

## **Module-8**

# **SOCIAL STRATIFICATION**

## **Social stratification**



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# **SOCIAL STRATIFICATION**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In all societies people differ from each other on the basis of their age, sex and personal characteristics. Human society is not homogeneous but heterogeneous. Apart from the natural differences, human beings are also differentiated according to socially approved criteria. So socially differentiated men are treated as socially unequal from the point of view of enjoyment of social rewards like status, power, income etc. That may be called social inequality. The term social inequality simply refers to the existence of socially created inequalities. Social stratification is a particular form of social inequality. All societies arrange their members in terms of superiority, inferiority and equality. Stratification is a process of interaction or differentiation whereby some people come to rank higher than others.

In one word, when individuals and groups are ranked, according to some commonly accepted basis of valuation in a hierarchy of status levels based upon the inequality of social positions, social stratification occurs. Social stratification means division of society into different strata or layers. It involves a hierarchy of social groups. Members of a particular layer have a common identity. They have a similar life style. The Indian Caste system provides an example of stratification system. The society in which divisions of social classes exist is known as a stratified society. Modern stratification fundamentally differs from stratification of primitive societies. Social stratification involves two phenomena (i) differentiation of individuals or groups on the basis of possession of certain characteristics whereby some individuals or groups come to rank higher than others, (ii) the ranking of individuals according to some basis of evaluation.

## **DEFINITION AND FEATURES**

Social stratification simply means the inequality between different groups of people. We may observe this inequality in almost all cultures and societies. Social stratification has got very complex concepts all across the globe. Social stratification refers to a system whereby people in society are grouped into different social classes according to their birth, race, economic position, culture, ethnicity, wealth, income, earnings, occupation, education, and sometimes gender among other factors. It is a system through which people are ranked – one above another. This rank creates a class or division in the society. Thus the concept of social stratification is prevalent since ages. Simply put, social stratification meaning includes categorization of individuals based on order, group, hierarchy, wealth or occupation.

According to Ogburn and Nimkoff, The process by which individuals and groups are ranked in more or less enduring hierarchy of status is known as stratification. Lundberg argues that A

stratified society is one marked by inequality, by differences among people that are evaluated by them as being “lower” and “higher”. According to Gisbert, Social stratification is the division of society into permanent groups of categories linked with each other by the relationship of superiority and subordinations. According to Williams, Social Stratification refers to “The ranking of individuals on a scale of superiority-inferiority-equality, according to some commonly accepted basis of valuation. Melvin M Tumin argues that Social stratification refers to arrangement of any social group or society into hierarchy of positions that are unequal with regard to power, property, social evaluation and psychic gratification.

### **Features of Social Stratification**

On the basis of the analysis of the different definitions given by eminent scholars, social stratification may have the following characteristics.

**1. Social stratification is universal:**

There is no society on this world which is free from stratification. Modern stratification differs from stratification of primitive societies. It is a worldwide phenomenon. According to Sorokin “all permanently organized groups are stratified.”

**2. Stratification is social:**

It is true that biological qualities do not determine one’s superiority and inferiority. Factors like age, sex, intelligence as well as strength often contribute as the basis on which statues are distinguished. But one’s education, property, power, experience, character, personality etc. are found to be more important than biological qualities. Hence, stratification is social by nature.

**3. It is ancient:**

Stratification system is very old. It was present even in the small wondering bonds. In almost all the ancient civilizations, the differences between the rich and poor, humble and powerful existed. During the period of Plato and Kautilya even emphasis was given to political, social and economic inequalities.

**4. It is in diverse forms:**

The forms of stratification is not uniform in all the societies. In the modern world class, caste and estate are the general forms of stratification. In India a special type of stratification in the form of caste is found. The ancient Aryas were divided into four varnas: the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. The ancient Greeks were divided into freemen and slaves and the ancient Romans were divided into the patricians and the plebians. So every society, past or present, big or small is characterized by diversified forms of social stratification.

## 5. Social stratification is Consequential:

Social stratification has two important consequences one is “life chances” and the other one is “life style”. A class system not only affects the “life- chances” of the individuals but also their “life style”. The members of a class have similar social chances but the social chances vary in every society. It includes chances of survival and of good physical and mental health, opportunities for education, chances of obtaining justice, marital conflict, separation and divorce etc. Life style denotes a style of life which is distinctive of a particular social status. Life-styles include such matters like the residential areas in every community which have gradations of prestige-ranking, mode of housing, means of recreation, the kinds of dress, the kinds of books; TV shows to which one is exposed and so on. Life-style may be viewed as a sub-culture in which one stratum differs from another within the frame work of a commonly shared over-all culture.

## **TYPES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION**

There are many ways in which social stratification can manifest itself, based on different factors and elements. Mentioned below are the most common types of social stratification being followed in the society:-

### 1. The Caste system

The caste system is a system of social stratification in India, which divides Hindus into four main groups. We can even find the mention of these four varnas in important Hindu literatures. These four varnas are Brahmins, Kshyatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudra xaste. The powers, duties and financial status of each varna differ from each other.

- The Brahmins at the top (i.e. the priests and the teachers),
- The Kshyatriyas on the next level down (these are rulers and warriors),
- The Vaishyas (farmers, merchants and traders),
- The Shudras (i.e. the labourers) on the bottom rung of the socil ladder.

When an individual is born into a particular caste, he or she remains to be a member of it forever. Every caste is identified by name, and marriage in such a social stratificationa system is also

determined by the caste of the likely couples. Since the caste system is hierarchical, a society that practices it is often faced with the challenge of class resentment.

## 2. The Class system

Some countries have a class system, where people in society are divided into three classes: upper, middle and lower class. Stratification is majorly based on the wealth of an individual. Just as the name of each class suggests,

- The upper classes tend to be aristocrats (or landed gentry) who have been born into lives of greater wealth and privilege. The high-class consists of eminent people in society. They are generally regarded as a successful people in the society.
- The middle class comprises of people that can afford to live decently but are not wealthy enough to enjoy the type of fine living experienced by the upper class. They manage to earn average income and enjoy decent social status in society. The middle classes can be further subdivided into upper middle and lower middle class people. (Also read: Caste System: Meaning, Features, Causes, Effects, and Solutions.)
- The lower class is the category with people having lowest social status in terms of their position and economic status. They do not earn much. The term lower class is a snobbish term, that reflects a divisive and derisive attitude towards people who are not in the upper echelons of society. As a result, most people who belong to this 'lower' stratum of society tend to prefer to be referred to as working class.

A class system can easily become entrenched, and it can be hard to move between the classes. Moving between classes – e.g. from the working class to the middle class – can be done through education, marriage or acquiring wealth. This is known as social mobility. Social mobility can be upward (moving into a 'higher' class) or downward (moving 'down' through the strata of society). One group that has posed a puzzle for traditional classed society is the nouveau riche, or those who have become newly rich. These people are often middle class businesspeople who have struck it rich. This makes them too socially powerful to be truly classed as middle class, and yet they do not share the values or the hereditary privileges of the upper classes.

## 3. Estate system

This system comes from the medieval Europe origin. Estate based social stratification gives much importance on the original birth status. It also considers wealth and other possessions that belong to the individual. This means if a person was born in a particular class, he/she remains in the same until death, without any change. This kind of social stratification works on the principle that each estate has a state and remains with it, right from the beginning until the end.

#### 4. Gender Stratification

There are societies in the world that categorize their members in terms of gender. Gender stratification means that people who belong to a certain sex will have certain rights and privileges that the other sex may not enjoy. Even in the modern world, some societies are greatly defined by this type of social stratification. Gender stratification has led to many societal challenges such as gender-based violence and the marginalization of women. The fight for gender equality can be viewed to be an attempt to dismantle this type of social stratification.

#### 5. Slavery

Though slavery has been abolished in most part of the world, it is still in practice in some countries. People, being classified under this category, are known as slaves. *Every slave is under a master whom he/she belongs to. This system remains so from one hierarchy level to the other. It continues for generations.* The master, thus, owns the slave and by this his power on the slave remains unlimited. It also means that the master can technically use the slave for varied set of reasons. The master can assign any task to the slave. The slave has to complete that task as and when asked for.

## **APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF STRATIFICATION**

### **Functional Approach**

The word 'function' refers to manifest positive consequences of aspects like economy, policy, religion etc. for the maintenance of the social system. Hence, the functional approach explains social stratification as inevitable phenomenon. Functional differentiation is inevitable because an individual cannot fulfill all his needs by himself/ herself. A person is not equipped for meeting all the requirements; hence persons with different abilities are required. Different functions are not required in equal measure. Therefore, different persons are rewarded differentially according to the value attached to the functions they perform. Such a differential pattern of reward gives rise to stratification and hierarchy.

### **Davis and Moore**

The functional theory of social stratification formulated by Kingsley Davis and Willbert E. Moore conforms to the above characterization. The salient features of their theory are as follows: i) Inevitability of social stratification; ii) Need for differential intent and ability for different functions; iii) Differential evaluation of different social positions and duties; iv) Reward on the basis of differential value attached with different functions and v). Values and rewards constituting the social differential and stratification. Thus, social stratification is a consequence of inevitability of differentiation of roles and duties. Further, different duties and roles cany

differential power and prestige. And the differentiation of roles and duties is inevitable for the survival of human society. Hence, stratification becomes inevitable in social life.

### **Tumin's Critique**

However, a scathing attack on Davis-Moore approach comes from Melvin M. Tumin who challenges' social stratification as inherent feature of social organization. He doubts the historical validity of the functional importance for the necessarily of social stratification. The idea of positions with greater and lesser power and prestige as posited by Davis-Moore is a 'tautology and unsound procedure' in Tumin's understanding. Assignments and performances are the bases of rewards rather than positions. Distinction between the 'less functional' and 'more functional' as drawn by Davis-Moore is also misleading because an engineer alone cannot perform a task without equally important contributions of workers and other functionaries. Division of labour is a necessity, but not social differentiation as envisaged by Davis Moore. The functional approach is also dubbed as a general and vague formulation because it does not spell out the range of inequality and the determinants of the rank in concrete societies. According to Ralph Dahrendorf, stratification lies neither in human nature nor in a historically dubious conception of private property. It lies in 'authority structure' of a society which is necessary for sustaining norms and sanctions. 'Institutionalized power' based on norms and sanctions create inequality and hierarchy.

### **Max Weber**

More concrete formulation of social stratification is presented by Max Weber in his analysis of 'class, status and party'. Weber not only clearly distinguishes between economic structure, status system and political power, he also finds interconnections, between these three in the form of the system of social stratification. 'Class' is an economic phenomenon, a product of the 'market situation' which implies competition among 1 different classes such as buyers and sellers. 'Status' is recognition of 'honour'. People are distributed among different classes, so are status groups based on distribution of honour ~ which is identified in terms of a range of symbols in a given society. Though analytically, classes and status groups are independent phenomena, they are significantly related to each other depending upon the nature and formation of a given society at a given point of time. The world 'party' implies a house of power, and power is the keynote of Weberian theory of stratification. Power may be for the sake of power or it may be economically determined i power. And the economically determined power is not always identical with the social or the legal power. Economic power may be a consequence of power existing on other groups. Striving for power is not always for economic well-being. As we have mentioned it may be for the sake of power or for social honour. All power does not provide social honour, and power is not the only source of social honour. Sometimes even the propertied and the propedyless can belong to the same status group. Thus, status is determined by social honour, and the latter is expressed through different 'styles of life', which are not necessarily influenced by economic or political standing in society.

## **Dialectical Approach**

Karl Marx is the foremost architect of the dialectical approach to the study of society and history. His theory is not restricted to economic understanding and analysis only, it is a wide structural theory of society. However, despite such a grand theorization Marx accords preeminence to class over status and power, which Weber largely does not accept. 'Base' is economic structure, and 'superstructure' includes polity, religion, culture etc. To clarify further, according to Marx stratification is determined by the system of relations of production, and 'status' is determined by a person's position in the very system in terms of ownership and non-ownership of the means of production. The owners are named as 'bourgeoisie' and the non-owners are called as 'proletariat' by Marx. These are in fact social categories rather than bare economic entities. Production is by 'social individuals', hence production relations imply a 'social context' rather than a mere economic situation. Extrapolating this understanding relation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are 'social', and the two could be seen in terms of 'domination' and 'subjection', or as effective superiority-inferiority relationships. Classes to Marx are basic features of society; they are the product of the processes of the productive system which is in effect a system of power relations. To own means of production tantamount to domination and power and to render services, and to supply the human labour amounts to subordination and dependence. In this sense, class is a social reality, a real group of people with a developed consciousness of its existence, its position, goals and capabilities. Class is like a looking glass of society by which one can see its social fabric and internal dynamics.

## **Dahrendorf's Critique**

Ralf Dahrendorf, while agreeing with Marxian theory of society in general, questions the ubiquitous character of class-conflict. Conflict is context-specific; and 'coercion' is key to social ranking in the context of given institutions of authority. The two groups of people are: (i) which is coercive, and (ii) which is coerced. Such domination and subjugation are found in all the areas of social life - economic, political, industrial, social, cultural etc. And coincidence of one type of conflict into another has ceased to exist. 'Conflict groups' rather than 'classes' characterize conditions of social structure. 'Authority' is a legitimate relation of domination and subjection. Authority relations are always relations of superordination and sub-ordination, hence stratification.

## **SOCIAL MOBILITY**

Social mobility refers to the movement within the social structure, from one social position to another. It means a change in social status. All societies provide some opportunity for social mobility. But the societies differ from each other to extent in which individuals can move from one class or status level to another.



It is said that the greater the amount of social mobility, the more open the class structure. The concept of social mobility has fundamental importance in ascertaining the relative “openness” of a social structure. The nature, forms, direction and magnitude of social mobility depends on the nature and types of social stratification. Sociologists study social mobility in order to find out the relative ‘openness’ of a social structure. Any group that improves its standard will also improve its social status. But the rate of social mobility is not uniform in all the countries. It differs from society to society from time to time. In India the rate of mobility is naturally low because of agriculture being the predominant occupation and the continuity of caste system as compared to the other countries of the world.

### Types of Social Mobility:

In social stratification the movement occurs in three directions.

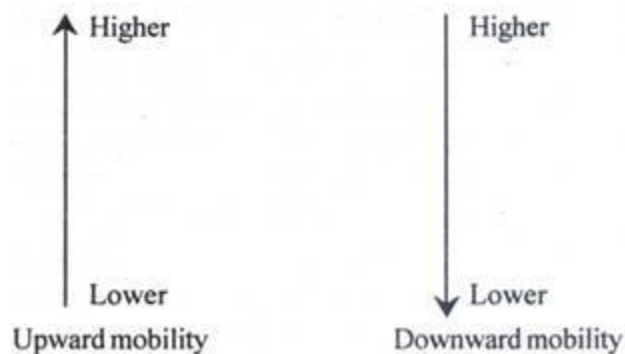
- (a) From lower to higher
- (b) From higher to lower
- (c) Between two positions at the same level.

Social mobility is of two types:

- (i) Vertical mobility
- (ii) Horizontal mobility

(i) Vertical mobility:

It refers to the movement of people from one stratum to another or from one status to another. It brings changes in class, occupation and power. It involves movement from lower to higher or higher to lower. There are two types of vertical mobility. One is upward and other is downward mobility.



When an individual moves from lower status to higher status, it is called upward mobility. For example, if the son of a peon joins a bank as an officer, it is said to be upward social mobility but if he loses the job due to any other reason or inefficiency, he is downwardly mobile from his previous job. So downward mobility takes place when a person moves down from one position to another and change his status.

(ii) Horizontal Mobility:

It refers to the movement of people from one social group to another situated on the same level. It means that the ranks of these two groups are not different. It indicates change in position without the change in status. For example, if a teacher leaves one school and joins another school or a bank officer leaves one branch to work in another or change of residence is the horizontal mobility.



Apart from the above two broad types of social stratification, there are two other types of social stratification in terms of dimension of time. They are:

(i) Inter-generational mobility:

When changes in status occur from one generation to another, it is called intergenerational mobility. For example, if the son changes his status either by taking upon occupation of higher or lower rank with that of his father, there inter-generational mobility takes place.

(ii) Intra-generational mobility:

When changes in status occur within one generation, it is called intra-generational mobility. For example, the rise and fall in the occupational structure of a family which leads to change in its social status within one generation is called intra-generational mobility.