
UNIT 4: DESCENT APPROACH*

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will able to:

- Explain the meaning of the concept of descent in kinship studies;
- Trace the historical development of descent;
- Explain how different anthropologists used decent approach to understand kinship systems;
- Explore the application of the kinship systems in India;
- Offer a critique of descent approach.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Kinship is generally a system of recognising relationship by marriage, blood and social relationship. The relationships can be based on blood—known as consanguineal or through marriage termed – as affinal. If the relationship between one person and another involves descent, the two are consanguine (“blood”) relatives. For example, relationship between father and son. If the relationship has been established through marriage, it is affinal, a classical example of this is the relationship of husband and wife.

Kinship relations can be studied and can be understood through three approaches:

* Written by Dr. Archana Prasad, Associate Professor, Kamala Nehru College, Delhi University

- (i) Descent approach – emphasis on blood/consanguine relations
- (ii) Alliance approach – emphasis on marriage
- (iii) Cultural approach – focus on kinship as cultural

The first approach also known as lineage theory focused on study of kinship system by tracing the biological connection between individual (referred as ego in anthropology) and his ancestor, living and dead. The theory made a distinction between the relatives from the line of descent and those formed by marriage. The blood relation was considered as primary to the affinal relations that was secondary. In the alliance approach, the focus shifted from blood tied to relations formed as result of marriage. The core of the theory was the exchange of women for formation of groups. The alliance theory was criticised for focusing on women as object and treating the opposition between affine and consanguine as universal. Due to the limitation of both descent and alliance theory there was a cardinal change in the way kinship was studied and 1970's saw the "undoing" of kinship. The cultural approach argued that kinship could not be understood only with reference to biology. The reference to biology was seen as nothing more than ethnocentric view of kinship, derived from European culture. Kinship was to be understood with reference to cultural practices of every society.

In this unit, we are going to learn about the descent approach to the study of kinship system. According to this view, a person's place in society was largely determined by his or her position within the kinship system. Crucial was the determination of an individual's position within the line of filiation privileged by a given society (descent). Proponents of descent theory presented non-Western societies as based on their kinship organisation. Non-Western societies were seen as emphasising one particular line of descent whose analysis was believed to unpack their social mechanisms and account for the maintenance/reproduction of the social order. The emphasis is on tracing the genealogical origin by blood relations or in terms of descent.

4.2 DESCENT IN KINSHIP STUDIES

In anthropology, kinship has been used to refer to the network of genealogical relationship and social ties. Every society has developed means of categorising individuals as either kin or non-kin. One of the method of doing this is to trace relation with the ancestors and decent refers to the line of connection between individual and his/her ancestor both living and dead. Descent group includes those individual who are descended from an ancestor in a particular way. Thus two individual who are regarded as kin may be related to each other in one or other of the two ways: one is descended from the other or both are descended from a common ancestor (Dumont 2006).

4.2.1 Meaning of the concept of descent

Descent can be defined as a relationship defined by connection to an ancestor (or ancestress) through a culturally recognised sequence of parent-child links. In anthropology various terms 'line', 'lineal', 'lineage' are used synonymously with the term 'descent. These terms have been used in kinship studies in four different ways:

Functions of descent

- (i) It enables to trace of relationships inter-generationally through real, putative, or fictive parent-child links.
- (ii) It refers to person's offspring or his parentage.
- (iii) It is used to trace one's ancestry.

- i) To denote corporate descent groups, i.e., a group united for economic and political purpose
- ii) To denote the chosen line of inheritance and succession
- iii) To refer to the type of kinship terminology
- iv) Regardless of which lines (matrilineal or patrilineal or both) are chosen for the above three purposes, lineal relatives refer to one’s ascendants or descendants. Lineal relatives are those who belong to the same ancestral stock in a direct line of descent. Opposed to lineal relatives are collaterals who belong to the same ancestral stock but not in a direct line of descent.

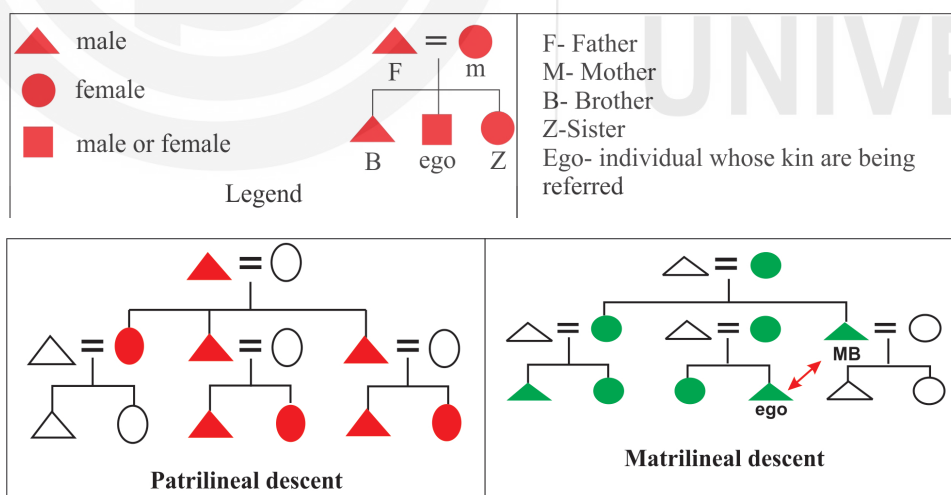
Morgan defined descent as a cultural rule which affiliates an individual with a particular selected group of kinsmen for certain social purpose such as mutual assistance or the regulation of marriage (1949:15-16). The structural-functionalist define descent as a process regulating the recruitment of members into a social group, either through the father or mother (River 1924). As per this definition, the term descent denotes the process of automatic recruitment into a social group on birth but the membership is exclusive and does not overlap. Thus Leach (1962) defined descent as a principle of recruitment into a unilineal descent group.

4.2.2 Types of Descent

1. Unilineal–This traces descent only through a single line of ancestors, male or female. Both males and females are members of a unilineal family, but descent links are only recognised through relatives of one gender.

The two basic forms of unilineal descent are referred to as:

- Patrilineal – tracing decent through the male(father) line



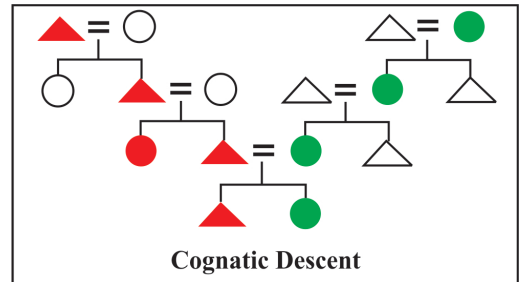
- Matrilineal- tracing of decent through female(mother) line

The depiction of societies as neatly ordered by unilineal descent into clearly bounded, nested units of different scale was quite far from everyday political reality. Personal experiences of kinship could vary considerably from the normative models.

2. *Double Descent*–descent is traced through both the patrilineal and the

matrilineal group with attendant rights and obligations but assigns to each a different set of expectations. For example, the inheritance of immovable materials, such as land, may be the domain of the patrilineage, while the matrilineage controls the inheritance of moveable objects such as livestock. The Yako of Africa have the system of double descent. Among the Yako, patrilineal descent has economic rights to farmland, house sites, and cooperative labour. Further it practices joint residence for all members, that is, men of the same patrilineal clan live together and cooperate in farming activities. They also recognise matrilineal descent, which governs the inheritance of transferable wealth, such as livestock and currency.

3. *Cognatic*—The system of descent in which a child is recognised as a descendant equally of both the father and the mother. It is also referred as bilateral or bilineal descent system. Here no unilineal groups can be formed but group structure can be cognatic, that is, the group of kin-persons on the father’s and mother’s side. Membership can be acquired through either the father or the mother.



4. *Ambilineal*—patrilineal and matrilineal principles both operate at the societal level, but at the level of the individual various rules or choices define a person as belonging to either the mother’s or the father’s group.

Among the four types of descent group, emphasis has been on first type. The unilineal descent has been described by anthropologist as exogamous groups. They also acted as corporations: their members held land in common, acted as a single unit with regard to substantive property, and behaved as one “person” in relation to other similarly constituted groups in legal and political matters such as warfare, feuds, and litigation. That is, the members of a lineage did not act as individuals in the politico-jural domain, instead conceiving themselves to a considerable extent as undifferentiated and continuous with each other. This corporateness was the basis of the stability and structure of a society formed out of unilineal descent groups” (Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/kinship/Descent-theory>).

Check Your Progress 1

1. Define descent.

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2. What is the difference between unilineal descent and double descent?

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4.2.3 Other related terms

Clan: A lineage is an exogamous unit. This means that a boy and a girl of the same lineage cannot marry. A larger exogamous category is called the clan. Among the Hindus, this category is known as *gotra*. Each person of a higher caste among the Hindus belongs to the clan of his/her father and cannot marry within the clan or *gotra*. One usually knows about the common ancestor of lineage members as an actual person. But the common ancestor of a clan is generally a mythical figure. In rural areas, often the members of a lineage live in close proximity and therefore have greater occasions for cooperation or conflict. Common interests or actions do not characterise the relationships among clan members because they are usually scattered over a larger territory and their relationships are often quite remote. You would observe that it is common to find these relationships assuming significance only in the context of marriage. That is why we will now discuss caste/ sub-castes as the third characteristic feature of kinship groups in North India. Castes/ subcastes are the endogamous units within which marriage takes place.

Lineage is a descent group traced through only one of the parents, either the father (patrilineage) or the mother (matrilineage). All members of a lineage trace their common ancestry to a single person. Notionally, lineages are exclusive in their membership. In practice, however, many cultures have methods for bestowing lineage membership on individuals who are not genetically related to the lineage progenitor. The most common of these is adoption, although other forms of fictive kinship are also used. Lineages are normally corporate, meaning that their members exercise rights in common and are subject to obligations collectively

Phratry and Moiety Notes- When due to any reason many Lineages get joined as a bigger group then such group is called Phratry. All the lineage of a tribe when divided into two Phratrics, then the social structure so form is called dual organisation and every phratrics among this is called Moiety. Phratry may be exogamous or may not be. Two Toda Phratrics i.e. Tarathral and Teyevaliole are endogamous, though these are divided in many exogamous lineages. It is said that Moiety of Nagas were endogamous in the past but later on became exogamous. Social organisation of Bondo tribe from Odisha is divided in two Moieties—Ontal (Cobra) and Killo (Tiger). These became region exogamous and lineage exogamous by coming in contact of their neighbour's culture. Due to this endogamy also developed in their Moiety. One phratry has many lineages

Gotra refers to the lineage segment within an Indian caste that prohibits intermarriage by virtue of the members' descent from a common mythical ancestor, an important factor in determining possible Hindu marriage alliances. Gotra originally referred to the seven lineage segments of the Brahmans (priests), who trace their derivation from seven ancient seers: Atri, Bharadvaja, Bhrigu, Gotama, Kashyapa, Vasishtha, and Vishvamitra. An eighth gotra was added early on, the Agastya, named after the seer intimately linked up with the spread of Vedic Hinduism in southern India.

Anthropologist studied simple societies as part of the colonial enterprise of trying to understand societies that were colonised or were explored. These anthropologists were guided by evolutionary theories that looked at some of these simple societies as part of the earlier phases of evolution and hence primitive in their organisation. Influenced by theories developed by Maine and

Morgan in which societies transited from status to contract forms of organisation and from corporate to individual forms of property ownership. Of the many questions that vexed these anthropologists were; how are some of the stateless societies organised? how are rights, properties, inheritances etc. transferred and maintained? They found the answers in the study of genealogies where they found kinship systems were great organisational principles in many of these so called “primitive societies”. In our next section we will look at some of these anthropologists who looked at descent and the groups formed thereof as way to understand kinship systems and larger societies.

4.3 DESCENT APPROACH IN KINSHIP STUDIES

Kinship is important to a person and a community's well-being. Because different societies define kinship differently, they also set the rules governing kinship, which are sometimes legally defined and sometimes implied. Anthropologist in the 19th century in an attempt to understand the constitution of society gave the theory of descent as the principal of organising the social structure. In this section, let us examine the evolution of descent approach and some of the key features put forward by descent theorists.

4.3.1 Evolution of Descent Approach

The functionalist anthropologist in the early stages of the emergence of the discipline of anthropology were in search of an answer to the question, what integrates society. As the primitive societies, studied by anthropologists, were seen as kinship based, integration of the social structure was located in kinship system. As groups were seen as segments of society, they would be integrated only if the principal of kinship organisation were unilineal. For Radcliffe-Brown, only group formed on the basis of unilineal descent did not overlap. Thus the understanding of unilineal descent group as essential for the formation and continuity of social structure. Most anthropological literature during this period were concerned with societies whose social structure rested on unilineal descent and thus creating an impression that descent was the organising principal.

The descent approach was the transformation of the theoretical problems raised by 19th century anthropologists, mainly Maine and Morgan. These early anthropologists were concerned in finding the relationship between kinship and territory and also find the differentiation between family as a bilateral group (tracing relation through both parent) and clan as unilateral group. The main concern was to investigate the constitution of primitive society and their political institution. The unilineal descent group was taken as the criteria for regulating political relations and providing stability to the group. According to Maine (1861), the earliest history of primitive society reveals that the political structure was based on extended ties of territorial relations. Morgan similarly believed that all forms of government can be classified into two categories – society or 'societas' (clan as unit of organisation) and state (formed on basis of territory and property).

The British anthropologist, unlike their predecessor, were not interested in the evolution of the society. They were more concerned with the constitution of the structure and the inter relations between different parts. Therefore society was viewed as having a systematic order resulting due to the inter relation and dependence of different parts. On the basis of the ethnographic study these anthropologist arrived at the understanding that residence/territory and descent

coexisted in the same society. This formed the base of the descent theory that supports the idea of all agnates (male member from same line of descent) have common residence and hence forming the patrilineal descent group. Similarly all uterine (female member from same line of descent) formed the matrilineal group. In both cases, descent provided the basis of group integration.

4.3.2 Features of Descent Principal

The key features of descent principal as found in the theories of anthropologist using descent approach are

1. Descent principles have parallel rules of post-marital residence:
 - Patrilocality: married couples and children live in husband’s community usually found with patrilineal descent.
 - Matrilocality: married couples and their children live in wife’s community, associated with matrilineal descent
2. Descent rules are used to determine parenthood, identify ancestry and assign people to social categories, groups, and roles on basis of inherited status.
 - The descent approach emphasis on the formation of social groups or descent group and have described these groups as exhibiting certain features:
 - a) Descent groups are permanent social units, whose members claim common ancestry. The membership of the group is determined at birth and is a life-long membership. The descent group endures over time even though membership changes.
 - b) Descent groups function successfully as long-term joint property owners and economic production teams.
 - c) Descent groups assume important corporate functions such as land ownership, political representation and mutual aid and support.
 - d) Descent groups were the mechanisms for maintaining political order in stateless societies. The principle was used to trace lines of inheritance and succession as chieftain.
3. In the development of theory of family and kinship, the descent theories made reference to genealogical charts that helped trace connections between kin.
4. The descent principle helped in the allocation of roles and responsibility among the members of a particular group, kinship terminology were relevant in indicating the allocation.

Check Your Progress 2

1. How did the British Anthropologist differ from their predecessor in the understanding of the nature of integration in society?

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2. Mention any four feature of descent approach to the study of kinship.

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4.4 USAGE OF DESCENT APPROACH BY ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Prominent British social anthropologists of this period, such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, and Meyer Fortes, generally advocated a functionalist approach. The major premises of functionalism were that every aspect of a culture, no matter how seemingly disparate (e.g., kinship terms, technology, food, mythology, artistic motifs), had a substantive purpose and that within a given culture these diverse structures worked together to maintain the group's viability. For instance, these scholars saw the family as a universal social institution that functioned primarily to rear children. From their perspective this function was to a large degree self-evident and cross-culturally constant. The wider groupings recruited through kinship, which were the basis of political and economic organisation, were much more culturally variable and hence of greater interest.

4.4.1 Henry Morgan: Descriptive and Classificatory Terminology

Henry Lewis Morgan (1818-1881), as we mentioned earlier, is one of the foremost cultural anthropologists whose theories had substantial influence in sociology and anthropology. Morgan carried out fieldwork among the Native American peoples. In *Ancient Society* (1877) he attempted to link the evolution of kinship institutions to technological changes and the evolution of property forms. His pioneering work on kinship resulted in a book: *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*, was published in 1871. He provided an evolutionary thinking according to which kinship was defined as a social institution identifying the earlier steps of societal organisation. Kinship was presented as the epi - centre of so - called primitive societies' social organisation. Kinship was seen as a principle for differentiated simple society from complex modern societies. Kinship gave explanation of the problem of the maintenance of social order in the absence of state based organisations.

An important element in Morgan's formulation was the distinction between classificatory and descriptive systems of kinship. In a classificatory system, relatives not in ego's direct line of descent or ancestry—called the collateral kin are placed in the same terminological grouping as lineal kin—relatives in ego's direct line of descent. Classificatory system, such as that of the Dravidian kinship for example, designate the father and his brother, and conversely the mother and her sister, by the same term or indicating a relationship of similarity. In many societies with unilineal descent—that is, systems that emphasise descent through one of the parents' line, but not both—ego uses one set of terms to refer to brothers, sisters, and parallel cousins (those whose genealogical ties are traced through a related parent of the same sex, as in a father's brother or a mother's sister), while another set of terms is employed for cross-cousins (the offspring of a father's sister or a mother's brother). This arrangement emphasises

the fact that cross-cousins do not belong to the lineage with ego, ego's siblings, and ego's parallel cousins, thus designating marriage between cross-cousins as exogamous group.

Descriptive terminology, in contrast to classificatory terminology, maintains a separation between lineal and collateral kin; for example, mother and mother's sister, although of the same generation and sex, are distinguished.

4.4.2 Radcliffe-Brown: African System of Kinship and Marriage

He insisted on the study of a kinship system as a field of rights and obligations and saw it as part of the social structure. Kinship system should be regarded as a special social relations that form part of a broader general network of social relations called social structure. For Radcliffe-Brown descent is both social and biological and hence the distinction between pater (social) and genitor (biological) father. He differentiated between two types of rights; 'Rights in personam' refers to certain rights that a husband has to his wife. By virtue of these rights, he may require the execution of her respective duties. If in relation to his wife, someone commits a violent action, the mechanism will take effect right in rem, and the offense will be treated as a crime against her husband. If in relation to his wife, someone commits a violent action, the mechanism will take effect right in rem, and the offense will be treated as a crime against her husband.

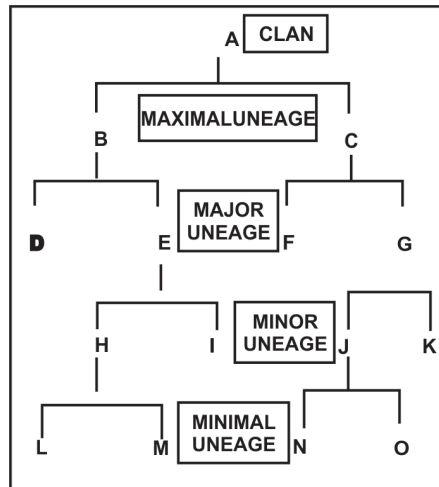
In the study of kinship system, Radcliffe Brown also focuses on kinship and kinship terminology. According to him, kinship terminology enables to understand the social structure. In simple societies kinship is the basis of social organisation, and is associated with a particular kinship term. Thus, by studying the kinship system and terminology of a society its social structure can be understood. He also emphasised upon the study of kinship functionally.

4.4.3 Evans-Pritchard: The Study of Nuer of Africa

Evans-Pritchard's study of the Nuer of the southern Sudan (1951) focused on kinship groups, particularly groups based on descent in the male line from known ancestor. He showed how clans functioned as political groups in Nuer society. He emphasised on the recruitment, perpetuation and functioning of such groups in Africa. Evans-Pritchard asserted that their social idiom is a bovine idiom and calls the relationship between cow and Nuer "symbiotic," because "cattle and men sustain life by their reciprocal services to one another". Nuer's life is of necessity migratory and transhumance, and is not governed by an evolved governing institution. Evans-Pritchard described the Nuer social system as 'ordered anarchy' because in their social life was actually strongly regulated on the basis of kinship.

Evans-Pritchard, in his study of the Nuer, developed the concept of 'segmentary lineage. Among the Nuer, a patrilineal society, lineage is a kinship group that traces descent in male line. Evans-Pritchard has described the Nuer clan as being highly segmented. The segments are genealogical structures, and we therefore refer to them as lineages. Though the clan is divided into segments, its lineages are distinct groups in relation to each other. Thus, in the diagram below, A is a clan which is segmented into maximal lineages B and C and these again bifurcate into major lineages D, E, F, and G. In the same manner, minor lineages H, I, J, and K are segments of major lineages E and G; and L, M, N,

and O are minimal lineages which are segments of minor lineages H and J. The whole clan is a genealogical structure, i.e. the letters represent persons to whom the clan and its segments trace their descent, and from whom they often take their names.



In tribal society, the segmentary lineage systems has an important place, especially in those tribal societies where lineage groups are based on descent through the male line. These agnatic groups are responsible for economic and political functioning of society. The patrilineage has collective ownership of, or particular claims on, important resources such as land and water sources. Segmentary lineage is found in society where there is the absence of organised political institution. And even without a stabilised government, lineage segmentation helps in maintaining formidable relation among the members of clan.

4.4.4 Meyer Fortes: The Study of Tallensi and Ashanti Kinship System

In Fortes "The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups" (American Anthropologist, 1953) Fortes gave the theory of segmentary lineage. He suggested that the structure of unilineal descent group could be generalised and its position in the complete social system can be viewed. The social structure exhibited how territory and descent would connect with each other. Fortes portrayed Tallensi society in Northern Ghana as entirely built around the "lineage system. Whether he is worshipping ancestors, arranging marriages, allocating work, or exerting judicial authority, a Tallensi man's rights and responsibilities are determined by his position in his patrilineage. Although lineage membership is determined by kinship criteria, its functions are economic and political.

Descent and Filiation-Filiation stemmed from being the legitimate child of one's parents and was normally "bilateral, i.e. children were filiated to both parents. Descent as jural status was determined by pedigree — descent from a particular ancestor. In patrilineal cases, a man had descent and filiation links on his father's side, but only filiation on his mother's side. Filiation was relevant only in domestic contexts and descent was a politico-jural matter. Decent is unilateral whereas filiation is always bilateral.

Complementary filiation
Matrifiliation- The filiation with mother's side in patrilineal society.
Patrification- the filiation with father's side in matrilineal society.
Quazi filiation- the purchase of filiation by father in matrilineal society

theory. The alliance theory also critiqued Radcliffe-Brown's understanding of the relation between family and clan. Radcliffe-Brown regarded elementary family universal as it created sentiments which took solidarity among siblings to a larger grouping. Levi-Strauss on the contrary argued that the siblings can be linked through the exchange of sisters in marriage. Another advance argument was made by Edmund Leach who critiqued the concept of complementary filiation given by Meyer Fortes. Complementary filiation, according Fortes was the result of the opposition of relation between affinal and consanguineal relations. For Leach, it was the system of preferential unilateral marriage alliances linked to the local group that helped to reckon segmentary lineage systems. Despite the critiques offering an alternative to the study of kinship system, the importance of descent approach cannot be negated. The theory contributes to the evolutionary understanding of society were formed. It also helps in moulding itself into other broader model of society.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have learnt about the descent approach to the study of kinship. According to the descent approach a person's place in society was largely determined by his or her position within the kinship system. The descent theorist emphasised on tracing the genealogical origin by blood relations or in terms of descent. Some of the key anthropologist who used the descent approach were Henry Maine, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes. The descent principle has been practiced differently in North and South India. The descent approach has been critiqued and led to the evolution of alliance approach to study of kinship.

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Unit 2 –Descent and Alliance Theories–E-gyankosh, available online at <http://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/41275/1/Unit-2.pdf> Online lecture, video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPMz847Cy94>

4.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Descent can be defined as a relationship defined by connection to an ancestor (or ancestress) through a culturally recognised sequence of parent-child links.
2. In unilineal descent a single line is used to trace genealogical connections, it is either through male or female line. It is known as patrilineal descent when the male line is used and when female line is used it is called matrilineal descent. In double descent both male and female lines are used for tracing descent. In such society there is the formation of both patriclan and matriclan.

Check Your progress 2

1. The British anthropologist, unlike their predecessor, were not interested in the evolution of the society. They were more concerned with the constitution of the structure and the inter relations between different parts. Therefore society was viewed as having a systematic order resulting due to the inter relation and dependence of different parts.
2. The features of social groups formed on basis of descent are:
 - i. Descent groups are permanent social units, whose members claim common ancestry.
 - ii. Descent groups assume important corporate functions such as land ownership, political representation & mutual aid and support.
 - iii. Descent groups were the mechanisms for maintaining political order in stateless societies.
 - iv. Membership of the group is determined at birth and is a life-long membership. The descent group endures over time even though membership changes.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Segmentary lineage is a model of social organisation based on a branching system of kinship descent. Lineage is a kinship group that traces descent in male line. Evans-Pritchard has described the Nuer clan as being highly segmented. The segments are genealogical structures, and we therefore refer to them as lineages. Though the clan is divided into segments, its lineages are distinct groups in relation to each other. In tribal society, the segmentary lineage systems has an important place, especially in those tribal societies where lineage groups are based on descent through the male line. These agnatic groups are responsible for economic and political functioning of society. The patrilineage has collective ownership of, or particular claims on, important resources such as land and water sources.

Segmentary lineage is found in society where there is the absence of organised political institution. And even without a stabilised government, lineage segmentation helps in maintaining formidable relation among the members of clan.

2. Meyer Fortes made the distinction between descent and filiation. Descent refers to the genealogical connection recognised between a person and any of his/her ancestor/ancestress. Filiation refers to the relation an individual develops as a fact of being the child of a specified parent. It denotes the relationship created by the fact of being a legitimate child of one's parent. Descent may be unilineal but filiation is always bilateral, having attachment to both the parent.



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