

7. Social Stratification

7.1 Social Stratification: Definitions and Characteristics

7.2 Types of Social Stratification

7.3 Social Mobility

Introduction

Societies around us are heterogeneous in nature and thus divided into various strata or groups. Most societies exist with social systems of social division and social stratification. Everywhere society is divided into various strata. The process by which individuals and groups are ranked in a more or less enduring hierarchy of status is known as stratification. Social stratification refers to the existence of structured inequalities between groups in a society. It can be defined as the structural inequalities between different groups in a society.

Sociologists use the concept of social stratification to refer to a system by which a society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy.



Social inequality

One has to distinguish between social differentiation or division and social stratification. Social differentiation involves the formation of horizontal social divisions whereas social stratification involves vertical (hierarchical) ranking of social strata. In the stratified system the strata are arranged in a vertical manner to show higher and lower levels.

The term social inequality refers to the existence of socially created inequalities. Social stratification is a particular form of social inequality. It refers to the presence of distinct social groups which are ranked one above the other.

7.1 Social Stratification: Definitions and Characteristics

7.1.1 Definitions

1. **Oxford Dictionary:** “The division of society into strata based on social position or class.”
2. **Pascual Gisbert:** “Social stratification is the division of society into permanent groups or categories linked with each other by the relationship of superiority and subordination.”
3. **Harry Johnson:** “Social stratification is the process in which layers of persons or groups are ranked differently so that any one stratum contains many persons or groups of roughly the same rank.”

7.1.2 Basic Characteristics of Social Stratification

1. **Stratification is social:** Social stratification is a characteristic of



society and not simply the reflection of individual differences. In short, stratification is not determined by biological differences but it is governed by social norms and sanctions. It is very closely connected with other systems such as the political, economic, religious.

- 2. Social stratification persists over generations:** In all societies parents confer their social status on their children. Thus the pattern of inequality stays same from generation to generation.
- 3. Social stratification is universal but variable:** Social stratification seems to be found everywhere. At the same time the nature of inequality varies. 'What' is unequal and 'how' unequal, changes within the context of a society.
- 4. Social stratification involves inequality:** Any stratified system gives some people more resources but also justifies this arrangement and defines them as fair. The explanation for inequality differs from society to society.
- 5. Social stratification is consequential:** Stratification affects every aspect of life of all individuals. Social life is affected because of the position of an individual in the social hierarchy. Some individuals experience positive consequences, while others face negative consequences of the hierarchy in a particular society. It leads to two important consequences - life chances and life styles.

7.2 Types of social stratification

Stratification is of two types :

- i. Closed stratification:** Closed stratification is one in which individuals or groups do not enjoy the freedom of changing their social strata. The individual who gets a social strata by birth can never change it in one's life time. In this type of social stratification there is no scope for social mobility. Individuals or groups cannot move from one social strata to other. The Varna system and the caste system in India are examples of closed stratification.
- ii. Open stratification:** Open stratification is one in which individuals or groups enjoy the freedom of changing their social strata i.e. in this type of social stratification there is scope for social mobility. Individuals or groups move from one strata to another. The class system in modern industrial society (Upper class, middle class and lower class) is an example of open stratification. The criteria of open stratification are power, property, intelligence, skills, etc.

Now we will discuss caste system and class system as examples of closed and open forms of stratification.

7.2.1 Caste System

In traditional Indian society, different castes formed a hierarchy of social preference. Each position in the caste structure is defined in terms of its 'purity and pollution.' In a caste stratification system, an individual's position depends on the status attributes ascribed by birth. Therefore, caste is the closed form of social stratification. It is specifically a pan-Indian characteristic. The word 'caste' owes its origin to the Spanish word 'casta'



which means breed or race. The Portuguese applied this term to the classes of people in India, known by the name of 'jati'. Caste is an example of a closed system of stratification. In contemporary societies, caste system is changing. Given below are some definitions and characteristics of the caste system:

Definitions

1. **H. H. Risley** : "Caste is collection of families or group of families bearing a common name, claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community."
2. **George Lundberg** : "A caste is merely a rigid social class into which members are born and from which they can withdraw or escape only with extreme difficulty."
3. **S. V. Ketkar** : "A caste is a group having two characteristics i) membership is confined to those who are born of members and include all persons so born, ii) the membership is forbidden by an inexorable social law to men outside the group."

While defining caste in India, G. S. Ghurye, a well-known sociologist and an Indologist defined caste in terms of its essential characteristics. They are as follows:

Characteristics of caste

- (1) **Segmental division of society**: Society is divided into various castes. The membership of these castes is

determined by birth. Caste is hereditary and thus the status of a person in a caste-based society is not determined by the wealth one owns but it depends on the position/status of the caste into which one is born. The status is determined not by vocation but by birth. Each of these castes is a well developed social group. Since membership is based on birth, mobility from one caste to another is impossible. Each caste has its own traditional social status, occupations, customs, rules and regulations.

- (2) **Hierarchy**: Castes or segments are arranged in terms of a hierarchy. According to Prof. Ghurye castes are graded and arranged into a hierarchy on the basis of the concept of 'purity and pollution.' Hierarchy is a scheme, which arranges castes in terms of higher (or superior) and lower (or inferior) status, in relation to each other. The relative ranking of specific caste groups differs from one place to another.
- (3) **Restriction on feeding and social intercourse**: The first two characteristics described above reflect the separation or distance between castes. This fact of separation is reinforced by the notion of "purity and pollution." Each caste imposes restrictions on its members with regard to food and social intercourse.
- (4) **Differential civil and religious privileges and disabilities**: In a caste society, there is an unequal distribution of privileges and disabilities among its members. While 'higher' caste people enjoy all privileges, 'lower'



caste people suffer from all kinds of disabilities.

(5) Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation: Choice of occupation is not free under caste system. Each caste or a group of allied castes is traditionally associated with a particular occupation. Occupations are hereditary and members of a caste are expected to follow their traditional occupation.

(6) Endogamy: Castes are divided into sub-castes and each sub-caste is an endogamous group. Endogamy, according to some thinkers is the essence of caste system. Every caste or sub-caste insists that its members should marry within the group.

ACTIVITY - 1

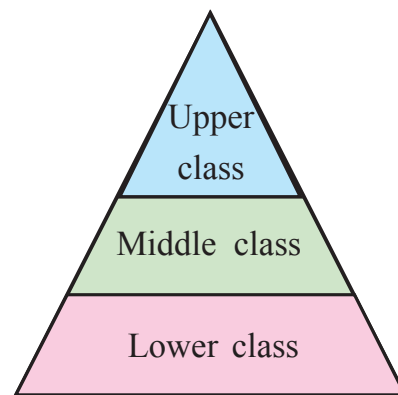
Watch the Marathi movie, 'Fandry' and write a film review describing the social, cultural and economic obstacles created by caste barriers.

ACTIVITY - 2

In today's world the characteristics of caste are changing. Find out which of the characteristics are changing and which are constant. Conduct a group discussion on the same.

7.2.2 Class

A social class is made up of people of similar social status who regard one another as social equals. Each class has



Stratification based on class

a set of values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour norms which differ from those of the other classes. A social class is essentially a status group. Class is related

Have you seen this?

Watch the documentary 'India Untouched' by K. Stalin and conduct a group discussion on the changing nature of caste system in India.

to status. Status, in the case of class system is achieved and not ascribed. Achievements of an individual decides one's status. Class is almost a universal phenomenon. Each social class has its own status in the society. Status is associated with prestige. The relative position of class in the social set up arises from the degree of prestige attached to status. A social class is relatively a stable group. This is often referred to as the life-style of a particular class. It includes mode of dressing, kind of living, means of recreation and cultural products that one is able to enjoy. Life-styles reflect the specialty in preferences, tastes and values of a class. Social classes are open-groups. They represent an open social system. An open class system is one in which vertical social mobility is possible. The basis of social classes is mostly economic but they



are not mere economic groups or divisions.

Definitions

1. **Ogburn and Nimkoff:** “A social class is one or two or more broad groups of individuals who are ranked by the members of the community in socially superior and inferior positions.”
2. **Max Weber:** “Classes are aggregates of individuals who have the same opportunities of acquiring goods, the same exhibited standard of living.”
3. **Morris Ginsberg:** “A class is a group of individuals who through common descent, similarity of occupation, wealth and education have come to

who have differential access to wealth, power and certain styles of life. Ownership of wealth and occupation are the chief criteria of class differences but education, hereditary prestige, group participation, self-identification and recognition by others, also plays an important part in class distinction.

Characteristics of class

(1) Wealth and Income: Possession of substantial amounts of wealth is the main characteristic distinguishing the upper class from other class groups in society. Persons having more wealth and income generally have higher social position and respect in society. Though,



Figure 2: Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002)

Bourdieu gives four types of capital to explain how hierarchy in society persists due to the ownership of these forms of capital. According to him, along with wealth and economic capital, social, symbolic and cultural capital is also very important to retain the upper class position in society.

Forms of capital	Definition and features	How you can recognise it?
Economic capital	Ownership of wealth	Wealth, income, property
Social capital	Membership and involvement in social network	Good connections, networking
Cultural capital	Gained through family and education	Educational credentials Knowledge of art and culture
Symbolic capital	Prestige, status and social honour	Reputation and respect

have similar mode of life, a similar stock of ideas, feelings, attitudes and forms of behaviour.”

Thus, a social class is an aggregate of people who have the same status, rank or common characteristics. This aggregate of people is identified on the basis of their relationship to the economic market

wealth and income (money) are necessary for upper-class position, one's class position is not directly proportionate to one's income. For example, a car mechanic has a lower social status than a teacher, though the income may be greater than the teacher. In spite of all its weaknesses, wealth and income are important



determinants of social class, because of the way of life it permits or enforces.

(2) Occupation: Occupation is an exceedingly important aspect of social class and as such it is another determinant of class status. It is a well-known fact that some kinds of work are more honourable than others, e.g., doctors, engineers, administrators, professors and lawyers hold a higher position than people who are in labour-intensive professions.

Occupation is also one of the best clues to one's way of life, and therefore to one's social class membership. It affects many other facets of life (values, beliefs, marital relations) other than determining the social class.

(3) Education: There is a close, reciprocal relationship between social class and education. One's extent and kind of education affects the class rank that can be secured. Higher education gives opportunities for upward mobility. Thus, education is one of the main levers of social class.

(4) Prestige: It refers to the respect and admiration with which an occupation is regarded by society. Prestige is independent of the particular person who occupies a job. Sociologists have tried to assign prestige rankings to various occupations. Besides wealth, occupation and education, there are certain other criteria which help a person to gain prestige and subsequent higher social status in society. For example, family background, kinship, place of residence etc.

7.2.3 Gender

Stratification has always existed in our society but earlier economic (class) and caste barriers were considered as major reasons, but later on, women sociologists showed how gender equally plays an important role in stratifying our society. Thus gender is one more important and universal basis of social stratification. Gender stratification refers to social ranking, where men typically inhabit higher statuses than women. A common general definition of gender stratification refers to the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and privilege between the two sexes. Gender inequality can be analysed on the bases of prestige, style of life, privileges, and opportunities, association with social groups, income, education, occupation, and power.

One must understand that gender and sex are not interchangeable terms. **Sex** refers to the biological distinction between females and males. In contrast, the term **gender** refers to the social aspects of differences and hierarchies between male and female. Sex may be male or female whereas gender refers to the social meaning of masculinity and femininity. It determines how one should behave in society. For example, men are supposed to behave in a "masculine" manner and thus certain attributes are assigned to men such as courage, bravery, physical strength. On the other hand, women are assigned with attributes like nurturance, care, love, sacrifice which help them to behave in a "feminine" manner.





Gender discrimination

In most countries throughout the world, societies allocate fewer resources to women than to men. Almost all societies are characterised by sexism. **Sexism** is the belief that one sex is superior than the other. All through, societies have been believing in the superiority of men over women and therefore have been dominating women. This male dominance is supported

further by patriarchy. **Patriarchy** is a form of social organisation in which men, dominate, oppress and exploit women. While some degree of patriarchy might be universal, there is significant variation in the power and privileges of men.

If we look at the toys given to a child during childhood, we realise how the process of socialization is gendered and creates gender hierarchy. For example, boys are given toy cars, lego sets or bat and ball to play, whereas girls are given household sets, medical sets, dolls etc.

Thus, the concept of gender stratification refers to a societies' unequal distribution of wealth, power and privilege between the sexes.

Asking 'Where are the women in all this?'

Some sociologists claim that when the word society was used, it always meant 'male' society. We need to be aware of this and sociology needs to keep on asking, 'Where are the women in all this?'

Examples for discussion :

- **Economy:** Ask about the likelihood of lower pay, differential work and the balance of unpaid work like raising kids, domestic work, caring work.
- **Polity:** Ask about the right to vote, the number of women in official positions of power, the women who are world leaders, the number of women at war, and in peace movements.
- **Crime:** Ask about how many women commit crimes? How many women go

to prison? How many are violent and involved in killing? How are women's problems with the law handled?

- **Religion:** Ask about the number of world religions that have female gods or women spokespersons. How are women treated by their religion? Are they prohibited by certain gatherings, spaces or positions?
- **Family:** Ask about the role of men and women in raising children. Ask about the sexual division of labour
- **Health:** Ask about women's illness, about the frequency to visit doctor or managing with home remedies. Ask whether they are aware of their hemoglobin value.

Source: Macionis and Plummer: Sociology - A Global Introduction, Pearsons, UK, 2014.



ACTIVITY - 3

Divide the class into groups. Each group can select one of the issues mentioned in the above block and collect information on it. The group should present their findings to the class.

Traditional notions of a polarized gender identity

Feminine traits	Masculine traits
Submissive	Dominant
Dependent	Independent
Emotional	Rational
Weak	Strong
Timid	Brave
Content	Ambitious
Passive	Active
Cooperative	Competitive
Sex object	Sexually aggressive

Source: Macionis and Plummer: Sociology - A Global Introduction, Pearsons, UK, 2014.

7.3 Social Mobility

Mobility stands for shift, change and movement. The change may be of a place or from one position to another. Social mobility stands for change in the position of an individual or a group of individuals from one status to another.

7.3.1 Types of social mobility

1. Horizontal mobility: It refers to change of residence or job without status change. Under this type of social mobility, a person changes one's occupation but the overall social standing remains the same. Certain occupations like doctor, engineer, and teacher may enjoy the same status but when an engineer changes one's occupation from

engineer to teaching engineering, there is horizontal shift from one occupational category to another but no change has taken place in the system of social stratification.

2. Vertical mobility: Vertical mobility refers to any change in the occupational, economic or political status of an individual or a group which leads to change of their position. According to Sorokin, vertical social mobility refers to the relations involved in transition of an individual from one social stratum to another. Vertical mobility stands for change of social position, either upward or downward, which can be labelled as ascending or descending type of mobility.

3. Intergenerational mobility: This type of mobility means that one generation changes its social status in contrast to the previous generation. However, this mobility may be upward or downward e.g. people of lower caste or class may provide facilities to their children to get higher education, training and skills. With the help of these skills the younger generation may get employment in a higher position.

4. Intragenerational mobility: This type of mobility takes place in the life-span of one generation. A person may start one's career as a clerk. He/She acquires more education and over a period of time, he/she becomes an IFS officer. Here the individual moves up and occupies a higher social position than previously.

A society based on absolute equality



is an 'ideal type'. However, social stratification pervades our lives - our personal spaces, work lives, religious practices, relationships and so on.

ACTIVITY - 4

Find out examples of intergenerational and intragenerational mobility from your surroundings and present it in your classroom.

In this chapter you will have learnt about class, gender and caste as forms of social stratification. You must be very clear by now about the fact that we live in a world that is grossly unequal.

SUMMARY

- Most societies exist with social systems of social division and social stratification and are divided into various strata.
- The process by which individuals and groups are ranked in a more or less enduring hierarchy of stratas is known as stratification.
- One has to distinguish between social differentiation or division and social stratification. Social differentiation involves the formation of horizontal social divisions whereas social stratification involves vertical (hierarchical) ranking of social strata.
- Stratification is social and persists over generations.
- Social stratification is universal but variable.
- Social stratification is based on caste, class or gender.
- Caste is an example of a closed system of stratification.
- Class is an example of open stratification.
- Gender is an important universal factor of social stratification.
- When an individual moves from one stratum to another, it is known as social mobility.

EXERCISE

1. (A) Choose the correct alternative and complete the statements.

- (1) Social stratification is ____.
(local, national, universal)
- (2) Class is a ____ form of stratification.
(open, closed, rigid)
- (3) Gender based stratification has led to ____ in society.
(justice, exploitation, equality)
- (4) Social stratification of ____ is based on the

principle of purity and pollution. (class, gender, caste)

1. (B) Correct the incorrect pair.

- (1) (i) Ownership of wealth - Economic capital
(ii) Membership and involvement in social network - Social capital
(iii) Gained through education - Cultural capital



- (iv) Prestige, status and social honour
- Economic capital

1. (C) Correct underlined words and complete the sentence.

- (1) Caste is based on wealth.
- (2) A hierarchical system where women are given a lower social status is stratification based on class.

2. Write short notes.

- (1) Principles of social stratification
- (2) Characteristics of caste according to Dr. G. S. Ghurye
- (3) Types of mobility

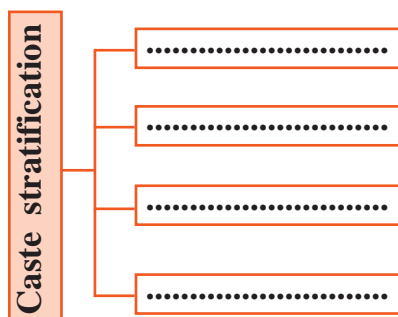
3. Write differences.

- (1) Caste and Class
- (2) Intragenerational mobility and Intergenerational mobility

4. Explain the following concept with an example.

- (1) Vertical mobility
- (2) Intergenerational mobility

5. (A) Complete the concept map.



(B) State whether the following statements are True or False with reasons.

- (1) There is no mobility in the class system.
- (2) Education has led to women's empowerment.

6. Answer the following question in detail (about 150-200 words).

Discuss class and gender as forms of social stratification with suitable examples of your own.

ACTIVITY:

Arrange a group reading of any two of the following books and conduct a group discussion on the caste and gender discrimination/inequality.

Baburao Bagul - 'Jevha Mi Jaat chorli Hoti'

Daya Pawar - 'Baluta'

Urmila Pawar - 'Aiyadaan'

Omprakash Valmiki - 'Jhootan'

Kishor Shantabai Kale - 'Against all Odds'

