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## **LESSON 27 SOCIAL STRATIFICATION PART I**

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## 27. SOCIAL STRATIFICATION PART I

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### 27.0 Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to understand and learn about:

- Concept of Concept of Social Stratification
- Dimensions of Social Stratification
- Functions of Social Stratification

### 27.1 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 men 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.

### 27.2 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 in 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 neighbour, 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.

### **Definition**

- 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."
- Gisbert: "Social stratification is the division of society into permanent groups of categories linked with each other by the relationship of superiority and subordination."
- 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'"
- Raymond Murry: "Social stratification is a horizontal division of society into 'high' and 'lower' social units".



## 27.3 Key Concepts of 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 valorised, 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.

## 27.4 The Universality of Social Stratification

Social stratification is ubiquitous. In all societies there is social differentiation of the population by age, sex, and personal characteristics. The roles and privileges of children differ from those of adults; and those of good hunters or warriors differ from those of the rank and file. It is not customary to speak of a society as stratified if every individual in it has an equal chance to succeed to whatever statuses are open. Strictly speaking, there are no purely equalitarian societies, only societies differing in degree of stratification. Even Russia which dreamt of a 'classless society' could not, any more than any other society, escape the necessity of ranking people according to their functions. The criterion of rank has changed along with values of society. P.A. Sorokin wrote in his 'Social Mobility' that 'unstratified' society with real equality of its members is a myth which has never been realised in the history of mankind.' Social differentiation and Stratification

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. differentiation society bases status on certain kind of trait Which may be (i) physical or biological such as skin-colour, physical appearance, age, sex, (ii) social and cultural such as differences in etiquettes, manners, values, ideals, ideologies. etc. Thus, differentiation serves as a sorting process according to which the people are graded on the basis of roles and status.



Stratification tends to perpetuate these differences in status. Hence, through this process people are fixed in the structure of the society, in some cases, as it is in the case of caste status may become hereditary. Differentiation may be considered the first stage preceding stratification in society, sorted and classified into groups. It does not, however, mean that all differentiation leads to stratification in society.

## 27.5 Characteristics of Social Stratification

According to **M. Tumin** the main attributes of stratification are as follows:

- i) 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 recognised 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.
- ii) 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.
- iii) 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.
- iv) It is in Diverse Forms. The stratification system has never been uniform 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 civilised societies.



- v) It is Consequential. The stratification system has its own consequences. The most important, most desired, and often the scarcest things in human life are distributed unequally because of stratification. The system leads to two main kinds of consequences: (i) 'life chances' and (ii) 'lifestyles'. 'Life-chances' refer to such things as infant mortality, longevity, physical and mental illness, childlessness, marital conflict, separation and divorce. 'Life-styles' include such matters as — the mode of housing, residential areas one's education, means of recreation, relationships between the parents and children, the kind of books, magazines and TV shows 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.

## Functions of Stratification

The glimpse of the cultures of the world reveals that no society is 'classless', that is, unstratified. All the known established societies of the world are stratified in one way or the other. According to Moore and Kingsley Davis, stratification system came to be evolved in all the societies due to the functional necessity. As they have pointed out the main functional necessity of the system is the requirement faced by any Society of placing and motivating individuals in the social structure. Social inequality is thus an unconsciously evolved device by which societies ensure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons". As analysed by **H.M. Johnson** certain things here can be noted about the "functional necessity" of class stratification system.

- i) Encourages hard work. One of the main functions of class stratification is to induce people to work hard to live up to values. Those who best fulfil the values of a particular society are normally rewarded with greater prestige and social acceptance by others. It is known that occupations are ranked high if their functions are highly important and the required personnel is very scarce. Hard work, prolonged training and heavy burden of responsibility are associated with such occupational positions. People undertaking such works are rewarded with money, prestige comforts, etc. Still we cannot say that all those positions which are regarded as important are adequately compensated for.
- ii) Ensures circulation of elites. To some extent class stratification helps to ensure what is often called "the circulation of the elite". When a high degree of prestige comforts and other rewards are offered for certain positions, there will be some competition for them. This process of competition helps to ensure that the more efficient people are able to rise to the top, where their ability can best be used.
- iii) Serves an economic function. The competitive aspect has a kind of economic function in that it helps to ensure the rational use of available talent. It is also functionally necessary to offer differential rewards if the positions at the top are largely ascribed as it is in the case of caste system. Even in caste system the people at the top can lose their prestige if they fail to maintain certain standards.



Hence differential rewards provide the incentives for the upper classes to work at maintaining their positions.

- iv) Prevents waste of resources. The stratification system prevents the waste of scarce resources. The men in the elite class actually possess scarce and socially valued abilities and qualities, whether these are inherited or acquired. Because of their possession of these qualities their enjoyment of some privileges such as extra comfort and immunity from doing menial work, are functionally justified. It becomes functionally beneficial for the society to make use of their talents without being wasted. For Example, it would be a waste to pour the resources of society into the training of doctors and engineers, and then making them to work as peons and attendants. When once certain individuals are chosen and are trained for certain difficult positions it would be dysfunctional to waste their time and energy on tasks for which there is enough manpower.
- v) Stabilises and reinforces the attitudes and skills. Members of a class normally try to limit their relations to their own class. More intimate relationships are mostly found between fellow class members. Even this tendency has its own function. It tends to stabilise and reinforce the attitudes and skills that may be the basis of upper-class positioning. Those who have similar values and interests tend to associate comfortably with one another. Their frequent association itself confirms their common values and interests.
- vi) Helps to pursue different professions or jobs. The values, attitudes and qualities of different classes do differ. This difference is also functional for society to some extent. Because society has needs manual as well as non-manual workers. Many jobs are not attractive to highly trained or 'refined' people for they are socialised to aspire for certain other jobs. Because of the early influence of family and socialisation the individuals imbibe in them certain values, attitudes and qualities relevant to the social class to which they belong. This will influence their selection of jobs.
- vii) Social Control. Further, to the extent that 'lower class' cultural characteristics are essential to society, the classes are, of course, functional. In fact, certain amount of mutual antagonism between social classes is also functional, to some extent, and upper-class and lower-class groups can act as negative reference groups for each other. Thus they act as a means of social control also.
- viii) Controlling effect on the 'shady' world. Class stratification has another social control function. Even in the 'shady' world of gamblers and in the underworld of lower criminals, blackmarketers, racketeers. Smugglers, etc., the legitimate class structure has got respectability. They know that money is not a substitute for prestige but only a compensation for renouncing it. Hence instead of continuing in a profitable shady career, such people want to gain respectability for their money and for their children. They try to enter legitimate fields and become philanthropists and patrons of the arts. Thus the legitimate class structure continues to attract the shady classes and the underworld. This attraction exerts a social control function.





## Principle forms of Social Stratification

Concrete forms of social stratification are different and numerous. However, sociologists have grouped majority of these into four basic systems of stratification: slavery, estates, caste and class. These are sometimes found in conjunction with one another.

- i. **Slavery:** The term 'slave' is used to denote "a man whom law and/or custom regards as the property of another". Slaves are in lower condition and have no political rights. The legal conditions of slave ownership have varied considerably between different societies. Slavery is an extreme form of inequality. Its basis is economic. It has existed almost in all agrarian societies where slaves become an asset in production. In the 18th and 19th centuries, slaves were used exclusively as plantation workers and as domestic menials in the United States, South America and the West Indies; in India, this institution existed in the form of 'bonded labour'.
- ii. **Estates:** Estates were categories in feudal systems, especially in Europe during middle ages. They were less rigid than castes and allowed some mobility. In an estate system men are assigned to their strata according to their birth, military strength and landholdings. Unlike castes, estates were created politically by man-made laws rather than religious rules. Each estate had its own code of appropriate behaviour. The normal divisions were three-fold: (a) the nobility [the first (highest) estate], which was composed of aristocracy and gentry; (b) the clergy (the second estate), which had lower status but possessing various distinctive privileges; and (c) the commoners, which include everyone else from peasants to artisans. In an estate system, the people of various strata were identified by the rights they had and the duties they were expected to perform.
- iii. **Caste system:** The Indian caste system provides an example of a peculiar type of social stratification based on ascription. It is a system of inherited inequality as the guiding principle in social relationships. A caste may be defined as an endogamous group whose members follow by tradition a single occupation, or certain cognate occupations and who are held together by definite social rules of behaviour, and by common ceremonial or ritual observances. The system of caste is based on the assumption that each person is preordained a place and occupation in society at birth. Contact between persons of different strata (castes) is 'impure' and intermarriage between castes is forbidden. Even the most trivial acts of life, such as sipping water or eating, are governed by rules of each caste. Caste system derives its authority from the Hindu belief in the principles of karma and rebirth. Accordingly, individuals who fail to abide by the rituals and duties (karma) of their caste, it is believed, will be reborn in an inferior position in their next incarnation. The caste system is an illustration of social closure in which access to wealth and prestige is closed to social groups, which are excluded from the performance of purifying rituals. The concept of caste is sometimes used





outside the Indian context where two or more ethnic groups are largely segregated from one another, and where notions of racial purity prevail. Modern Weberians, such as John Rex, argue that the apartheid system in South Africa was a form of caste system.

- iv. **Social class:** The above three systems of stratification—slavery, estate and caste system—are mainly associated with agrarian societies. In the modern industrial societies, where machine energy has replaced human and animal energy as the primary source of economic production, an entirely new set of social stratification has developed, which is known as social classes.

## Conclusion

Stratification is a system of social ranking involving relations of superiority and inferiority. The relations of superiority-inferiority between units of ranking are governed by a set of norms. These relations are essentially social relations. Social Stratification is a process in which we divide societies on various bases such as ascribed and achieved bases. Age, gender, caste, race are the ascribed form of social stratification and wealth, income, education, prestige are achieved form of social stratification.

## References and Suggested Further Reading

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