

SYM 101 SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

Unit : 05

Topic : Social Stratification Part I

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Introduction

- All human societies, from the simplest to the most complex, have some form of social inequalities in terms of unequal distribution of power, privilege, prestige and wealth between individuals and social groups. We all are not equal. Some people are rich and some are poor. Some are respected and others are despised. Some are powerful and others are powerless. The egalitarian society remains a dream though humans have always longed for an egalitarian society. It is dreamed that in an egalitarian society, there will be no rich and poor, no haves and have-nots, no exploitation and oppression and the phrase like 'power to the people' will become a reality.

- How inequality develops, and how it persists generation to generation? Why are some groups in a society more wealthy or powerful than others? These are some of the questions which have led sociologists to study social inequality. To describe social inequalities, sociologists have used the term social stratification. Stratification is a term that refers to all forms of inequalities based on age, gender, ethnicity, caste, class etc. We can compare social stratification to layers of a rock in the earth's surface, one on the top of each other. While rock's layers are quite rigid (subject to minimum change) but such rigidity is not found in social structure.

Meaning and Definition of Social Stratification

- Differentiation is the law of nature. True, it is in the case of human society. Human society is not homogeneous but heterogeneous. Men differ from one other, in many respects; Human beings are equal so far as their bodily structure is concerned. But the physical appearance of individuals, their intellectual, moral, philosophical, mental, economic, religious, political and other aspects are different. No two individuals are exactly alike. Diversity and inequality are inherent in society. Hence, human society is everywhere stratified.



- All societies arrange their members in terms of superiority, inferiority, and equality. The vertical scale of evaluation, this placing of people into strata, or layers, is called stratification. Those in the top stratum have power, privilege and prestige than those below.
- Society compares and ranks individuals and groups. Members of a group compare different individuals, as when selecting a mate, or employing a worker, or dealing with a neighbor, or developing friendship with an individual. They also compare groups such as castes, races, colleges, cities, athletic teams. These comparisons are valuations, and when members of a group agree, these judgements are social evaluations.
- All societies differentiate members in terms of roles and all societies evaluate roles differently. Some roles are regarded as more important or socially more valuable than others. The persons who perform the more highly esteemed roles are rewarded more highly. Thus, stratification is simply a process of interaction of differentiation whereby some people come to rank higher than others.

Ogburn and Nimkoff: "The process by which individuals and groups are ranked in a more or less enduring hierarchy of status is known as stratification."



Melvin M. Tumin: Social stratification refers to "arrangement of any social group or society into a hierarchy of positions that are unequal with regard to power, property, social evaluation, and/ or psychic gratification."

Lundberg: A stratified society is one marked by inequality, by differences among people that are evaluated by them as being 'lower' and 'higher'

Gisbert: Social stratification is the division of society into permanent groups of categories linked with each other by the relationship of superiority and subordination.

Raymond Murry: Social stratification is a horizontal division of society into 'high' and 'lower' social units.

Key Concepts in Social Stratification

Gupta (1991) explains two general terms as key concepts of stratification:

(a) Hierarchy (b) Difference

According to Dumont (1988), hierarchy implies the regular ordering of a phenomenon on a continuous scale 'such that the elements of the whole are ranked in relation to the whole'. Height, weight, income, and even power (once it has been quantified) can be arranged in a hierarchy; tall and short people can be arranged in a hierarchy of height.

- Hierarchy is one form of stratification. But not all systems of stratification are hierarchical. Some are, but many are not. In the latter case, 'difference' is valorized, and notions of hierarchy may or may not surface.
- Differences rather than hierarchy is dominant in some stratification systems. In other words, the constitutive elements of these differences are such that any attempt to see them hierarchically would do offence to the logical property of these very elements. The layers in this case are not arranged vertically or hierarchically, but horizontally or separately. Such an arrangement can be easily illustrated in the case of language, religion, or nationality.

Dimensions of Social Stratification

On the basis of avenues of Social Mobility, 2 types of social stratification can be identified:

Open System

Closed System

Dimensions of Social Stratification

- On the basis of dimensions, there are many types of social stratification:
 - Age
 - Slave
 - Estate
 - Class
 - Caste
 - Racial Stratification
 - Ethnic Stratification
 - Gender Stratification

P.A. Sorokin wrote in his '**Social Mobility**' that 'unstratified' society with real equality of its members is a myth which has never been realized in the history of mankind.'

As it is clear from the above, all societies exhibit some system of hierarchy whereby its members are placed in positions that are higher or lower, superior or inferior, in relation to each other. The two concepts — 'social differentiation' and 'social stratification' are made use of to refer to such classification or gradation and placement of people in society.

Characteristics of Social Stratification

It is Social: Stratification is social in the sense; it does not represent biologically caused inequalities. It is true that such factors as strength, intelligence, age and sex can often serve as the basis on which statuses or strata are distinguished. But such differences by themselves are not sufficient to explain why some statuses receive more power, property, and prestige than others. Biological traits do not determine social superiority and inferiority until they are socially recognized and given importance.

- For example, the manager of an industry attains a dominant position not by his physical strength, nor by his age, but by having the socially defined traits. His education, training skills, experience, personality, character, etc. are found to be more important than his biological equalities.
- Further, as Tumin has pointed out, the stratification system is — (i) governed by social norms and sanctions, (ii) is likely to be unstable because it may be disturbed by different factors, and (iii) is intimately connected with the other systems of society such as the political, family, religious, economic educational and other institutions.

- **It is Ancient:** The stratification system is quite old. According to historical and archaeological records, stratification was present even in the small wandering bands. Age and sex were the main criterion of stratification then. Ever since the time of Plato and Kautilya, social philosophers have been deeply concerned with economic, social and political inequalities.
- **It is Universal:** The stratification system is a worldwide phenomenon. Difference between the rich and the poor or the 'haves' and the 'have not' is evident everywhere. Even in the 'non-literate', society stratification is very much present. As Sorokin has said, all permanently organised groups are stratified.

- **It is in Diverse Forms:** The stratification system has never been unfirming in all the societies. The ancient Roman society was stratified into two strata: the patricians and the plebeians, the ancient Aryan society into four Varnas: the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras, the ancient Greek Society into freemen and slaves; the ancient Chinese society into the mandarins, merchants, farmers and the soldiers and so on. Class, caste and estate seem to be the general forms of stratification to be found in the modern world. But stratification system seems to be much more complex in the civilized societies.

- **It is Consequential:** The stratification system has its own consequences. The system leads to two main kinds of consequences: (i) 'life chances' and (ii) 'lifestyles'. 'Life-chances' refer to opportunities and outcomes available to individuals based on their position within a social structure. 'Life-styles' include specific ways of life such as housing, residential areas, one's education, means of recreation, relationships between the parents and children, the kind of books to which one is exposed, one's mode of conveyance and so on. Life-chances are more involuntary, while life-styles reflect differences in preferences, tastes and values.

THANKYOU
