Ch. 8 Social Stratification

**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.

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.

### **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.

(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.

**(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.

**(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.

**(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. I**t 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 statu**s. 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 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.

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 can not 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.

**Gender:**

Gender is defined as the social construction of relations between women and men and among various groups of women and men. Feminist consider gender as the socio-cultural manifestation of being a man or a woman.

Thus, gender involves power structure and economic relationships. It is used to analyze the role, responsibilities, constraints, needs of men and women in all areas. It encompasses the social division and cultural distinctions between women and men. It plays an important role in shaping institutions and practices in every society.

**Gender and Sex:**

The term gender does not replace the term sex. It is necessary to distinguish between sex and gender. The distinction between sex and gender is fundamental, since many differences between males and females are not biological in origin. Sex refers to the physical differences of body where as gender refers to social, cultural and psychological differences between males and females.

Sex refers to biological differences between male and female which are much more the same over time and space where as gender refers to socially and culturally constructed differences and relations between males and females which vary from place to place and from time to time. Sex refers to male and female where as gender refers to masculinity and feminity.

(Estract from [www.yourarticlelibrary.com](http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com))

**Theories**:

Functional theory : In sociology, the functionalist perspective examines how society’s parts operate. According to functionalism, different aspects of society exist because they serve a needed purpose. What is the function of social stratification? The theory posits that social stratification represents the inherently unequal value of different work. Certain tasks in society are more valuable than others. Qualified people who fill those positions must be rewarded more than others.(Durkhelm, Moore)

Conflict theory: Stratification, conflict theorists believe, perpetuates inequality. Conflict theorists try to bring awareness to inequalities, such as how a rich society can have so many poor members. Today, while working conditions have improved, conflict theorists believe that the strained working relationship between employers and employees still exists. Capitalists own the means of production, and a system is in place to make business owners rich and keep workers poor. According to conflict theorists, the resulting stratification creates class conflict.(Marx, Weber)

Symbolic Interactionist theory: Symbolic interactionism is a theory that uses everyday interactions of individuals to explain society as a whole. Symbolic interactionism examines stratification from a micro-level perspective. This analysis strives to explain how people’s social standing affects their everyday interactions.

In most communities, people interact primarily with others who share the same social standing. It is precisely because of social stratification that people tend to live, work, and associate with others like themselves, people who share their same income level, educational background, or racial background, and even tastes in food, music, and clothing. The built-in system of social stratification groups people together. (Veblin)