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# SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

**School of Social Sciences**
**Indira Gandhi National Open University**

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## COURSE PREPARATION TEAM

| BLOCK 1 | INTRODUCING STRATIFICATION | |
|---|---|---|
| Unit 1 | Basic Concepts | Adapted from ESO14 |
| Unit 2 | Bases of Social Stratification | Adapted from ESO14 |
| **BLOCK 2** | **THEORIES OF STRATIFICATION** | |
| Unit 3 | Marxian Theory | Adapted from ESO14 |
| Unit 4 | Weberian Theory | Adapted from ESO14 |
| Unit 5 | Functionalist Theory | Adapted from ESO14 |
| Unit 6 | Interactional and Attributional Theory | Adapted from ESO14 |
| **BLOCK 3** | **IDENTITIES AND INEQUALITIES** | |
| Unit 7 | Caste and Class | Adapted from ESO14 |
| Unit 8 | Race and Ethnicity | Adapted from ESO14 |
| Unit 9 | Gendering Inequalities | Adapted from ESO14 |
| **BLOCK 4** | **MOBILITY AND REPRODUCTION** | |
| Unit 10 | Concept and Forms of Mobility | Adapted from ESO14 |
| Unit 11 | Factor and Forces of Mobility | Adapted from ESO14 |
| Unit 12 | Cultural and Social Reproduction | Dr. Karunakar Singh<br>Assistant Professor,<br>University of Rajasthan |

## PRODUCTION

Mr. Tilak Raj
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# COURSE INTRODUCTION

The course BSOC 110: Social Stratification introduces learners to sociological study of social inequalities. It acquaints learners with principal theoretical perspectives and diverse forms of social inequality in articulation with each other. This course is divided into four thematic blocks.

Block 1 **Introducing Stratification** comprises two units. Unit 1 is Basic concepts. This unit focuses on various aspects of social stratification including the evolutionary process. It also introduces the organizing principles of status, wealth and power. The unit also introduces caste and class in India, Indian social structure and discusses some conceptual and theoretical problems.

Unit 2 is Bases of Social Stratification. In this unit we introduces various dimensions or bases of social stratification i.e. class, power and status, and natural inequalities when it have attached some social meanings: race and ethnicity, age and sex.

Block 2 **Theories of Stratification** comprises four units. Unit 3 is Marxian theory and unit 4 is Webrian theory. These units provide material on what these thinkers wrote on division of labour, meaning of class, growth of class, classes and life chances, status and so on. Unit 5 focuses on functionalist theory. It provides an insight into Talcott Parsons approach value consensus and stratification. It goes on to describe the Davis-Moore theory, its basic propositions and its criticism. It thus provides a holistic view of the functionalist theory. Unit 6 focuses on intractional and attributional theories. This unit goes into the early explanations of caste and differentials between the religion and sociological explanations. It then examines in details attributional approaches of Ghurye, Hutton and Srinivas. Following this interactional theories of Bailey, Mariott,Mayer and Dumont are presented. The unit finally appraises the attributional and interactional theory.

Block 3 **Identities and Inequalities** comprises three units. Unit 7 is race and ethnicity. In this unit sociologists talk about race relations as forms of stratification. These are characterized by unequal access to wealth and power on the basis of physical characteristics. Sociologists also point out that disappearance of ethnic identities through the process of assimilation is often hampered when the dominant groups do not allow the flow of social benefits to certain groups, deemed to be powerless ethnic minorities. This situation gives rise to ethnic conflicts.

Unit 8 is Caste and Class: It understands the jati model and explain the role of class in social stratification. Several analysts popularized the view of Indian society as a caste society ignoring the dynamics of existing conditions. They perceived caste to be logical opposite of the class system which was associated along with individualism and particularly with the west.

Unit 9 is the formation of Gender identities and analyses the body as an instrument of social control. It also examines factors leading to gender identities.

Block 4: **Social Mobility and Reproduction** consists three units. Unit 10 deals various concepts and forms of social mobility. Unit 11 informs about various factors and forces associated with social mobility. Units 12 deals with cultural and social reproduction.It tries to analyse the idea of cultural and social reproduction through the prism of Marxist tradition; Durkhemian tradition; Ethnomethodological tradition; Structuralist tradition and most exclusively and comprehensively through Bourdieu's prism.

# CONTENTS

# BLOCK 1
# INTRODUCING STRATIFICATION

# UNIT 1 BASIC CONCEPTS: MEANING AND APPROACHES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

**Structure**

## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to:

- outline evolutionary processes in societies and social stratification;

- discuss its organizing principles: status, wealth and power;

- describe the types of social stratification; and

- Discuss some conceptual and theoretical issues of social stratification.

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Social stratification is a process through which groups and social categories in societies are ranked as higher or lower to one another in terms of their relative position on the scales of prestige, privileges, wealth and power. A distinction could be made between the criteria which place emphasis upon the ascribed or

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innate qualities with which the strata are relatively endowed and those which are acquired by the strata though their own achievement. Ascription and achievement are, therefore, two types of scales which generally define the normative principles which work as determinants of social stratification in all societies.

Social stratification is also historical process. It emerged as a social institution of societies at a certain level of social evolution and social development. The hunting and food gathering societies had individual levels of social differentiation, for example, a top hunter or shaman acquired higher status due to his personal qualities or skills which society considered to be mystical or divine in origin; or differentiation could be in terms of age and sex of the members of the society. But owing to the limits on the population growth due to less developed production technologies and precarious and often nomadic nature of these societies, their social structure was quite simple endowed as it was with elementary skills among people for communication (limited language vocabulary), simple technologies, elementary forms of belief systems, and rules of social control such societies did not produce any produce any substantial economic surpluses and accumulation of wealth for any member was impossible. Such simpler societies did have social differentiation, but were without the institution of social stratification.

## 1.2    THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

Social stratification as a institution evolved when the technologies of production under went basic changes. Innovations of animal husbandry and agriculture necessitated more complex technologies and settled forms of community life. These economies also began to generate economic surpluses and accumulation of wealth either in the form of cattle or food grains. With assured food resources population began to grow as never before and barter and exchange, or commodities began to take place on a larger scale. In course of time, tools of exchange were invented which could reflect values of commodities in a growth of sections of societies who had more control on wealth and power, with development of relatively complex technologies and division of labour, not only specialized groups emerged but a division between the rural and urban centres also came into existence in course of time. The complexity of social structure necessitated more elaborate institutions of social control over the emerging new social realities, such as institutionalized form of religion, strata of functionaries specialized into different forms of work, culture specialists and the ruling classes etc. The institution of social stratification came into being as a result of an evolutionary functional necessity at such a historical moment.

## 1.3    ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

There are three major organizing principles of social stratification. These are, stanis, wealth and power. Sociological observations of many societies over a period of time have revealed some linkages among these principles in any evolutionary process. For example, even in societies which did not have the institution of social stratification, such as the food gathering and hunting communities, some individuals enjoyed higher social status and were treated as leaders. The magicians (Shamans), persons with exceptional skills in limiting or in any other sphere of social economic and defense were accorded higher stanis in the community. Yet, it did not result into the arrival of the institution of social

stratification because such accrual of individual distinction contributed to social differentiation which could be on the basis of merit, age, gender or any other marker in society. Social stratification comes into being in societies when social gradation or ranking is done on the basis of an entire group of people such as the gradations based on caste and class in our society.

### 1.3.1 Status

The earliest principle of social stratification is that of status. Status in the language of social stratification means ranking of groups in a society on the basis of their relative position in terms of honour or respect. Honour is a qualitative attribute which members in a status group enjoy by birth. Any such attribute which is inherited by birth is ascribed and cannot be acquired by effort. Therefore, status principle of social stratification is also termed as the principle of ascription. In our country, caste is a very appropriate example of status groups. The qualities which go to make a status groups are related more to values and beliefs, to legends and myths perpetuated in societies over a period of time than to principles which are achievable by efforts, whether economic, political or cultural.

### 1.3.2 Wealth

The second organizing principle of social stratification is wealth. Wealth is generated in societies only when technologies advancement takes place and there is a change in the mode of production. Examples are: change from hunting and food garnering economy to settled agriculture, change from agriculture based economy to one based predominantly upon manufacturing and industry. Such changes, not only brought about the institution of social stratification, but in course of time also altered the principles of organization of social stratification. Economic advancement led to generation of more wealth in society, more accumulation of markers of wealth be it in the form of food grains or cattle, or metals and minerals (silver, gold precious stones etc.) or money. At this stage, the groups which had greater control over the economic resources and wealth or which possessed more wealth were ranked higher in society than groups which controlled less of it, or groups which had little or negligible access to wealth (for example, landless workers or industrial workers). The social stratification based on class is its prime example.

### 1.3.3 Power

The third organizing principle of social stratification is power, unlike status and wealth which can be clearly linked with group characteristics of ranking the societies, the principle of power is a relatively diffused attribute because it is not exclusive in character. It is always possible that a group with higher status in society or that which enjoys greater wealth, also exercises more power in society. Nevertheless, one could make a distinction between say, principle of privileges where as the latter tends to be based on the group's ability to use coercive means for other group's conformity with actions, values and beliefs determined by it. The concept of power as Max Weber has discussed in his treatment of social stratification rests on the fact that it endows the persons or groups which have power to impose their will on other groups by legitimate use of coercive method. In this sense, state offers us a good example of an institution which has maximum power. It has sovereign authority to impose its will on citizens of the society.

When legitimacy of exercise of power, is widely accepted by groups, in other words, when it is institutionalized in society, power becomes authority. Authority as a concept could be defined as legitimate power. Power as a principle also enters into the notion of social stratification when its functions or its social ramifications begin to be influenced by the political processes in society, and when state begins to take more active or direct role in influencing the principles of social stratification. A relevant example of this could be found in the policy of positive discrimination or reservation of jobs, political offices and entry into educational institutions in our country by the state in favour of castes and tribes now declared as 'scheduled' or as 'other backward classes'. Max Weber, in his treatment of power as an element in the formation of social stratification has rightly emphasised the significance of politics, political parties and their role in optimizing their access to power.

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**Activity 1**

Discuss **'status' 'wealth' and 'power' with other students in the study centre. In which** way **are they related to one another? Put your findings down in your notebook.**

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## 1.4    TYPES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Broadly speaking, the following types of social stratification have been known to exist:

i)    The age-set system

ii)   Slave system,

iii)  Estate system,

iv)   Caste system,

v)    Class system, and

vi)   Race and Ethnicity

Each of these systems offers clearly argued theories, to explain and justify its respective system of stratification. In some cases, there is flexibility regarding social mobility from one stratum to another. In other cases, there is little or no chance of mobility out of a stratum. The following discussion of the different types of social stratification will make clear what the distinct features of stratification of human societies are.

### 1.4.1   The Age-set System

Societies, which have been described as stateless type of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), lack centralised government. They have no office of chief, or if thqr have such an office, it holds more ritual than secular power. Still, such societies are found to be stratified on the basis of age. This type of stratification, is a characteristic of certain east African societies. The principle of age is most prominent among the Masai and Nandi in East Africa, where ranking on the basis of age, is put together with the exercise of authority, on the basis of seniority. The ranks determined on the basis of age are called age-sets. All the persons (basically men) born, within a range or number of years, belong to one set. The first age-set may comprise as short as six or seven years or as long as fifteen.

In most cases, usually around adolescence, the membership; of the first age-set closes and recruitment to the next set takes place. At this stage, entry to the new age-set generally involves an initiation rite, such as circumcision or other body-marks. Thus, after going through the ritual, each member comes out of childhood, and takes of full membership of his tribe. Each person, thus, belongs to an age-set, to which he remains attached throughout his life. Along with other members, he moves 1 o the next age-set. The age-sets in these societies, determine their social organisation, because membership of these sets covers all areas of life. It directs a person to decide whom he may marry, what land he can own, and in which ceremonies he can take part etc. Thus, membership of each stratum tells a person about his ranking in society.

In most cases, where age-sets operate, a member of an age-set also belong:; to a particular age-grade. These grades are clearly marked out from one another, so that a person belongs to only one grade at a time. Generally, a person after childhood would move 'from junior warrior hood to senior warrior hood. Then he would graduate from junior elder hood to senior elder hood. The warriors fight and defend their tribe from attack, while the elders take decisions and settle disputes. They also communicate with the ancestral spirits. Thus, the age-sets go through the different grades in complete units. In other words, all the members of one particular age-set move into one grade all at once. Thus, their social status also changes all at once. In the kinds of societies we belong to, each person usually makes his or her own natural transition from childhood to adulthood and finally to old age. But in age-set societies, these transitions are made on a corporate basis as members of large age-sets.

In terms of a system of social stratification, the age-set system provides for an open society, in which no one is allocated a particular position for life. Everybody in his time does become old, and therefore gets a chance to hold decisive authority. Thus, this is a system in which personnel change within the system, without changing the pattern of stratification itself

## 1.4.2 Slave System

The slave system of stratification does not exist anymore. Slavery was abolished in 1 833 by Britain and 1865 by USA. This was characterised by a high degree of institutionalisation, i.e. there was a solid legal framework to the system. The main emphasis in this system was on economic inequality, which rendered certain groups of people without rights. The article "slavery' in the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences (1968)* makes a distinction between primitive, ancient, medieval and modem slavery. Here we mention only two main types of slavery-ancient slavery and New World slavery. Ancient slavery was prevalent in ancient Rome and Greece. Here slaves were usually foreign prisoners of war. In New World slavery, the basis of development of slavery was colonial expansion and racist ideology. In this system, the slave was designated as the master's property. The slave had no political and social rights. He or she was compelled to work. Living upon slave labour, the masters formed an aristocracy. It is said that the decline of slavery was primarily brought about, by the inefficiency of slave labour. Some other scholars hold that slavery declined, because of continued opposition to the slave system by educated and enlightened public in general, and the anti-slavery struggles organised by the slaves themselves in different parts of the world at different times. The ancient slavery was somewhat reformed, by limiting the

owner's right of punishment and giving personal rights to the slave. Tim Christian Church in the Roman Empire also supported the provision of manumission to the slave.

### 1.4.3 Estate System

This type of social stratification was characteristic of feudal societies of medieval Europe. In this system we find hierarchy of social strata, which are distinguished and rigidly set off from one another by law and custom. The defining feature of the estate system, was that the position held in the society, depended entirely in terms of ownership of land. Though this system was less rigid than the caste system, it was also characterised by hereditary transmission of social position. Each estate had a clearly defined set of rights by law. At the top of the system existed a royal family, and a hereditary military aristocracy, who were the landholders. Ranking on par with this group were the priesthood or clergy, who were allied with the nobility. Below this were the merchants and craftsmen, who 'were a small proportion of the population initially, but later formed the nucleus for the emergence of the middle class. At the bottom were the free peasants and the Serfs. Defined by a legal set of rights and duties, each estate had a status. The differences between estates were reflected in differences in punishments given for identical offences. Comparative feudal systems and their connections with modem capitalist systems can be traced, for example, in Japan.

As the nobility was supposed to protect everybody, the clergy to pray for everybody and the commoner to produce food for everybody, the estates may be referred to **as** a system of division of labour. Lastly, the estates also represented political groups. In this way, one can say that in classical feudalism, there were only two estates, the nobility and the clergy. It was only after the 12th century that European feudalism had a third estate of the burghers, who first remained as a distinct group and later changed the system itself. If we view the feudal estates as political groups, the serfs, who did not possess any political power, cannot be considered **as** part of an estate.

This system of social stratification is best explained in terms of the nature of and relationship between property and political authority in medieval Europe.

### 1.4.4 Caste System

The caste system in India can be compared with other types-of social stratification but it is unique in some senses to the Indian society. It is uniquely associated with Indian agrarian society as well as, the urban communities like, the Aggarwals, Jains, etc. It consists of essentially closed social groups Arranged in a fixed hierarchical order of superiority and inferiority. It represents the most rigid type of social stratification in terms of ascribed as well **as** socially accepted stratification.

The typical characteristics of the caste system are - i) the membership is hereditary and fixed for life, ii) each caste is an endogamous group, in) social distance is encouraged by the restrictions of contracts and commensality with members of other castes, iv) caste consciousness is stressed by caste names as well as by conformity to the particular customs of the particular caste, and v) occupational specialisation.

Caste operates at two levels. Firstly in terms of an abstract classification into four types of 'varna': brahmin (priests), Kshatriya (lungs), vaishya (merchants) arid shudra (workers). Secondly at the operational village level, there is a division of local communities into groupings called jati. The rigidity of this system is unchangeable. Marginal upward social mobility is possible by a process called sanskritisation. In this process, members of a lower caste adopt the manners and customs of a higher caste, and sever their ties with their original caste.

Individual features of the caste system can be observed in other societies, which follow strict segregation of particular groups. But caste system in its entirety is of course, found in India, and outside India among Hindus settled abroad and within India among non-Hindu groups. The stronghold of caste and the trends towards change in its nature and functioning, have affected the pattern of social stratification in India.

### 1.4.5  Class System

The class system is very different from the systems of stratification, we have so far discussed. Social classes are neither legally defined nor religiously sanctioned groups. Rather, these are relatively open groups which have been considered to be the byproducts of the process of industrialisation and urbanisation throughout the world, in all modern industrial societies.

The class system of social stratification basically implies, a social hierarchy based primarily upon differences in wealth and income. These differences are expressed in different life styles and hence different consumption patterns. In some case we also find different manners in terms of speech and dress. As a general type, class-systems are characterised by social mobility - upward and downward, both inter-generational and intra-generational.

In studying the concept of class, we face two questions. Firstly, what criteria should be used to identify classes? Secondly, there is the subjective element, i.e., do people with identical tangible material assets form a class, even if they are not perceived by others and themselves as a conscious class? For the irst problem of criteria, according to Max Weber, tit dimensions of wealth, power and lifestyle are crucial in determining the class. Most sociologists generally use several criteria simultaneously in determining the class. For the second 'subjective' problem, 'it is generally agreed that the issue of class-consciousness should not be introduced as a definition of the class itself. This is a matter for individual empirical investigation in each case.

Generally, most sociologists agree that in all industrial societies we find the existence of the upper, middle and working classes. Similarly, in agrarian societies a noted sociologist, Daniel Thorner has identified three classes in the rural countryside in India. These he called the class of 'malik, 'kisan' and 'mazdur' i.e., the proprietors who owned land, the working peasants who owned small amount of land and the labour class or mazdurs who did not own any land but worked on other peoples' land. (Thomer, D. in Gupta(ed) 1992; pp. 265). On the questions of the role of classes in society and their intra and inter linkages, sociologists have adopted different approaches and developed different theories of social stratification. About these approaches and theories we will tell you briefly at the end of this unit.

In industrial societies, we find that social classes coexist with status groups. This observation led Max Weber to distinguish between the two, and to look at their linkages with each other. Max Weber argued that social classes are ranked according to their relation to the ways of producing and acquiring goods. Status groups however are ranked according to the ways of consuming goods. This way of understanding the difference between classes and status groups is an over simplification. Since Weber's formulation of this distinction, many sociologists have made studies of the notions of class and status. At this stage it will suffice to say that analysing social stratification in industrial societies is a very difficult task. In the context of developing societies, it is an even more difficult task, because in these societies social class is only one component and the elements of status groups, castes or caste-like groups, racial and ethnic groups exist side by side.

## 1.4.6  Race and Ethnicity

The remaining type of social stratification is the one based on race and ethnicity. Race, **as** a biological concept, refers to a large category of people who share certain inherited physical characteristics - colour of skin, type of hail; facial features, size of head etc. Anthropologists initially tried to arrive at a classification of races, but ran into problems, because more advanced studies of racial types showed the near absence of pure races. Thus, the latest thinking is that all humans belong to a common group. Recent genetic research indicates that 95 per cent of DNA (gene-rating) molecules are the same for all humans. The remaining 5 per cent are responsible for differences in, appearance. Outward differences are also seen as varying within a race rather than across the races. Thus, the classification of races floundered at the scientific level.

For sociologists, a race is a group of people who are perceived by a given society, as biologically different from the others. Thus, people are assigned to one race or another, by public opinion which is moulded by that society's dominant group, rather than on any scientific basis. In racist societies, for example South Africa, physical characteristics are believed to be intrinsically related to moral, intellectual and other non-physical attributes and abilities.

At the theoretical level, sociologists talk about race relations **as** forms of stratification. These are characterised by unequal access to wealth and power, on the basis of physical characteristics. We find in this situation the presence of racial ideologies in one form or the other.

Looking at ethnicity, it can be said that whereas race is based on popularly perceived physical traits, ethnicity is based on cultural traits. Ethnic group is thus defined as a common group of peoples with a common cultural heritage (learned, not inherited). This group may share a common language, history, national origin, or lifestyle.

The factors of migration on a massive scale in the last century provide sociologists an opportunity to examine the fate of ethnic identities. For example, the Chicago School of Sociologists found that over several generations, ethnic identities were lost and later revised. Gellner (I 964 : 163) aptly describes the situation thus : the grandson tries to remember what the son tried to forget. However, sociologists also point out that disappearance of ethnic identities through the process of assimilation is often hampered when the dominant groups do not allow the flow

of social benefits to certain groups, deemed to be powerless ethnic minorities. This situation gives rise to ethnic conflicts. All such situations of conflict make the study of social stratification very important and relevant for sociologists. That is why it is necessary to also look briefly, at the various theories of social stratification. Here, we discuss two major theories, namely, the functionalist theory and the conflict theory.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) What is the term given to ranks determined on the basis of age?

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2) Name two main types of slave system. Use one line for your answer.

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3) Which form of social stratification is defined in term of relationship to ownership of land?

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4) Name the two levels at which the caste system in India operates.

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5) Which of the six types of social stratification, is commonly found in industrialized societies?

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6)  Give the sociological definition of race.

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## 1.5    SOME CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

Issues related to concepts and theories of social stratification have essentially been oriented towards the relationship between social stratification and social order. Max Weber made a distinction among three orders of society: the social, the economic and the political. The complexion of social stratification, according to him varied with the nature of the 'order' of the society. The 'social order' has its primacy in the normative principle of 'honour' and its institutional structures are influenced by it. It is located in the 'status groups'. The institution of feudalism, aristocracy, the formation of different 'estates' in traditional European society were its example; hereditary rights and patrimony and various forms of ascribed privileges and authorities followed in this kind of social order. In India, the caste social stratification reflects this principle. It is operative in the principle of purity and pollution, hereditary occupation and caste privileges or sanctioned forms of discrimination; it can also be found in the principle of endogamy. Castes also constitute unlike class social communities. The 'economic order' is based on the normative principle of rationality and market situation. It manifest in the form of interest groups. Class, according to Max Weber is a product of market situation; it is competitive, it comprises social categories which do not constitute communities and one's social mobility in the class situation depends upon achieved skills or merits governed by the laws of supply and demand. Its manifestation as a institution could be seen in the rise of capitalism, which gives rise to the market situation. The third order of society is 'political'; it is based on the pursuit of 'power' It makes institutional manifestation in the organised system of political parties and various associations which are orientated to its acquisition. The political order of society and its institutional processes have a tendency to extend to the social institutions of other orders, such as the social and political orders.

### 1.5.1   Weber's Approach

The conceptual and theoretical approach of Weber is primarily interpretive and systemic. He considered that theoretical advancement in sociology could be achieved both for understanding and explanation of social phenomena by uses of the 'ideal type" concepts. These concepts are not based on empirical induction from observed reality, but are an abstraction from the 'historical individual' or a configuration of historical events over a period of time from which the sociologists constructs concepts by interpretive understanding. Ideal type concepts are thus not real types although they are derived from a certain understanding of reality. Even though ideal they are not normative (desirable or undesirable; good / bad) but ideational or mental constructions. Weber believed that sociological theories do have explanatory significance but still they did not have law-like power of generalization. His theory of social stratification should, therefore, be treated as

such; it is based on comparative understanding of the typical manifestations of the principles of social stratification over a period of time. It makes significant contribution to both understanding of social stratification as system, as well as its processes of change.

## 1.5.2 The Dialectical Approach

The theory of 'dialectical and historical materialism' enunciated by Karl Marx is another very established theory of social stratification. Just as Weber uses the basic notion of 'order' to locate the type concepts for the understanding of social stratification, Marx uses terms of 'mode of production' and 'relations of production' for classification of the conceptual categories of social stratification. The important modes of production are: primitive, feudal and capitalist, these distinctions are based on modes of uses of or nature of labour power and means of technology for production of commodities. The primitive mode was characterized by communal or collective mode of labour with elementary tools as in the food gathering and hunting communities. As we have discussed, the institutions of social stratification could not have evolved at this stage. It institutional organs begin to develop with the rise of feudalism; accumulation of wealth and productive resources developed by this time; it led to the stratification in society with feudal landlord or aristocrat at the top, who exercised control over his estate (land and all other productive resources), and those dependent upon it which was indeed very inclusive. The peasants, serfs and traders and artisans were other social strata who were part of the system but entirely dependent upon the means of production and labour power which remained under the control of the landlord. Most these strata were in fact attached to the estate of the feudal lord. Feudalism evolved its own typical political, economic, social and cultural institutions but most of these were based on the principle of hereditary privileges and patrimonial authority. The feudal lord had a control on the means of productions and this led to a form of relationship between him and other social strata which were based on status obligations and privileges.

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**Box 1.03**

According to Marx, conflict and tension were endemic to the system, may be in explicit or implicit form; often this conflictual relationship was not overt due to 'false consciousness' which prevailed; for example, between the relationship of the lord and the peasant which instead of being perceived by peasant as being exploitative, was seen as being patronage. One viewpoint also exists about the modalities by which wealth determines ranking of groups as social strata.

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## 1.5.3 The Rise of Capitalism

The rise of capitalism ushered a new period in social evolution. The dialectical process of historical change both through the innovation of new technologies and social institutions made feudalism obsolescent and it was replaced by the institution of capitalism. Class structure emerges in full measure by this time by the industrial revolution. The growth in the factor)' mode of production of commodities, massive migration of peasants and worker from the rural areas to the urban centres and accumulation of capital by expanded use of the market, made possible by the new technology of transport and colonial expansion of the European powers changed the system of social stratification. The main classes

which emerged in the new scheme of social stratification were; the capitalist entrepreneurs and the working classes. A new form of acute antagonistic relationship now emerges between these two classes; this relates to demand of reasonable working hours, reasonable wages, better conditions of employment and work etc. These forces of conflict, according to Marx should have culminated into the replacement of capitalism by its obsolescence like in the case of feudalism by a socialist system of society, it would be, according to Marx based on collective mode of production without private ownership of capital mid pursuit of profit. In many countries, socialist societies did come into existence by revolution of the peasants and working classes; for example, former USSR, China, Vietnam etc., but as envisaged by Marx, capitalism has not been rendered obsolete as yet. On the contrary it has shown new resilience where as many socialist economies have either been weakened or have been replaced by capitalist institutions.

The essence of Marxist theory, however, does not depend upon the processes of the formation of social strata or its structural composition as much as upon its basic premise on the nature of social order.. Marx treats social order as a product of historical-materialistic conditions', these are defined by the modes of production and relations of production, and are continually undergoing change due to technological innovations and attempts within the society to resolve various social conflicts which are universal. Social order is thus based on the relationship among various groups which are inherently antagonistic, and cannot be resolved without basically altering the social order or system itself. The process by which this takes place, and in which the exploited classes such as the industrial workers and peasants are partners in class struggle against the capitalist classes in termed as revolution. The new social order, the socialist society which emerges through revolution does not have a place for strata based on inequalities which generate antagonism, but has social differentiation of work without class or social stratification. Such strata are called 'nonantagonistic'.

### 1.5.4 Darhendorf and Coser

In addition to the Marxist formulation, there are other theoretical perspectives in sociology of social stratification which treat conflict as the universal feature in form of social gradations in society. Ralph Daharendorf and Lewis Coser are for example, a few among many such western sociologists who accept the universality of conflict in all form of stratification but locate these conflicts in the institutional anomalies within the system rather than linking it with the theory of class struggle and revolution. Conflict according to these sociologists arises out of antagonism of interests and exercise of power by one stratum over the other which seeks upward social mobility. It represents, therefore, internal dynamics of the stratification system rather than a movement towards its total replacement or change of social order itself by revolutionary means as Marx envisaged. Such theories of social stratification, which are known as conflict theories do not accept the Marxist position of historical materialism which postulates invariable stages of social evolution through series of revolutionary movements. The notion of social order in the conflict theory is closer to functional viewpoint rather than dialectical materialist interpretation.

### 1.5.5 The Functional Theory

The functional theory of social stratification which is very widely followed in the studies of social stratification, particularly among the American sociologists takes a view of social order very different from Marxist position. Instead of

treating social order as being inherently endowed with self-annulling contradictions or conflicts based on the inequalities of social strata,, the functional theory treats social order to be endowed with inherent capacity of self-maintenance and self -regulation. It treats society and its institutions, including social stratification to be constituted by inter-dependent sets of social relationships with capacity to contain to and resolve conflicts which this theory does not deny. This theory postulates an analogy between social order and organism; both have internal mechanisms for self-regulation and self-corrections. Social stratification from a functional view point is a dynamic system characterized by social mobility and continual restructuring of the rules of consensus building. It acknowledges the role of competition and conflict but also postulates the existence of institutional mechanism much as, processes of socialization, education, empowerment by democratic participation etc. through which aspirations for social mobility are or can be realised and contradiction arising out of asymmetrical opportunities of various strata in society resolved with a meaningful degree of social consensus.

The studies of social stratification by Indian sociologists have employed all the theoretical approaches we have described above. Most studies of class structure and peasantry in India have employed Marxist theory of historical materialism and attempted to adapt it to the Indian historical conditions. Weberian perspective on stratification theory has also influenced many studies of rural and urban systems of social stratification. Caste, class and power have been used as conceptual typologies in many studies to measure the changes in social stratification arising out of the forces of social mobility, parti cularly education, policies of democratic participation, positive discrimination favouring SCs, STs and OBCs, industrial and entrepreneurial developments etc. of sociological interest in particularly the observation that due to processes of social mobility and policy of empowerment, the traditional congruence among factors such as economic status, ritual status and power status of strata within the caste system has broken down In other words, higher castes no longer enjoy high economic status orpower status only because they by tradition have been accorded a higher ritual status in the caste system. Sociologists have used in this context, class to define economic status, power to define political status and ritual to define caste status, and have concluded that due to social mobility during to past decades following Independence, social development policies have broken the summation of status principle in the caste mode of social stratification. The emergence of class and ethnic mobilization of caste and religion are new dynamic processes which today challenge the traditional forms and institutions of social stratification.

## 1.6 LET US SUM UP

After defining social stratification as a system of social ranking involving relations of superiority and inferiority, we have discussed its organising principles, namely, class, status and power. Then we described the six types of social stratification; namely,

i) the age set system,

ii) slave system,

iii) estate system,

iv) caste system,

v) class system, and

vi) race/ethnic system;

existing in human societies. This unit outlined some conceptual and theoretical approaches of social stratification..

## 1.7   KEYWORDS

**Demography** : Concerned with various facets of a population such as gender ratios, distribution of a trait, gross numbers etc

**Dialectical** : Taking into account the two opposing or antagonistic views on a topic and resolving them at *$* higher level of abstraction

**Hierarchy** : A rank order of castes or groups from top to bottom

**Caste** : An ascriptive grouping which is community based

**Class** : A achievement oriented interest group.

**Power** : The capacity of a group or persons to influence decisions in their own way in the group or community.

**Status** : Ranking of groups in a society on basis of their relative position in terms of honour or respect.

## 1.8   FURTHER READINGS

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## 1.9   SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Ranks determined on the basis of age are called age-sets.

2) The two main types of slavery are - Ancient slavery and New World slavery.

3) Estate - system of social stratification is determined on the basis of one's relationship to ownership of land.

4) Caste operates at two levels. Firstly, at an All-India level, caste is understood in terms of a four-fold classification of *varna—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.* Secondly, it operates at the village level in terms of jati".

5) Class system is the most commonly found system of social stratificationn **industrial** societies.

6) In sociological terms, race can be defined as a group of people who are considered by a given society **as** biologically different from the others.

# UNIT 2   BASES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

**STRUCTURE**

## 2.0   OBJECTIVES

After reading this you should be able to

Understand the bases of social stratification.

Discuss how natural inequalities become the bases of social stratification

## 2.1   INTRODUCTION

This unit explains what social stratification is, and then discusses its general principles in terms of the bases or dimensions of social stratification. It also discuss how the natural inequlities become the bases of social stratification.

## 2.2   WHAT IS SOCIAL STRATIFICATION?

Stratification is a system of social ranking, involving relations of superiority and inferiority. These relations between the units of rank are governed by a set of norms. Analytically, stratification is conceived of as an evaluative ranking of social units. Concretely, it refers to the empirical distribution of advantages and benefits in society. It can be seen as a process, which is regulated by some principles. These principles determine the bases of the distribution of social advantages in society.( for details see unit 1)

### 2.2.1   Dimensions or Bases of Social Stratification

The bases or dimensions of social stratification refer to the different levels of differentiation which are made to allocate people in a given society. Natural

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inequlities take the form of social inequalities when the members of society assign some meaning of them. Age, sex, and colour are natural bases of inequalities. But now it becomes the bases of social stratification because society has attached some meanings to them. On the basis of some empirical findings, sociologists present three bases of stratification wealth, power and prestige i.e. class, power and status. These can be listed as follows:

i) **Class:** It refers to differentiation at the level of wealth. In this sense it can be termed as economic differentiation. Wealth is generated in societies only when technologies advancement takes place and there is a change in the mode of production. Examples are: change from hunting and food garnering economy to settled agriculture, change from agriculture based economy to one based predominantly upon manufacturing and industry. Such changes, not only brought about the institution of social stratification, but in course of time also altered the principles of organization of social stratification. Economic advancement led to generation of more wealth in society, more accumulation of markers of wealth is it in the form of food grains or cattle, or metals and minerals (silver, gold precious stones etc.) or money. At this stage, the groups which had greater control over the economic resources and wealth or which possessed more wealth were ranked higher in society than groups which controlled less of it, or groups which had little or negligible access to wealth (for example, landless workers or industrial workers). The social stratification based on class is its prime example.

ii) **Power:** It refers to differential access to power in society. It includes political, social and other types of power. It is always possible that a group with higher status in society or that which enjoys greater wealth, also exercises more power in society. Nevertheless, one could make a distinction between say, principle of privileges where as the latter tends to be based on the group's ability to use coercive means for other group's conformity with actions, values and beliefs determined by it. The concept of power as Max Weber has discussed in his treatment of social stratification rests on the fact that it endows the persons or groups which have power to impose their will on other groups by legitimate use of coercive method. In this sense, state offers us a good example of an institution which has maximum power. It has sovereign authority to impose its will on citizens of the society. When legitimacy of exercise of power, is widely accepted by groups, in other words, when it is institutionalized in society, power becomes authority. Authority as a concept could be defined as legitimate power. Power as a principle also enters into the notion of social stratification when its functions or its social ramifications begin to be influenced by the political processes in society, and when state begins to take more active or direct role in influencing the principles of social stratification. A relevant example of this could be found in the policy of positive discrimination or reservation of jobs, political offices and entry into educational institutions in our country by the state in favour of castes and tribes now declared as 'scheduled' or as 'other backward classes'. Max Weber, in his treatment of power as an element in the formation of social stratification has rightly emphasised the significance of politics, political parties and their role in optimizing their access to power.

iii) **Status:** It refers to distribution of prestige or social honour. Status in the language of social stratification means ranking of groups in a society on the basis of their relative position in terms of honour or respect. Honour is a

qualitative attribute which members in a status group enjoy by birth. Any such attribute which is inherited by birth is ascribed and cannot be acquired by effort. Therefore, status principle of social stratification is also termed as the principle of ascription. In our country, caste is a very appropriate example of status groups. The qualities which go to make a status groups are related more to values and beliefs, to legends and myths perpetuated in societies over a period of time than to principles which are achievable by efforts, whether economic, political or cultural.

In most cases, the three dimensions complement each other. However, Max Weber (1 947) draws a distinction between class, power and status. According to Weber, class is an economic category, a product of the market situation. The status group, on the other hand, constitutes the social order based on prestige or honour. Status is determined by the social prestige one enjoys. Social prestige is expressed through different styles of life. Analytically, class and status groups can be independent phenomena, but in reality the two overlap with each other. The notion of power is the keynote of Weber's theory of social stratification. Both the propertied and the property less can belong to the same status groups. Thus, economically determined power is not always identical with the social or legal power.

It has been said that Weber's theory of stratification, is a reaction to Marx's theory of class. We can say that Weber is the founding father of stratification analysis, which developed best in the U. S.A. Marx, on; the other hand, **was** not a stratification theorist. For him the oppositions and contradictions found in modes of production, were of central importance. In answer to Marx's ideas on class, Weber developed his ideas on stratification. He emphasised the distinction of the economic, social and political bases of stratification. Thus, he provided a multi-dimensional approach to the study of social stratification.

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**Activity 1**

Take a round of your colony/village and note down the pattern of housing, such as, where the richest and most powerful people live, where the market is situated, where the poorest people live. Write a one page assay on "Social Stratification in my Community" Discuss your paper with other' students and your Academic Counsellor at your Study Centre.

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**Check Your Progress 1**

1) What are the three bases of social stratification?

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2) Distinguish between class and status group.

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## 2.4 OTHER BASES OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Stratification is a system whereby people are unequally ranked and rewarded on the basis of wealth, power and prestige. It is part of every society and may take various forms like class, gender, race and, of course, ethnicity. The earlier studies of stratification used to focus on the class, status and power while race, age, sex/gender and ethnicity were treated as side issues. However, of late not only have ethnicity and gender been getting some attention in stratification analysis, but ethnic stratification is even replacing class as the foremost form of social division since now property relations tend to be determined by ethnic ranking instead of it being the other way round. These can be listed below:

### 2.4.1 Age

Societies, which have been described as stateless type of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), lack centralised government. They have no office of chief, or if they have such an office, it holds more ritual than secular power. Still, such societies are found to be stratified on the basis of age. This type of stratification is a characteristic of certain east African societies. The principle of age is most prominent among the Masai and Nandi in East Africa, where ranking on the basis of age, is put together with the exercise of authority, on the basis of seniority. The ranks determined on the basis of age are called age-sets. All the persons (basically men) born, within a range or number of years, belong to one set. The first age-set may comprise as short as six or seven years or as long as fifteen.

In most cases, usually around adolescence, the membership; of the first age-set closes and recruitment to the next set takes place. At this stage, entry to the new age-set generally involves an initiation rite, such as circumcision or other body-marks. Thus, after going through the ritual, each member comes out of childhood, and takes of full membership of his tribe. Each person, thus, belongs to an age-set, to which he remains attached throughout his life. Along with other members, he moves to the next age-set. The age-sets in these societies, determine their social organisation, because membership of these sets covers all areas of life. It directs a person to decide whom he may marry, what land he can own, and in which ceremonies he can take part etc. Thus, membership of each stratum tells a person about his ranking in society.

In most cases, where age-sets operate, a member of an age-set also belong:; to a particular age-grade. These grades are clearly marked out from one another, so that a person belongs to only one grade at a time. Generally, a person after childhood would move 'from junior warrior hood to senior warrior hood. Then he would graduate from junior elder hood to senior elder hood. The warriors fight and defend their tribe from attack, while the elders take decisions and settle disputes. They also communicate with the ancestral spirits. Thus, the age-sets go through the different grades in complete units. In other words, all the members of one particular age-set move into one grade all at once. Thus, their social status also changes all at once. In the kinds of societies we belong to, each person usually makes his or her own natural transition from childhood to adulthood and finally to old age. But in age-set societies, these transitions are made on a corporate basis as members of large age-sets.

In terms of a system of social stratification, the age-set system provides for an open society, in which no one is allocated a particular position for life. Everybody in his time does become old, and therefore gets a chance to hold decisive authority. Thus, this is a system in which personnel change within the system, without changing the pattern of stratification itself

## 2.4.2 Race

Another type of social stratification is the one based on race. Race, as a biological concept, refers to a large category of people who share certain inherited physical characteristics - colour of skin, type of hail; facial features, size of head etc. Anthropologists initially tried to arrive at a classification of races, but ran into problems, because more advanced studies of racial types showed the near absence of pure races. Thus, the latest thinking is that all humans belong to a common group. Recent genetic research indicates that 95 per cent of DNA (gene-rating) molecules are the same for all humans. The remaining 5 per cent are responsible for differences in, appearance. Outward differences are also seen as varying within a race rather than across the races. Thus, the classification of races floundered at the scientific level.

For sociologists, a race is a group of people who are perceived by a given society, as biologically different from the others. Thus, people are assigned to one race or another, by public opinion which is moulded by that society's dominant group, rather than on any scientific basis. In racist societies, for example South Africa, physical characteristics are believed to be intrinsically related to moral, intellectual and other non-physical attributes and abilities.

At the theoretical level, sociologists talk about race relations as forms of stratification. These are characterised by unequal access to wealth and power, on the basis of physical characteristics. We find in this situation the presence of racial ideologies in one form or the other,

## 2.4.3 Ethnicity

Looking at ethnicity, it can be said that whereas race is based on popularly perceived physical traits, ethnicity is based on cultural traits. Ethnic group is thus defined as a common group of peoples with a common cultural heritage (learned, not inherited). This group may share a common language, history, national origin, or lifestyle.

The factor of migration on a massive scale in the last century provided sociologists an opportunity to examine the fate of ethnic identities. For example, the Chicago School of Sociologists found that over several generations, ethnic identities were lost and later revised. Gellner (1964 : 163) aptly describes the situation thus : the grandson tries to remember what the son tried to forget. However, sociologists also point out that disappearance of ethnic identities through the process of assimilation is often hampered when the dominant groups do not allow the flow of social benefits to certain groups, deemed to be powerless ethnic minorities. This situation gives rise to ethnic conflicts. All such situations of conflict make the study of social stratification very important and relevant for sociologists.

### 2.4.4 Sex

Every human being is a man or woman by sex. The part played by an individual in the course of social interaction is called as "role" Men and women play different roles. Sex role is the role played by an individual due to his or her sex. Later there is the development of sex role stereotype. In a male dominated society the men's roles are given a higher status and whatever a woman does is rated as low.

The anatomical differences were for a long time viewed as intimately related to differences in emotional and intellectual capacities, as well as differences in physical abilities. The tasks and roles assigned to men and women in our own cultural tradition were assumed to be correlated highly with anatomically based aptitudes.

Patriarchy means to serve the interest of the male sex. The sex role division is such that men are for production and women for reproduction. The unpaid, unseen household work is considered lower man the work done by men outside the house. Women are sexually vulnerable; therefore many societies put a lot of restrictions on them and many rituals and taboos are linked to the various biological events hi life.

**Sociological Theory of Sex Roles**

According to a British sociologist Ann Oakley, sex is a biological term and gender is a cultural term. Gender refers to the sex of an individual after socialization.

Oakley argues that division of labour is not universal. She disagrees with Murdock. She regards it as a myth that women are biologically incapable to carry out heavy and demanding work. She also noted that employment of mothers is not detrimental to the children's development. According to her Parson's explanation of woman's "expressive role" and men's instrumental role, is for die convenience of men.

Emile Durkhiem one of the founding fathers of sociology, said that in the primitive societies men and women were fairly similar in strength and intelligence and only as civilization progressed new codes evolved which restricted women from working outside home. Thus they became weaker and less intelligent.

The process of socialisation begins the moment a person is born. Sex roles are learned activities as children are socialized into these roles. Thus sex role allocation is a social phenomenon and is in fact learned behaviour. Women for centuries have been socialized into passive roles.

**Check your Progress 2**

1)  Say True or False

    a)  Men and women play different roles                                    (T/F)

    b)  Gender is a biological term.                                          (T/F)

    c)  The process of socialization begins the moment a person is born.(T/F)

## 2.5   LET US SUM UP

After defining social stratification as a system of social ranking involving relations of superiority and inferiority, we have discussed its three dimensions, namely, class, status and power. Natural inequalities take the form of social inequalities when the members of society assign some meaning of them. Age, sex, and colour are natural bases of inequalitities. But now it becomes the bases of social stratification because society has attached some meanings to them.

## 2.6   KEY WORDS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Status** | : | Ranking of groups in a society on basis of their relative position in terms of honour or respect. |
| **Class** | : | A achievement oriented interest group. |
| **Power** | : | The capacity of a group or persons to influence decisions in their own way in the group or community. |
| **Ethnicity** | : | A shared (real or imagined) racial, linguistic or cultural identity of a social group. |
| **Patriarchy** | : | Male headed family and the descent is reckoned in the male line. |
| **Stereotype** | : | A fixed form, character or image. |

## 2.7   FURTHER READINGS

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## 2.8   SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Check Your Progress 1**

1)   The three bases of social stratification are:

   i)   class  ii) status  iii) power

2)   Class is an economic category, based on one's income while status group is determined by the social prestige one enjoys.

**Check your Progress 2**

1)   a)   True

   b)   False

   c)   True