UNIT 2   DESCENT AND ALLIANCE THEORIES

Contents

Learning Objectives

From this unit we will be able to:

➢ know about the theories (descent and alliance) which explain kinship;

➢ see how the existing theories have motivated many scholars in the formulation of new theories; and

➢ how various kinship ties shaped these theories.

Also comprehend that though these theories are defunct in the contemporary scenario, they still provide an insight into the constitution of family, sib, clan, moiety, marriage, exchange etc.

2.1   INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will deal with two theories which sought to understand kinship relations in an elaborate way. As we have already learnt in the last chapter, kinship is the relationship between individuals who are connected through genealogy, either biologically or culturally. When relationships are created through birth it leads to descent groups or consanguineals and when relationships are created through marriage, it forms affinal groups. Based on these relationships, two theories of kinship were advocated, the first as early as the 40s and the second was discussed in the 60s. These theories, descent and alliance are in today's anthropological enquiry considered almost defunct for various reasons which we will try to decipher in this unit. However as these theories formed an important part in kinship studies it is important for the student to have knowledge about these.

2.2   DESCENT THEORY

2.2.1   Development of Descent Theory

Descent theory also known as lineage theory came to the fore in the 1940s with the publication of books like *The Nuer* (1940)*, African Political Systems* (1940) etc. This theory was in much demand in the discussion of social structure in British anthropology after the 2nd World War. It had much influence over anthropological studies till the mid-60s but with the downfall of the British Empire and its loss of colonies, the theory also sort of fizzled out. However its presence in certain works even now, like descriptions in ethnographic monographs, or its use by French Marxists to understand the lineage mode of production etc. makes it eligible enough for some intellectual enquiry.

Descent theory when it first became popular, it seemed to be a new idea, a revelation, but deeper studies exhibit that it was actually a part of the ongoing changes in ideas and notions which took place in the study of anthropology.

Descent theory, in order to be explained clearly can be divided into two periods, the classical and the modern. Both these periods have three stages each. The first phase of the classical period involves the creation of the new models of descent which was done by Henry Maine and Lewis Henry Morgan. These models were revised and given a new form by some anthropologists of that time, more notably by John F. McLennan. Finally in the third stage these models were empirically made use of in field studies by students of Franz Boas. The classical phase reached a low and remained mere speculations after this but were revived all of a sudden by British Africanists, and the modern phase of descent theory came up. The main issues in both the periods however were the same even though the approach applied to study them differed. The issues were relationship between blood and soil, kinship and territory, family and clan etc.

2.2.2   Main Exponents and Critical Evaluation

Henry S Maine formulates and discusses the patriarchal theory in his work *Ancient Law* (1861) which postulates how society was formed and grounded by families ruled by the eldest surviving male in it. He also talked about how families formed aggregations. With the death of the father, the sons stay behind together creating extended ties of kinship and a broader polity of sorts which formed the basis of societies. It was much later that attachment to territory created rivalry among blood ties, which became a matter of study of social organisation. This extended patriarchal family is known as a unilineal development. It allowed jural stability and endurance. His opposition towards concepts of societies based on kinship and those based on territory became the accepted norm in his subsequent generation. It was Mclennan and Morgan who deliberated that human societies are fundamentally promiscuous rather than being based on family. In fact promiscuity only led to matriliny first instead of patriliny as it first created the mother/ child bond. Patriliny developed much later with the introduction of marriage and legal paternity.

The descent model of society developed in two ways, one in which theorists rearranged the fundamentals in a new way to produce assumed patterns of historical development. The second way was by using the model to cultural sources and to ethnographic work of native communities. For example, McLennan and Morgan stressed about the importance of exogamy in clans or totemism, was found to be

a common factor in kin groups. Emile Durkheim, in his *Division of Labour in Society* (1893) tried to understand how clan based societies operated in reality. For him, they would be together through mutual solidarity which he named mechanical solidarity. Clans however also created territorial segments. According to him this comes out from division of labour and the complex groups thus formed were united by function. This is what he termed as organic solidarity.

Another development in this theory took place in the early twentieth century where Boas' students made use of Morgan's model in reference to studies they conducted among American Indians. For Example, John Swanton wrote on the social organisation of American Indians. He questioned the historical validity of matrilineal clans as postulated by Morgan. His work showed that many North American tribes were not matrilineal and if at all matrilineal than they were not advanced than family based units as deduced by Morgan. Another ethnographer, Frank Speck demonstrated in 1915 that the Algonkian hunter-gatherers have families and they are also associated to territories. This evidence too refuted Morgan's claims.

R.H. Lowie summarized the critique of Morgan by noting that all data showed that family has been present in all stages of culture. He also noted that there is no fixed succession of maternal and paternal descent. Both higher and lower civilizations in many cases give importance to paternal side of the family. His final postulation was, family (bilateral) and clan, sib, moiety (unilateral) are rooted in local and consanguinal factor.

The prominent British anthropologists of that time, like Rivers and Radcliffe-Brown were clearly associated in their views with their American counterparts, more so with Maine and McLennan than Morgan. The debate about the historical superiority of 'father right' or 'mother right' was done away with. Family as a group and its existence from a very early time was accepted. Clans for the British anthropologists were associated with territories though for Rivers clans are based on common descent than on territory. Morgan had identified the classificatory kinship terminology, though initially was connected to forms of group marriage, later on got linked to the presence of exogamous clans. Rivers too supported this notion later on, in relation to studying kinship relationships in America, India, Africa, Australia etc.

The British and American scholars only differed from each other when Rivers and Radcliffe-Brown started investigating the corporate role of descent groups. Rivers talked about 'descent' in terms of the way in which membership of a group is recognised and also for modes of transmission of property, rank etc. but the second notion was not accepted as these processes do not correspond to each other all the time. Radcliffe-Brown's essay on "Patrilineal and Matrilineal Succession" gave Rivers' points a concrete basis. He noted that social organisations needed endurance and finality. Hence societies required corporations which can be either based on territorial ties or kinship ties. Such kin based ties are unilineal descent groups which describe group membership on a descent criterion. Radcliffe-Brown based his ideas from his work on *The Social Organisation of Australian Tribes* (1931).

It was A.L. Kroeber who however put forward a critique of Radcliffe Brown's study. His critique was mainly on descent theory of Radcliffe Brown, where he disagreed to his claim of placing descent groups at the centre in Australia. For Kroeber, moiety, clan and any other unilateral descent groups play secondary parts in many societies and are not central. Family or clan did not actually have

any historical character about who followed whom. In societies where clans played an important role, they were always found with basic family units.

The clan model did not die away but came back to the forefront as a functional model known as lineage model. It was basically used for the understanding of contemporary relationships between institutions, more so to study particular African example of segmentary lineage system. The field studies associated with this functionalist model was aimed at analysis of living societies. Hence relationship between territorial group and descent groups or between families and lineages were with the help of this model deciphered as real problems rather than historical issues.

Works on the Nuer by Evans-Pritchard and the Tallensi by Meyer Fortes developed theoretical explorations and definition of typologies. In Fortes "The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups" (*American Anthropologist*, 1953) he submitted the segmentary lineage model as an important offering of British Anthropology of his times. His formulation suggested that the structure of unilineal descent group could be generalised and its position in the complete social system can be viewed. For example he particularly talked about the existing continuous nature of such lineages in Africa and their political role specially where political centralisation was not strong. Thus the social structure would exhibit how territory and descent would connect with each other.

During that time, more classificatory studies continued. They tried to look at the variety and types of descent groups, how corporateness could be recognised and the importance to be devoted to unilineality. Leach however, was against typologizing and even spoke against basic categories like matrilineal and patrilineal. There were others who supported the pattern of sets of variables rather than the increase of types and subtypes.

2.2.3 Counter Theories

Considering that so much of effort and time was used for creating the perfect descent theories, it nevertheless faded out in the 1960s because of the many complicacies and misunderstandings created by the ideas postulated by the thinkers. In the 1960s in fact it faced the main challenge from a model which was designed by Levi-Strauss based on the primitive social structure. It was referred to as the Alliance theory. This model too agreed to the existence of segmentary organisation of unilineal descent groups but posited the main arena of the system in exchanges of marriage between such exogenous groups.

This alternative also critiqued Radcliffe-Brown by offering another interpretation on the relationship between family and clan. For Radcliffe-Brown the universal family created sentiments which took solidarity among siblings to a larger grouping while Levi-Strauss stated the siblings can be linked through the exchange of sisters in marriage. Similarly Edmund Leach argued on Fortes' complementary filiation. For Fortes, ties of affinity while generating importance to ties of descent came under the expression, which Fortes called complementary filiation. For Leach both segmentary lineage systems and primitive states could be identified by the system of preferential unilateral marriage alliances which finally is linked to local descent groups.

A neo-Malinowskian model was introduced during the same time which was called the Transactional theory. In his study of a village named Pul Eliya in Sri Lanka, Edmund Leach postulated that the reasoning behind social action was to

be seen at the level of individual management of resources for personal gain. This was in contrast to the segmentary lineage model. Human beings and the community's action are based on kinship and descent principles. For him human beings are dependent on a territory for their livelihood. Thus the conflict between territory and descent was brought up again in Leach's work. However Leach did not distinguish between kinship relations and between individuals though it works as a significant critique of descent theories.

2.2.4 Conclusion

In contemporary anthropological study of social systems, the descent model has no credibility. It does not look into the local models or notions that societies possess in their own realm. And it is not a 'repetitive series' of descent groups which are essential for organising political and economic events. It however helps in the study of kinship in anthropology, as it gives us ideas about how earlier societies were made up. It also helps in moulding itself into other boarder models of society. Beyond these Descent theories offer no significant contribution in anthropology today.

Reflection and Action

Delineate the features of the Descent theory.

2.3 ALLIANCE THEORY

2.3.1 Development of Alliance Theory

The alliance theory in the study of kinship is also known as the general theory of exchange. It bears its roots to the French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss and hence is also known as the structural way of studying kinship ties. The alliance theory was first discussed in Lévi-Strauss' monumental book named *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (1949). Its English version is known as *Elementary Sturctures of Kinship*. Alliance theory was quite popular during the 1960s and went on to be discussed and deliberated till the 1980s where the issue of incest taboo was taken up by not only anthropologists but also by psychologists, political philosophers etc. Alliance theory tries to enquire about how inter-individual relationships are woven and how finally they constitute society.

The theory developed to study those kinds of kinship systems which exemplify positive marriage (cross-cousin marriage) rules. However besides providing conjectures on marriage, it also provides a general theoretical awareness about kinship. The study of marriage rules have been used from the initial days of kinship studies to comprehend kinship terminologies. Scholars like W.H.R. Rivers also used marriage (symmetrical cross-cousin marriage) and terminology (bifurcate merging) and tried to exhibit a relationship between each other. For him the marriage rule is the cause and the terminology is the effect. Australian kinship system, which is quite perplexing, was also studied elaborately by anthropologists to be familiar with their descent system. They too made use of marriage alliances for this. Most scholars agree with each other on the notion that in symmetrical cross-cousin marriage pacts, double descent is always seen, directly or indirectly.

However exponents of descent theories tried to go on about this through various instances, like for example B.Z. Seligman's tries to convert types of marriage to forms of descent or Radcliffe-Brown's extra stress upon descent where he finds it worrying that the Australian kinship system has a core matrilineal exogamy along

with what he mentions as classic Australian patrilineal system. Radcliffe-Brown did accept that relationship between individuals and marriage rules are more important than descent groups. However, coming back to alliance theory and its development, Lévi-Strauss' alliance theory was in complete defiance to Radcliffe-Brown's functionalist theory.

2.3.2 Main Exponent

Alliance theory was categorically created by Claude Lévi-Strauss, though analytical assessment has been also offered by Rodney Needham and Louis Dumont. Lévi Strauss studied and observed the connections formed between consanguinity and affinity in his investigation of non-European societies. These two are both opposed and complementary to each other. Due to this rules of preferential marriage and marriage prohibitions are an incorporated part of this theory. Such rules in fact rise due to the connection between blood ties and affinal ties. It is the marriage ties, according to Levi Strauss and many of his contemporaries which create interdependence between families and lineages.

According to Levi-Strauss alliance theory is based on incest taboo and the prohibition of incest is recognised universally. It is viewed as a fundamental condition of human social life. A man is not allowed to make a woman his wife who is his immediate kin and in fact he has to give her away to another man. It is this prohibition of incest that led human groups to follow exogamy. Lévi-Struass says this prohibition is beyond any sociological explanation and clearly shows a difference between consanguinity and affinity as the basis of kinship system. For him incest taboo is thus seen as a negative prescription and it is only because of this that men had to move out of the core kinship group or come in from another group to it. This theory has much similarity with Sigmund Freud's work *Totem and Taboo* (1913).

This process of incest taboo where a daughter or sister is sent to a different family commences a circle of exchange of women. Strauss views marriage as primarily a process of exchange (between one men and other men or between one domestic group and others). He observes positive marriage rules from the negative prescriptions of prohibition. The main notion of alliance theory is then a reciprocal exchange which creates affinity. It is the positive marriage rules which regulates this exchange and thus gives rise to what Strauss call 'elementary' structures.

For Lévi-Strauss, there are two models of structure in the study of kinship and exchange in marriage. When women in the ego's group are proposed to another group which is eligible for such exchange then such a situation may be called as elementary structures of kinship. Similarly if the group of possible spouses for the women are not known and kept open in the ego's group, excluding particular kin people like the nuclear family, an uncle, an aunt etc, this Strauss terms as complex structures of kinship. This is easily seen in the western scenario.

In a society, keeping in mind incest prohibition, a kinship system is made up of a combination of many traits, like inheritance, affinity, descent, residence etc. and an understanding is reached by the combination of these features as a whole. If all the transmission between these features takes place systematically between generations in one and the same line it is known as harmonic while it is said to be disharmonic if some of it is passed patrilineally and some matrilineally. It was observed that the rules of cross cousin marriage where it exists is associated with this. Theoretically from this, three types of affinal relations can exist, bilateral,

matirlateral and patrilateral. In bilateral cross cousin marriage, the spouse is mother's brother's child and father's sister's child. It forms a self sufficient unit as two intermarrying groups exchange women as wives. Lévi-Strauss calls this closed or restricted exchange. He also connected it with disharmonic transmission.

In contrast to this, he talks about the implications of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. Here a man marries his mother's brother's daughter. So to elaborate if a given line A gives their women to Line B and themselves take women from C, finally at the end a circle is formed where Z after receiving from Y, will give back to A. This is what Levi-Strauss class generalised form of exchange. It is opposed to the closed type as it first consists of three groups and can accommodate any number of groups. This type has similarities to harmonic transmissions, which are either matrilineal or patrilineal.

It is the network of relationships which shows the identity of the intermarrying group. Relationships that come out of different generations within the same group of affines are terminologically compared. It is due to intermarriage being directionally adapted to, hence a group does not receive wives from a group to which it gives its daughters, as has been mentioned above. A possibility of disparity in status is noted between wife-givers and wife takers. Levi-Strauss' third type, the patrilateral type has been superficially dealt with. It seems to be there in his discussion as a failed hybrid of the other two.

Lévi-Strauss' model tried to offer a proper description of cross-cousin marriage, exchange of sisters, rules of exogamy etc. He postulated that it is the marriage rules which after a certain period generate social structures. This he says is because marriages are a coming together of not just two individuals but also of two groups. With his root for such relationships as based on incest taboo, he formulated that it was because of it that natural impulses were kept under check and it also created the division of labour based on sex. We have discussed the former notion in the above paragraphs about how women are exchanged and the latter idea prescirbes work for women at a domestic level. As noted this exchange of wives are arrangements which advances inter-group alliances and helps in creating structures of social networks. The kinship structures that Levi-Strauss proposed were of three kinds, which are created out from two types of exchange. They are elementary, semi-complex and complex structures.

The first i. e. elementary structures are centered on rules of positive marriage which indicate whom an individual can marry. Elementary systems work on two forms of exchange, direct exchange or restricted exchange between two groups of people which is symmetric. In restricted exchange, father's sister and mother's brother marry and the children born out of them become bilateral cross cousins. Then to maintain the continuity the two lineages marry again. Restricted exchange structures are not very common.

Elementary structures have another form of exchange which is called generalised exchange. Here a man can marry either his mother's brother's daughter, which is a matrilateral cross-cousin marriage or his father's sister's daughter, which is a patrilateral cross cousin marriage. These forms of exchange give rise to asymmetry between three groups. According to Levi-Strauss matrilateral cross cousin marriages are common in Asia, especially among the Kachin.

Compared to restricted exchange, generalised exchange was considered to be finer as it permitted the incorporation of innumerable numbers of groups. Levi-Strauss gave the example of Amazonian tribes who followed restricted form of

exchange. They were considered to be unstable as they usually were made up of moieties which broke quite regularly.

Generalised exchange on the other hand allows more amalgamation but exhibits hierarchy. The wife – givers are superior to wife takers and the last wife taking group is much inferior to the first wife giving group. Such disparities can weaken the complete structure of society. Levi Strauss gave the example of the Kachins, in *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, to show such behaviour. Levi-Strauss noted that the matrilateral cross- cousin marriage was better than the patrilateral one, from the structure point of view. As the exchange sequences are not very long as the direction of wife exchange is inverted every successive generation, hence it has less probability to create social integrity. As has been mentioned earlier patrilateral cross-cousin marriage is very rare and hence not clearly touched by Levi-Strauss. The peril that matrilateral cross cousin marriage faces is that group A as a giver has to wait to get a wife from a group which would be very far from the line and not much obligated to give a woman for marriage. A delay which might be caused is not found in restricted exchange system.

Between Elementary and Complex structures, Levi-Strauss contributed to a third structure, the semi-complex structure. It is also known as the Crow-Omaha system as it is found among the Crow and Omaha native Indians of North America. It is in many instances like the elementary structures, as for example it also contains negative marriage rules and almost have rules like prescribing marriage to some groups.

2.3.3 Analytical Assessment

Levi-Strauss' alliance theory is not without its flaws. His arguments are based on societies about which he has given examples of, which are clearly viripotestal and also that his ideas of marriage was simple. The fundamental character and explanatory value of exchange as defined by Levi Strauss faced some extreme criticism. For supporters of consanguinity as a self-explanatory system, the prohibiton of incest as the basis for the difference in consanguinity and affinity is redundant. Marriage as been seen as a form of exchange was also questioned, one because women were seen as possessions, private properties and also because exchange was used in too wide a sense that it lost its meaning. Strauss' main confronter, R. Needham tried to make clear cut distinction between prescription and preference in rules of marriage. For Needham, prescription on its own has structural involvements in the whole social system. He states that if prescription rules are seen not only as a marriage rule but as significant in the entire system, then the danger arises in underrating the importance of other types, like preferential marriage. These too have structural elements and the distinctions are sometimes not visible at all.

The main development in the alliance theory which was observed was that there was a refinement of the concept of alliance and to make to more empirical, it was given a more structural identity. Initially the theory was mostly concerned with the exchange of women between greater exogamous components of the society.

Needham tried to improve the notion that matrilateral marriage rules would result in groups intermarrying in a circle. It was suggested that the marriage circle was too limited in number and the people involved should be aware of them. Needham further asserts that such alliance cycles do exist, and that too implicitly, however their existence does not bring to an end the function or meaning of marriage

alliance. Levi-Strauss himself noted that conscious rules were to be considered more important than their results in terms of exchange. In the absence of cycles, the fundamental relationship can be formed from one of the many types of consanguinal relationship between paired local descent groups. Louis Dumont points out that where marriage alliance does not result in a system of exchange at the level of group as a totality, it remains an integral part of the system of categories and roles as understood by the people studied.

Needham further criticizes Levi-Srauss' structuralism by calling the mediating concepts of reciprocity and exchange as facing distinctive opposition. The basic assimilation is not of groups but of categories as is viewed by the social mind, where marriage rule is nothing but a gamut of ideas. Social relationships are demarcated by classification and Needham perceived that asymmetrical intermarriage, though could not function with less than three alliance groups, can be dualistically theorized. This was in accordance to a complete dualist arrangement.

Louis Dumont like Needham states that structural entailments which are observed are diverse from the group scheme on which attention was initially given. The phrase marriage alliance hence includes both a generic phenomenon of intellectual assimilation and a particular fact of group integration. Dumont further states that this structural theory in its limited arena on its own rises above the prejudices in our own culture. For him words like cross-cousin marriage maybe useful in theory but in real life is deceptive. A concrete comprehension can be reached according to him when the marriage rule which is known as marriage alliance is viewed as offering a diachronic aspect which is only connected to descent or consanguinity. If this can be done then it will be possible to go beyond our margins of thought built upon our own society and make evaluations and appraisals on the basis of the key perceptions involved, in this case consanguinity and affinity.

2.3.4 Conclusion

Allaince theory though quite categorical did not continue to work as a speculation which bore definite fruits. A lot more was anticipated from the theory. The inference of marriage alliance for status, economy, and political organisation was never clearly explained. The etymological investigation remained defectively structural. The study of terminologies did not finally help in comprehending or bettering this theory. Though alliance theory had much greater explanatory value than descent theory, yet in today's contemporary anthropological setting, investigations have minimized their interest in kinship studies to understand the diversity of kinship systems. Hence the question of universal kinship structures remains unanswered due to which the debates between descent and alliance theories have shrunk.

2.4 SUMMARY

To summarize the unit, we may say that in the study of kinship, two theories – the descent theory and the alliance theory were proposed by anthropologists. This was to work out the different structures of kinship through the models based on birth and marriage ties. However these theories though intricate and complex in their description and a matter of much debate while they were animate, lost their significance and worth as they were in reality and in today's understanding of society, not enough persuasive or credible. These theories are obsolete in the present scenario yet their knowledge is necessary for the student as it did play an important role in the development of kinship studies in anthropology in the past.

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Sample Questions

1)   What are the two theories in the study of kinship?

2)   Give a detailed analysis of descent theory.

3)   Explain how Levi-Strauss designed alliance theory. What were its main deliberations?

4)   How clearly did these theories help in the study of kinship?