attach to the word 'function'. You will learn not solely about the meaning of function; but also about its two types, viz, manifest and latent function. In addition you will be told about the negation of function i.e. dysfunction.

In the second section, i.e. section 29.3 we will discuss the postulates of traditional functionalism, particularly the kind of functionalism propagated by social anthropologists like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. Then, we will discuss how Robert Merton disagrees with the conventional postulates and proposed new changes.

In the third section, section 29.4 you will learn about the paradigm for functional analysis, which Merton believes, enables the social scientist to be clear about his or her priorities, the areas to be explored, and the questions to be raised. A paradigm, as you will learn, is needed to avoid chaos and confusion in your research.

And, finally, in the fourth section, i.e. section 29.5 you will learn how a concept like latent function, as Merton emphasises, enables the sociologist to expand the realm of knowledge and explore new areas of sociological enquiry.

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## 29.2 CONCEPTS OF FUNCTION

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Perhaps it is not difficult to describe the term function. You already know how your society functions. You read a newspaper. And you know that it informs you of the world around you. You go to your university or to your workplace. And you know that it provides education and knowledge and prepares you for the world you are going to enter. In the case of your workplace, it has a certain organisation and way of functioning. Or as a voter you cast your vote and elect your representatives, because you would like your views to be represented. In other words, it is not difficult for you to understand that all that constitutes of your society, be it the newspaper you read, the university you rely on for your studies, the place of your work, the democratic institutions in which you participate, helps you to relate creatively and positively to your society. In other words, social institutions tend to intensify the degree of your participation in your society as an insider, as an active member. The result is that the cohesiveness of the society is established. This is precisely the function of social institutions.

Before you begin to read Robert Merton's functional analysis, you can safely conclude that, as a sociologist, when you use the word 'function'

you are referring to how a social institution or a cultural practice intensifies the cohesiveness of the society. In other words, society functions because its constituent parts, its various institutions or cultural practices, do contribute to the formation of social unity and to order and cohesiveness. Function is precisely this contribution that brings order, unity and cohesiveness in a society.

Again there are some functions you are aware of and there are some other functions you are not aware of. Ask yourself why, as a student, you are regularly asked to sit for examinations. The examinations, you know, test your knowledge, enable you to work hard and, as a result, you get stimulated to sharpen your skill and intelligence so that you can become a better member of the society. This is undoubtedly the manifest function of the examinations. We are sure that you are aware of it.

But that is not all. The examinations serve another function which you may not be aware of. The examinations tend to convince you that there are 'good' students and 'not so good' students; not everyone is equal; merit or intelligence or knowledge is not evenly distributed. In other words, these examinations, in the ultimate analysis, induce you to accept that even in a democracy some kind of hierarchy is unavoidable. This acceptance reduces the possibility of conflict. In fact, this is a lesson of adjustment. Society retains its order, unity, and cohesiveness, despite its inherent inequality or hierarchy. This is the latent function of the examination system, the deeper meaning of which you may not always be aware of.

This brief introduction is likely to arouse your interest. You are now eager to know how Merton redefines functional analysis. But before that you ought to be clear about the concept of function. Merton wants you to examine and re-examine this concept from different perspectives so that its analytical significance comes through clearly. You will find a detailed elaboration of this in his famous book (1949) *Social Theory and Social Structure*.

### **29.2.0 Different Meanings of Function**

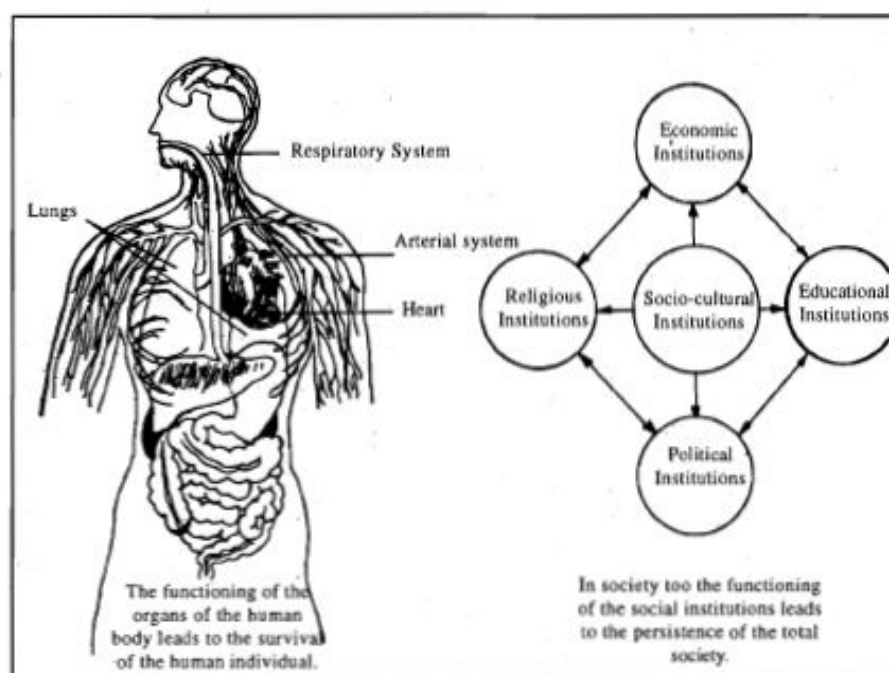
Remember when, as a student of sociology, you are using the word 'function', you have to be aware of its difference from other connotations assigned to the same word. As Merton says, there are generally five connotations assigned to the word 'function'.

First, function often refers to some public gathering or festive occasion, usually conducted with ceremonial overtones. And as Merton says, and you too may well anticipate, this popular usage of function does not have the slightest similarity with the sociological concept you are dealing with.

Secondly, the term is often equated with occupation. But this is not what a sociologist is interested in.

Thirdly, function is often used to refer to the activities assigned to the incumbent of a social status. For example, the function of a kindergarten teacher is to educate the child; the function of a doctor is to cure his or her patient and so on. Yet, says Merton, this definition is not sufficient. According to Merton such an understanding diverts attention from the fact

that functions are performed not only by the occupant of designated positions, but by a whole range of standardised activities, social processes, cultural patterns and belief systems found in society, Fourthly, function has got a mathematical meaning. It refers to a variable in relation to one or more variables in terms of which it may be expressed.



**Figure 29.1: Concept of Function in Sociology Adopted from the Biological Sciences**

But, as Merton says, it is the fifth connotation, which is central to functional analysis. The inspiration behind this usage has been the biological sciences, where the term function is used to refer to these ‘vital or organic processes which contribute to the maintenance of the organism’.

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, the noted social anthropologist, used this connotation in social sciences. ‘The function of any recurrent activity’, according to Radcliffe-Brown, ‘is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it makes to the maintenance of structural continuity’. According to Malinowski, another noted anthropologist, the function of social or cultural items is the part they play within the integral system of culture by the manner in which they are related to each other within the system.

Now it is for you to reflect on this special connotation of ‘function’ which, as a student of sociology, you are expected to use time and again. There are two things that you ought to remember.

- First, what you call society is not chaotic. It has an order, a structure. In other words, all that constitutes your society, its innumerable parts like polity, economy, religion, family, education cannot be seen in isolation. All parts are integrally related. It is this inherent relationship that sustains the society.
- Secondly, in order to appreciate the inherent relationship, you have to see how each part contributes to the maintenance of the inherent order and structure. It is this contribution that is called function. So you can say, education has got a function, precisely because the contribution of education is that it gives you knowledge and skill and, as a result, society both coheres and progresses.

### 29.2.1 Objective Consequences and Subjective Dispositions

It is at this juncture that Merton would invite you to raise a meaningful question, Who would decide the function of a social institution or a cultural practice? The participant or the observer?

It would be easier for you to appreciate the meaning of this question if you think of a living example. For instance, someone is about to get married and you ask her why is she getting herself into it. What is its function? It is quite possible that she, the participant, may tell you that she is marrying for the fulfilment of her human needs and her need for love. But, then, Merton would say that the participant is confusing her own subjective motives with the real, objective function of marriage. The objective function of marriage or family is not love but the socialisation of the child.

That is why, says Merton, the concept of function involves the standpoint of the observer, not necessarily that of the participant. In other words, social function refers to observable objective consequences, not subjective dispositions. A school child may think that he goes to school because he finds his friends there; but the function of school is something else; it is to add to and aid in the growth of knowledge that the society needs in order to sustain itself.

In other words, in order to see the function of a social institution or a cultural practice, it is not sufficient for the social scientist to remain contented with the subjective dispositions or the motives an actor attaches to it. Instead, the social scientist has to see the objective consequences: how really does the institution contribute to the cohesiveness of the society.

### 29.2.2 Function, Dysfunction, Manifest Function and Latent Function

It is now clear that functions are those observed consequences, which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system. But, then not everything is functional. Not everything helps to make for the adaptation of a system. So Merton uses another concept called dysfunction. Dysfunctions, according to Merton, are those observed consequences, which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of the system.

Imagine your own society. Modern India, you would agree, intends to be mobile, democratic, participatory and egalitarian. In such a society the institution of caste, far from having a function, has dysfunctions. Instead of intensifying the democratic ideal, caste tends to lessen the degree of mobility, democratisation and participation. That is why, castes may be classified as dysfunctional.

With these clarifications it is no longer difficult for you to come to the main problem, manifest function and latent function. Be it a manifest function or a latent function, it is the objective, observed consequence which makes for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system. There is, however, only one difference and it goes to the credit of Merton that he is able to bring it out sharply and intelligently. Whereas the participants are aware of the manifest function, they are not aware of the latent function. In other words, the latent function is neither intended nor recognised.

Why is this so? This is because the participants can see what is immediately visible; they cannot always see the deeper or latent meaning of what they do. But for social scientists, the task is to go beyond the common sense perception of the participants and see the latent consequences of social practices.

Think of Emile Durkheim's famous analysis of the social functions of punishment. Its immediate, manifest function is obvious. Everyone knows it. It reminds the criminal that society would not permit his **deviance**. But, then, it has a latent function too, which is not generally recognised. The latent function of punishment, Durkheim would argue, is not what happens to the criminal; instead, it is deeper; it intensifies society's faith in its collective conscience; the punishment of the criminal is an occasion that reminds the society of its force and its collective morals.

### Check Your Progress 1

i) Write in about six lines how sociologists use the word 'function'.

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ii) What is the difference between latent and manifest function? Write in about four lines.

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iii) Give a simple example of 'dysfunction'? Use about three lines.

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## 29.3 POSTULATES OF FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

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Robert Merton, you would realise, is no ordinary functionalist. What separates him from the traditional ones is his new insights, the way he goes beyond the boundaries of traditional functionalism. That is why it is important to know how Merton refutes the postulates of traditional



functionalism, the postulates of unity, universalism and indispensability and proposes refreshingly innovative changes, the changes that enable him to see that everything is not functional. Merton argues that society is divided into groups and sub-groups and what is functional for a particular group may be dysfunctional for others. Moreover, nothing is indispensable; there are always functional alternatives and equivalents.

### **29.3.1 Postulate of Functional Unity**

Radcliffe-Brown, says Merton, is one of the chief exponents of the postulate of functional unity. To quote from Radcliffe-Brown, 'The function of a particular social usage is the contribution it makes to the total social life as the functioning of the total social system' (Merton 1968: 25). What is implicit in such a postulate is that a social function has a certain kind of unity and all parts of the social system work together with a sufficient degree of harmony or internal consistency.

Perhaps the postulate of functional unity makes sense and remains valid in relatively homogeneous, non-literate civilisation. But in a modern complex society, the postulate of functional unity, as Merton argues, needs to be redefined. First, Merton doubts whether all societies are solidly integrated and hence every culturally standardised practice or belief is functional for the society as a whole. Secondly, Merton wants the sociologists to remember that social usages or beliefs may be functional for some groups and dysfunctional for others in the same society.

Merton's critique is very interesting. You have to understand its implications. Think of a social practice from your own society. What function, for example, does the kind of religion propagated by fundamentalists fulfil? It is true, as Durkheim showed that in a non-literate civilisation religion might have integrative functions. But in multi-ethnic, multi-religious society the religion of the kind that the fundamentalists propagate is likely to have disastrous consequences for the minorities. So you can understand that what the fundamentalists regard as a necessity is not necessary or functional for the whole society. It may be functional for the political interests of the fundamentalists, but dysfunctional for others.

This example is likely to incline you to the critique that Merton evolves. The postulate of functional unity does not make much sense in a complex world. As a result, the functionalists, says Merton, ought to specify the unit for which the given social or cultural item is functional. Moreover, they must make it clear, as the example of fundamentalism shows, that a given item may have diverse consequences, functional as well as dysfunctional for individuals or sub-groups.

### **29.3.2 Postulate of Universal Functionalism**

This postulate holds that all social or cultural forms have positive functions. Malinowski, says Merton, advances this in its most extreme form. As Malinowski says, 'In every type of civilisation, every custom, material object, idea and belief fulfils some vital function'.

What does this postulate mean? All social or cultural forms have necessarily positive functions. A moment's reflection is enough to make you see the

shortcomings of such a postulate. Because, as you have already learned, an item a social belief or a cultural practice may have dysfunctions also. And it may happen that a net balance of functional consequences is negative, not positive.

You can once again think of an example and evolve, as Merton does, a critique of this postulate. Many of you are perhaps fond of cricket. Cricket, you would argue, is a lovely game; it has got positive functions in the sense that it enables you to appreciate the beauty and art of the game, truly, a harmless experience'. It may also arouse your national identity (imagine India playing against Pakistan!); and enhance your patriotism! But at the same time, the positive functions of cricket should not prevent you from seeing its dysfunctions. Cricket has damaged other games like football or hockey, which are relatively neglected by the media. The media projects a cricketer as a star with wealth and opportunity for foreign travel, which is indeed dysfunctional for a true sports culture to evolve. So you have to see the net balance of the consequences and only then can one conclude whether an institution is functionally positive or negative.

This is precisely the reason why Merton refuses to give his consent to the postulate of universal functionalism. Merton argues and, it seems, you would agree with him that the functionalists must focus on a net balance of functional consequences, positive as well as negative, but, by no means, positive only.

### **29.3.3 Postulate of Indispensability**

Implicit in this postulate is the belief and Malinowski asserts it that whatever fulfils some vital function, be it a custom, a cultural practice, is indispensable in that society. In other words, all that persists in a society is indispensable and nothing, it seems, can be altered.

Before you understand how Robert Merton evolves a critique of this postulate, it is necessary for you to think of an example and reflect on it. Education, for instance, remains an indispensable function and unless it is fulfilled, no society can survive. This is because without education society cannot produce knowledge, wisdom, skills and trained personnel. But the question is what are the ways to fulfil this indispensable function? Now think of the prevalent education system, a system in which there is neither reciprocity nor mutual understanding between the teacher and the student. The student remains a passive recipient while the teacher imparts to him or her techniques, information, knowledge subskills. The proponents of such an impersonal system may argue that it is indispensable because it disciplines the mind of the student, it makes him obedient and therefore it results in order.

Yet, as Paulo Freire said beautifully in his masterpiece *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, there is an alternative form of education, dialogical education, in which both the student and the teacher are equally active. The student, instead of remaining a passive receiver, participates and intervenes in the process of learning. This, said Freire, is more creative, more humane. So you understand that although education is a functional necessity, there are different ways to fulfil it. In other words no cultural form is indispensable



forever because the function it claims to fulfil can be fulfilled better by alternative cultural forms.

A functional analyst, Merton says, should assume that nothing, in fact, is indispensable. There are functional alternatives, equivalents or substitutes. In other words, the same function served by a given item, under changed circumstances, may be fulfilled by another item. For example, in modern societies where women too work outside the home, some functions of the family such as, childcare can be performed by other institutions like creches, daycare centres, and so on.

**Check Your Progress 2**

i) Who was one of the chief proponents of the postulate of functional unity?

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ii) Why did Merton refute the postulate of universal functionalism? Explain in about six lines.

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iii) What according to Merton, is the concept of functional alternative? Write in about five lines.

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## **29.4 A PARADIGM FOR FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS**

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Robert K. Merton was extremely particular about the necessity of a paradigm as the paradigm contains the minimum set of concepts without which the sociologist cannot adequately carry out a functional analysis. Moreover, the paradigm says Merton, is intended to lead directly to the postulates and often to the tacit assumptions underlying functional analysis. Finally, the paradigm seeks to sensitise the sociologist to the political and ideological implications of functional analysis.

In other words, without a paradigm, it is difficult to properly codify a theory. The paradigm brings out into open the array of assumptions, concepts and basic propositions employed in a sociological analysis. It reduces the possibility of randomness and arbitrariness in sociological research.

A paradigm for functional analysis therefore helps to make clear how to conduct functional analysis, what to study, what to emphasise upon and how to locate one's analysis in the ideological struggle between conservatism and radicalism.

#### **29.4.0 The Items to which Functions are Imputed**

It is necessary for you to know the nature of the sociological data that can be subjected to functional analysis. Can you include anything and everything for functional analysis such as cultural practices, rituals, social institutions, machines, persons? As Merton clarifies, the basic requirement in functional analysis is that the object of analysis should represent a standardised, patterned item such as social roles, institutional patterns, social processes, cultural patterns, culturally patterned emotions, social norms, group organisation, social structure, devices for social control, etc.

In other words, something that is a regular practice can be included for functional analysis. For example, you can include cricket as well as marriage, a religious rite as well as the coercive machinery of the state. This is because all of the above are standardised social items. But you cannot include the idiosyncracies or peculiarities of a single individual for functional analysis because we are not talking now i.e., in this case, of standardised and regular social practice.

#### **29.4.1 Concepts of Objective Consequences**

You have already learned from Merton that an item may have both functional as well as dysfunctional consequences. As a sociologist, your task is to see the net balance of the aggregate of consequences.

Imagine yourself doing a functional analysis of Doordarshan. Its positive functions are obvious; it brings the world closer and informs you of the happenings on this planet. But its dysfunctions too have to be seen. It breeds consumerism and tends to stimulate violence. So your task is to balance the functions and the dysfunctions of Doordarshan and then arrive, at a reasonable conclusion.

##### **Activity 1**

Think of casteism in your own society. Try to examine its functions as well as dysfunctions. Write a note of about two pages listing the functions and dysfunctions of casteism. Compare if possible your note with those of other students at your Study Centre

#### **29.4.2 Concept of the Unit Subserved by the Function**

Every item does not necessarily have functions or dysfunctions for the whole society. Something might be functional for one group and dysfunctional for another group or sub-system.

For instance, the continual coverage of cricket by Doordarshan may have function of lowering the crime rate during those hours, but on the other hand it may breed and promote inefficiency in the work place. That is why, says Merton, it is necessary to be particularly specific about the unit for which one wants to study the functional consequences of an item. So a sociologist should be absolutely clear whether he or she is studying the functional consequences of a given item for the whole society or only for a sub-group.

A functional analyst should not assume that her or his task is to focus only on the static aspects of social structure and neglect the study of structural change in society. Merton believes that a functional analyst should be equally concerned about social change. First, as you know, nothing is indispensable; so also one might add that nothing is static either. Functional alternatives are possible. Secondly, a functional analyst should know that not everything is functional; there are many social and cultural items, which have dysfunctional consequences. Dysfunctions, according to Merton, imply the concept of strain, stress and tension on the structural level and, therefore, provide an analytical approach to the study of dynamics and change.

It has often been alleged that functional analysis is inevitably committed to a 'conservative' or a 'reactionary' perspective. But Merton says that it has no intrinsic commitment to any ideological position. It all depends, in Merton's opinion, on how you do your analysis and how you want to use it. For instance, if you concentrate solely on positive functional consequences, it leads towards an ultra-conservative ideology. But, on the other hand, if you concentrate solely on dysfunctional consequences, it leads you towards an ultra-radical **Utopia**, because you are excessively critical of all the institutions present in your society.

Choose a living example; reflect on it. If, as a sociologist, you see only the functional consequences of caste, 'how caste restricts competition and, therefore, maintains order or how caste enables one to choose one's *swadharma* and therefore reduces the possibility of career anxiety or identity confusion, you are indeed adopting an ultra-conservative ideology. But once you begin to see the dysfunctions of caste, you can no longer be accused of conservatism. Because by seeing the dysfunctions you are essentially pleading for change. That's why, Merton argues, functional analysis has no intrinsic commitment to any ideological position.

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## 29.5 MANIFEST AND LATENT FUNCTION - PURPOSE OF DISTINCTION

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What gives a new meaning to Merton's functional analysis is the way he evolves the notion of latent function and distinguishes it from manifest function. This distinction, Merton forcefully argues, helps us to go beyond the common sense perception of the world. A notion like latent function, opens your eyes, it enables you to see the deeper, hidden meaning of many of your social practices and cultural beliefs. In this fashion you are almost forced to alter the prevalent notion of 'rationality' and 'irrationality', 'morality' and 'immorality' that you had taken for granted. Because even

in an ‘irrational’ or an ‘immoral’ practice you would see a latent and necessary social function being fulfilled. The result is that the realm of social knowledge and enquiry would begin to expand.

### **29.5.0 What Appears ‘Irrational’ Becomes Meaningful**

The distinction between latent function and manifest function helps the sociologist to make his or her presence felt as a critical analyst. Once you are aware of the notion of latent function, you would not be easily tempted to regard everything that does not have an immediate, manifest function as simply ‘irrational’. Instead, you would ask a deeper question! Why is it that what appears ‘irrational’ continues to exist? Only then, perhaps, you would begin to see the hidden or latent meaning of the so-called irrational act or belief.

A concrete example that Merton suggests would help you to appreciate the point. With your secular rationality how do you look at the Hopi ceremonials? The Hopi ceremonials are designed to produce abundant rainfall. But it is not as if rain really falls on account of the ceremonials performed by the Hopis. Rainfall does not depend on ceremonials. This may tempt you to conclude that the Hopi ceremonials reflect nothing except an irrational, superstitious belief of the primitive folk.

Now it is at this juncture that Merton would ask you to resist temptation. Don’t draw such an easy conclusion. Merton wants you to see something deeper in these ceremonials. Well, the ceremonials do not produce rainfall. But the ceremonials enable the scattered members of the group to assemble together and engage in a common activity. This reinforces their group identity and solidarity, which is no mean achievement. This is the latent function of the ceremony.

#### **Activity 2**

Imagine yourself participating in a socio-religious festival like Holi. And try to see its latent function and ask yourself how it helps you to increase your perception about rituals and festivals. Write a note of one page about the latent and manifest functions of Holi. Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

### **29.5.0 New Horizons of Enquiry Begin to Emerge**

You have already come to realise that sociologists are not lay persons. With their special skills, particularly with their awareness of the notion of latent function, they rediscover new areas of enquiry worthy of exploration. Generally, the social actors are content with immediate, manifest functions and do not bother about things having hidden, latent, and deeper consequences. But sociologists are not satisfied by external appearance alone. They delve into the hidden meanings and aspects of cultural items and social practices. Thus, they are interested even in those realms that may not have the slightest appeal to the clever pragmatist, that is, a practical person who is concerned more with the here and now of the manifest world.

There are many examples. Imagine yourself having a dialogue with an intellectual who is fond of only serious, 'art' films. He or she may tell you that all that takes place in the name of 'commercial' films is absurd and meaningless. But if you read Merton and begin to appreciate the notion of latent function, you are unlikely to be persuaded by the intellectual's arguments. Though commercial films may be absurd, what with their implausible stories, music, dances, romances and fight scenes, they may still have some positive functions. These films may strengthen the role of motherhood, celebrate the ultimate triumph of good over evil, and reinforce ideals which many fear may get lost in a rapidly changing world. It is in this regard that, commercial films may have a latent function and act like a safety valve, restoring faith. When seen in this way, a way suggested by Merton, a new area of sociological enquiry emerges, e.g. the study of commercial films.

### **29.5.2 The Realm of Sociological Knowledge Expands**

It is now quite obvious that a sociologist with his notion of latent function contributes positively to the growth of knowledge. Had he been contented merely with the manifest function, he could not have said anything new. That's why, says Merton, the distinction between the latent function and the manifest function helps the sociologist to open the horizons of sociological knowledge.

It is at this juncture that you need to know about a very interesting example that Merton has discussed in detail. The example is from Veblen's famous book, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) in which the author sought to examine the latent function of the pattern of conspicuous consumption. Before you understand Veblen, it would be better, if you ask a simple question. Why do some people attach so much importance to new models of car, television, washing machine or even detergent powder?

Why do some people want to buy expensive and attractively packaged consumer goods all the time? Well, it is always possible to say that people buy cars because cars provide transportation; people buy TV sets because TV programmes help them to know about the world, its politics, culture etc. These are undoubtedly the manifest functions of the consumer goods and the consumers are well aware of these functions.

Everyone knows this. Wherein, then, lies the contribution of a sociologist? As Merton says, Veblen's analysis shows how a sociologist can go beyond the manifest functions of the pattern of consumption and tell us something new that seems strikingly different from one's common sense perception. Veblen says that people buy new models of car or TV sets not solely because they want transportation facilities or they want to know about the world, but also because it helps them to reaffirm their social status. In other words, buying costly goods serves the latent function of reaffirming one's social status. It is in this sense, says Merton, that sociologists help us to increase our knowledge about the world, the consequences of our beliefs, cultural practices, life-styles, etc.

### **29.5.3 Established Morals Get Challenged**

What appears 'immoral' then may have a latent function, though that does not necessarily make it moral. And hence, says Merton, it is not always

desirable to agree with the established morals of the society. Because unless the functions, i.e., the latent functions of 'immoral' practices or institutions are fulfilled by alternative practices or institutions, a moral critique, remains empty; it serves nothing. It is just a social ritual rather than a piece of social engineering.

Merton gives a revealing example from the American society. The 'immoral' political machine, says Merton, serves what the official democracy fails to accomplish. In the impersonal American democracy the voters are regarded as amorphous, undifferentiated masses. But the political machine with its keen sociological awareness regards the voter as a person living in a specific neighbourhood with specific personal problems and personal wants. In other words, in an impersonal society, the political machine fulfils the important social function of humanising and personalising, the manner of assistance to those in need.

The message Merton wants to convey is clear. It is futile to be critical of an 'immoral' practice unless one can think of a 'moral' alternative that can take its place in functional terms. A moral critique on its own is simply insufficient.

### Check Your Progress 3

- i) What are the four reasons behind the distinction between the latent function and the manifest function? Use about four lines.

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- ii) How does the concept of latent function increase the realm of sociological knowledge? Give an example. Write in about eight lines.

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- iii) Which among the following statements is true?
  - a) Functional analysis is necessarily conservative.
  - b) Functional analysis is necessarily radical.
  - c) Functional analysis has no intrinsic commitment to any ideological position.



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## 29.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit you have learned how Robert K. Merton redefines functionalism as well as his disagreement with the conventional postulates and paradigms of functional analysis. You have also come to know how Merton comes forward with his own brand of functionalism which is more elastic, less dogmatic and hence capable of incorporating the societal experience of dynamics, change and dysfunctions. And what is particularly important is that you have also learned how, armed with the notion of latent function, Robert Merton proposes to expand the realm of sociological knowledge and enquiry. Essentially, he enables you to see the latent or hidden functions of many social practices, which our common sense perceptions fail to comprehend.

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## 29.7 KEYWORDS

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**Deviance** The word, sociologically speaking, implies an immoral practice, something that goes against society's established moral ideals. Drug-addiction, for instance, is a kind of deviance from socially approved normal and healthy existence.

**Hegemony** A process through which a particular section of the society, for instance, the ruling class, succeeds in imposing its values and ideas on the rest of the society. As a result, it seems that there is a consensus in the society, although, objectively, it remains divided.

**Utopia** The vision of a perfect, ideal society, something that seems strikingly different from the prevalent reality for which the revolutionaries and the oppressed often fight their battles.

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## 29.8 FURTHER READING

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Merton, Robert K. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Free Press: New York

Turner, J.H. 1987. *Structure of Sociological Theory*. Rawat Publications: Jaipur

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## 29.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) When sociologists use the word 'function' they mean the contribution a social institution or a cultural practice makes to the maintenance of social order, unity and cohesiveness. And, moreover, for a sociologist, function need not be confused with the subjective meaning that a participant attaches to a social item; instead, it is observed, objective

consequence, how really a social item brings about order and cohesiveness in a given system.

- ii) Whereas the participants remain aware of the manifest function of a social item, they are ignorant of its latent function. In other words, the manifest function is immediately visible; but the latent function remains hidden that need a sociologist to get explored.
- iii) Dysfunction is the negation of function. Instead of bringing about order and unity, it causes chaos and disorder. Caste, for example, is dysfunctional for a modern society, because it is against participatory and egalitarian democracy.

### **Check Your Progress 2**

- i) Radcliffe-Brown
- ii) The postulate of universal functionalism means that all social or cultural forms have positive functions. Merton refutes this postulate because with his critical awareness he can see clearly that social or cultural forms may have negative functions, i.e., dysfunctions also. That's why, says Merton, it is necessary to focus on a net balance of functional consequences, positive as well as negative but, by no means, positive only.
- iii) Merton refutes the postulate of indispensability. No cultural form, according to Merton, is indispensable for ever because the function it claims to fulfil can be fulfilled better by alternative cultural forms. In other words, the same function can be fulfilled by alternative items. This is, according to Merton, the concept of functional alternative.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- i)
  - a) What appears 'irrational' becomes meaningful.
  - b) New horizons of enquiry begin to emerge.
  - c) The realm of sociological knowledge expands.
  - d) Established morals get challenged,
- ii) The phenomenal growth of consumerism in our society, for instance, can be explained better by the concept of latent function. Because men are buying consumer items-cars, TV sets or detergent powder - not solely because of their manifest functions, the facilities these items provide. Behind the aggressive urge to consume more and more lies the desire to reaffirm one's social status.

This is the latent function; consumerism sustains a competitive, materialistic culture, which the capitalists need to retain their hegemony. And this is where a concept like latent function increases the realm of sociological knowledge.

- iii) (c).