

Social stratification: meaning, types, and characteristics

In all societies people differ from each other on the basis of their age, sex and personal characteristics. Human society is not homogeneous but heterogeneous. Apart from the natural differences, human beings are also differentiated according to socially approved criteria.

So, socially differentiated men are treated as socially unequal from the point of view of enjoyment of social rewards like status, power, income etc. That may be called social inequality. The term social inequality simply refers to the existence of socially created inequalities.

Meanings:

Social stratification is a particular form of social inequality. All societies arrange their members in terms of superiority, inferiority and equality. Stratification is a process of interaction or differentiation whereby some people come to rank higher than others.

In one word, when individuals and groups are ranked, according to some commonly accepted basis of valuation in a hierarchy of status levels based upon the inequality of social positions, social stratification occurs. Social stratification means division of society into different strata or layers. It involves a hierarchy of social groups. Members of a particular layer have a common identity. They have a similar life style.

The Indian Caste system provides an example of stratification system. The society in which divisions of social classes exist is known as a stratified society. Modern stratification fundamentally differs from stratification of primitive societies. Social stratification involves two phenomena (i) differentiation of individuals or groups on the basis of possession of certain characteristics whereby some individuals or groups come to rank higher than others, (ii) the ranking of individuals according to some basis of evaluation.

Sociologists are concerned not merely with the facts of social differences but also with their social evaluation.

Definitions:

1. Ogburn and Nimkoff:

‘The process by which individuals and groups are ranked in more or less enduring hierarchy of status is known as stratification’

2. Lundberg:

‘A stratified society is one marked by inequality, by differences among people that are evaluated by them as being “lower” and “higher”.

3. Gisbert:

“Social stratification is the division of society into permanent groups of categories linked with each other by the relationship of superiority and subordinations”.

4. Williams:

Social Stratification refers to “The ranking of individuals on a scale of superiority-inferiority-equality, according to some commonly accepted basis of valuation.

5. Raymond W. Murray:

Social stratification is horizontal division of society into “higher” and “lower” social units.”

6. Melvin M Tumin:

“Social stratification refers to “arrangement of any social group or society into hierarchy of positions that are unequal with regard to power, property, social evaluation and psychic gratification”.

Origin of Stratification:

Regarding the origin of stratification many views have been given.

- (i) According to Davis, social stratification has come into being due to the functional necessity of the social system.
- (ii) Professor Sorokin attributed social stratification mainly to inherited difference in environmental conditions.
- (iii) According to Karl Marx, social factors are responsible for the emergence of different social strata, i.e. social stratification.
- (iv) Gumplovioz and other contended that the origin of social stratification is to be found in the conquest of one group by another.
- (v) According to Spengler, social stratification is founded upon scarcity which is created whenever society differentiates positive in terms of functions and powers.
- (vi) Racial differences accompanied by dissimilarity also leads to stratification.

Types of Social Stratification:

Social stratification is based upon a variety of principles. So we find different type of stratification.

The major types of stratification are

- (i) Caste
- (ii) Class
- (iii) Estate
- (iv) Slavery

(i) Caste is a hereditary endogamous social group in which a person's rank and its accompanying rights and obligations are ascribed on the basis of his birth into a particular group. For example-Brahmins, Kshyatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudra Caste.

(ii) Class-Stratification on the basis of class is dominant in modern society. In this, a person's position depends to a very great extent upon achievement and his ability to use to advantage the inborn characteristics and wealth that he may possess.

(iii) Estate system of medieval Europe provides another system of stratification which gave much emphasis to birth as well as to wealth and possessions. Each estate had a state.

(iv) Slavery had economic basis. In slavery, every slave had his master to whom he was subjected. The master's power over the slave was unlimited.

Characteristics of Social Stratification:

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

(a) Social stratification is universal:

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

(b) Stratification is social:

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

(c) It is ancient:

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

(d) It is in diverse forms:

The forms of stratification is not uniform in all the societies. In the modern world class, caste and estate are the general forms of stratification. In India a special type of stratification in the form of caste is found. The ancient Aryas were divided into four varnas: the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. The ancient Greeks were divided into freemen and slaves and

the ancient Romans were divided into the patricians and the plebeians. So every society, past or present, big or small is characterized by diversified forms of social stratification.

(e) Social stratification is Consequential:

Social stratification has two important consequences one is “life chances” and the other one is “life style”. A class system not only affects the “life- chances” of the individuals but also their “life style”.

The members of a class have similar social chances but the social chances vary in every society. It includes chances of survival and of good physical and mental health, opportunities for education, chances of obtaining justice, marital conflict, separation and divorce etc.

Life style denotes a style of life which is distinctive of a particular social status. Life-styles include such matters like the residential areas in every community which have gradations of prestige-ranking, mode of housing, means of recreation, the kinds of dress, the kinds of books, TV shows to which one is exposed and so on. Life-style may be viewed as a sub-culture in which one stratum differs from another within the frame work of a commonly shared over-all culture.

Social Stratification and Social Mobility:

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

It is said that the greater the amount of social mobility, the more open the class structure. The concept of social mobility has fundamental importance in ascertaining the relative “openness” of a social structure. The nature, forms, direction and magnitude of social mobility depends on the nature and types of social stratification. Sociologists study social mobility in order to find out the relative ‘openness’ of a social structure.

Any group that improves its standard will also improve its social status. But the rate of social mobility is not uniform in all the countries. It differs from society to society from time to time. In India the rate of mobility is naturally low because of agriculture being the predominant occupation and the continuity of caste system as compared to the other countries of the world.

Types of Social Mobility:

In social stratification the movement occurs in three directions.

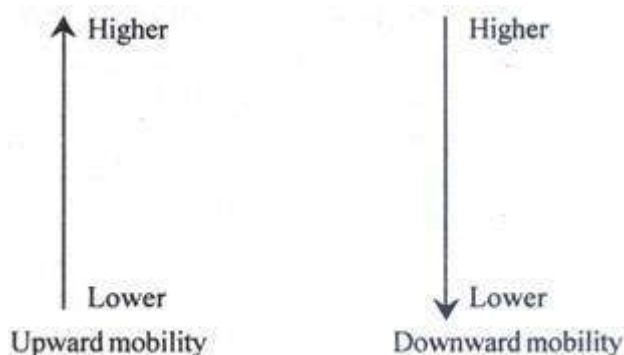
- a. From lower to higher
- b. From higher to lower
- c. Between two positions at the same level.

Social mobility is primarily of two types:

- I. Vertical mobility
- II. Horizontal mobility

(I) Vertical mobility:

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



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

(II) Horizontal Mobility:

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

Horizontal mobility



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

(i) Inter-generational mobility:

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

(ii) Intra-generational mobility:

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

Stratification and Caste:

Under the caste system status is hereditary. It is based on birth, it is purely an ascribed status. Once such positions are assigned, they cannot advance and improve their social status in any way. Hence, caste as a major type of social stratification does not facilitate vertical social mobility.

Social Stratification and Class:

Class is an “open” system. Under this system vertical mobility is absolutely free. Movement from one status to another has no barrier. Status is based on achievement. It is determined by the talents, wealth, money, intelligence, power, education, income, etc. of a person. There is no inheritance of parental status.