UNIT 4: SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- understand the meaning of social stratification
- explain the meaning and characteristics of caste and its different charateristics
- explain the meaning of class and discuss its different characteristics
- identify the difference between caste and class.

4.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we have discussed culture and its impact and the forms of social insitutions. In this unit we will try to discuss in details the

meaning and characteristics of social stratification. After understanding the concept of stratification we will try to understand the two important forms of social stratification, that is, caste and the class system. Apart from understanding its meaning, we will also identify the basic characteristics of both the types and then try to understand the difference between them. Further, we will discuss about casteism, its characteristics as well as causes.

Social stratification or the hierarchical grading of different groups in a society is an universal phenomenon and is present in every society in some or the other form. For example, in Indian Society caste is a predominant form of social stratification while in some other countries class may assume an important place.

4.3 CONCEPT OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

In every human society we find that some people have more resources than others. For example, some may have more money while some others may have more talent etc. So accordingly, there are different categories of people in every society. No two people in any society are equal. Some or the other form of inequalities exist among every individual in a society. This pattern of unequal access to resources is usually termed as social inequality. The term Social Stratification is often used by sociologists to illustrate the inequalities and disparities that exist between individuals and groups within human society. Social stratification is a universal phenomenon and is present in almost every society in some or other forms. Stratification takes place not only due to the difference in property or assets but it can also occur due to other attributes such as gender, age, religious affiliation so on and so forth. The simple definition of Social stratification therefore is the structured inequalities between different groupings of people. Every society is divided into different strata's with the most privileged ones ranked at the top and the least privileged at the bottom. Let us now try to understand its basic characteristics:

- Social stratification as the term suggests is social. It takes place

in a society and is a characteristic of society. It does not merely mean individual differences.

- Social stratification transmits from one generation to the other. Social position of a person is often associated with his family background, his caste status, etc. To a great extent his social position is ascribed and the position of his parents is conferred upon him at the time of his birth. It is very difficult to change ones social position especially in the case of caste. Since social positions pass on from one generation to the other, social stratification continues and persists over generations.
- The social ranking of a person have a considerable impact or influence in his life. His life experiences and opportunities are greatly dependent on the ranking of his social category. It is very clear to all of us that being wealthy or poor, male or female, black or white will make many differences in our life. It will determine our way of life, lifestyle etc.
- Social stratification is supported or backed by certain belief, or ideology. It is not possible for any form or type of social stratification to prevail in society unless it is supported by people and is viewed as fair or inevitable. It is actually that section of people who are benefitted from the system of social stratification who supports it and enables it to continue in society. To uphold the system, certain beliefs and ideologies are put forward so that it justifies the existence or the persistence of the system. For example the caste system is justified in terms of purity and pollution where the Brahmin is deemed to be superior while the Dalits are thought of as inferior by virtue of their birth and occupation. The people at the top of the hierarchy are most often the strongest supporter of the system because they are at a privileged position and do not want to lose it. But those at the bottom are exploited and marginalised and therefore they challenge as well as oppose the system.

4.4. MEANING AND CONCEPT OF CASTE

'Caste' is a social institution that has been a part of Indian history and culture for thousands of years. The English word 'caste' is borrowed from the Portuguese word casta, meaning pure breed. Caste refers to a broad institutional arrangement that in Indian languages (beginning with the ancient Sanskrit) is referred to by two distinct terms, Varna and Jati. Varna, which literally means 'colour', implies a four-fold division of society into Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. This schema however excludes the 'outcastes', foreigners, slaves, conquered peoples and others who comprise a significant section of the population and are sometimes referred to as the panchamas or fifth category. Jati, on the other hand, is the Indian word for Caste. It refers to a regional or local categorisation consisting of hundreds or even thousands of castes and sub-castes. This means that while the Varna classification is common to all of India; the Jati hierarchy denotes local classifications that vary from region to region.

Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (M. N. Srinivas) was an Indian sociologist. He was born in the year 1916 and died in 1999. Srinivas' works help us to understand the concept of caste, Sanskritisation, Westernisation as well as throws light on the concept of 'dominant caste.'

Srinivas was deeply interested in studying the Indian society and specially the dominance of a particular caste over another. For instance, Brahmins are generally considered superior as compared to other castes. M.N. Srinivas tried to understand and explain such complexities within the Indian society through the method of participant observation. While trying to understand the Indian society, Srinivas, brought out the concept of 'dominant caste.' According to Srinivas, depending on the numerical strength, economic power through ownership of land, political power amongst others helped a particular caste to change into a dominant caste. Hence although if we look at caste hierarchy, the Brahmins are considered to be superior. But Srinivas maintained that because of the above mentioned features, any caste (even low) would transform itself into a dominant caste.

4.4.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF CASTE SYSTEM

After understanding the meaning of caste and the difference between varna and jati, let us now try to understand the characteristics of caste system.

- Caste system is hereditary in nature: The caste status of a person is determined by birth. A person belongs to that Caste to which he/she is born and he/she carries his/her status throughout their lifetime, until death. He inherits his parent's caste status. Hence it is an ascribed and not an achieved status. It is also therefore not a matter of choice. One cannot change their caste status even if they want to. It is more or less a fixed status.
- Hierarchy: Hierarchy refers to the systematic ranking or grading of groups into different strata's in society. The various caste groups are accorded different ranks in the hierarchy on the basis of purity and pollution. The purity of one's occupation is the most important indicator of one's rank in the hierarchy. The castes like the Brahmans are considered pure by virtue of their occupation (priests) and are therefore ranked at the top and are most privileged while those considered inferior or polluted due to the nature of occupation like that of the sweepers, etc. are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy.
- Restrictions on food and drink: It is usually seen that food and drinks are not shared or exchanged among different caste groups. There are lot of restrictions regarding food and drinks. For example, The Brahmins do not accept food from lower castes. Again in some cases he only accepts pucca food i.e food cooked only in ghee without any water from other castes. There are regional variations found regarding the restrictions on food and drinks. Further the upper caste people are not supposed to eat things which are considered impure, for example, pork etc.
- Endogamy: It indicates to the fact that the members of a particular caste have to marry within their own caste only. Inter-castes

marriages are prohibited. However, among educated people, particularly in the urban areas, inter-castes marriages are gradually increasing.

- Purity and pollution: It is the very basis of caste system or the caste hierarchy. The different caste groups are ranked differently on the basis of purity and pollution. Purity and pollution are judged in terms of deeds, occupation, language, dress patterns, as well as food habits. For example, liquor consumption, consuming non-vegetarian food, eating left-over food of the high castes, working in occupations like leather craft, lifting dead animals, sweeping and carrying garbage etc. are supposed to be impure and people associated with these impure activities are placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. This notion of purity ad pollution is so strong that in some places even the shadow of those considered as untouchables cannot be seen by the Brahmans or other upper castes.
- Fixed Occupation: Each caste has its own specific traditional occupation and members of the caste groups are supposed to stick to that occupation. For example, Brahmins are supposed to be priests and teachers, kshatriyas to work as soldiers etc. However, with the advent of industrialisation and urbanisation, new job opportunities have become available and this has resulted in a shift from traditional occupation to modern ones. But in rural areas we can still find the persistence of traditional occupation.
- Social and religious disabilities: The lower caste is considered as impure and hence they suffer from several social and religious disabilities. For example, they are not allowed to enter the temple,or use the public well, etc. However these restrictions are no longer found in practice today, especially in the urban areas and metropolitan cities. But we cannot deny the continuation of some of these practices in remote rural areas.
- Caste Associations: Each caste has its own associations through

which it settles disputes and resolve conflicting issues. Caste panchayats or associations hold a strong position especially in villages and they work as conflict resolving agencies within the society.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Why is Social Stratification a Universal Phenomenon?

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Q 2: What are the four 'Varnas' ?

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Q 3: Is marriage outside one's own caste group allowed?

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4.5 CONCEPT OF CASTEISM

According to Kaka Kalelkar casteism is 'an overriding, blind and supreme group loyalty that ignores the healthy social standards of justice, fair play, equity and universal brotherhood. ' Again N. Prasad defines casteism as 'the loyalty to the caste translated into politics'.

4.5.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF CASTEISM

After trying to understand the meaning of casteism, let us now have a look at its characteristics-

- Casteism is the case of excessive and at times irrational loyalty towards one's own caste or sub caste. It completely undermines the interests of other caste or sub-caste groups.
- Casteism ignores human values and social welfare.
- Casteism acquires a new lease of life through the provisions of

constitutional safeguard to the deprived sections of the population.

- Casteism restricts social change and reforms. It stands as a barrier in the creation of a classless or egalitarian society. Hence, it is anti-democratic in nature.
- Casteism defies the spirit of our Constitution.
- Casteism adversely affects the outcome of elections.
- Casteism hinders the process of national integration.

4.5.2 CAUSES OF CASTEISM

Casteism implies excessive loyality to one's own caste group. There are multiple causes of casteism. Some of them are discussed below:

- Caste Status and Prestige: The feeling of superiority or inferiority by the members of a caste over the rest may be constructed as an important cause of casteism. The Hindu society is divided into many castes on the basis of superordination and subordination. The members of any caste want to enhance the prestige of their own caste group. Therefore, they try to to stabilise the position of their own caste, which ultimately results in casteism.
- Endogamy: The practice of caste endogamy, which proclaims that a person can marry only within her/his caste, has been responsible for the emergence of the feeling of casteism. By restricting the circle of marriage to one's own caste, people have developed different degrees of social distance within and outside their own caste.
- Superstitions and Orthodoxy: Though science and technology have advanced in India, we have not been able to develop scientific worldview in our practices. We still hold on to superstitions, orthodoxy and irrational beliefs which enhances discriminations and deprivations based on caste and creed and debars the progress of a nation.
- Politicisation of Caste: Urbanisation, and to a lesser extent industrialisation, emerged in colonial India. Even after India's Independence, the mode of production hardly changed. The ruling

class in India has used casteism for its political mileage. The sluggish pace of industrialisation has resulted in the continuity of caste feeling in the Indian psyche.

4.6 CONCEPT OF CLASS

After discussing the caste system let us now try to understand the class system . Class system is also one form of social stratification different from that of the caste system. Class is defined by Anthony Giddens as a 'large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources, which strongly influence the type of lifestyle they are able to lead. ' Thus, class is economic in nature and ownership of wealth along with occupation is its key elements. The class status is achieved and not ascribed. Even if a person is born to a poor, lower class family, he can change his class position by hard work. A person may be born poor but may not die poor. His class status is therefore not fixed. Thus, Class system allows mobility and is not rigid like the Caste system. One can climb up the class ladder through his achievements and similarly one can even fall down in the class ladder due to loss of wealth, job etc.

4.6.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF CLASS

- Class status is achieved and it is not a fixed status. It is not determined by birth but by one's own action. Hence it enables a person to change his class position.
- The Class System allows mobility. It enables one to climb up the class ladder and change his class status.
- The Class system is economically based. Classes are dependent upon economic differences. People are considered rich or poor or belonging to different classes on the basis of the difference in their wealth, assets, and income etc.
- The Class system is fluid in nature. Classes are de facto groups because they are neither sanctioned by religion nor by law. The class boundaries are not rigid and clear cut. Further it is not endogamous. Hence, Class system is less restrictive.

THE CAPITALISTS AND THE WORKING CLASS

Karl Marx was a German philosopher, economist, sociologist as well as a historian. He emphasised upon class struggle. As societies became more and more industrial, the rich people or the industrialists became richer and richer. The people engaged in industries or the working class became poorer and poorer. Hence Marx talks about exploitation of the working class, as they were not given their due wages. Instead the working class was made to work more than they were actually paid. The Marxist ideology formulated by Marx and his followers tried to do away with such divisions in society. In sociology the contributions of Karl Marx is significant as he tried to work for the betterment of the working class population and in a way tried to achieve a society wherein everybody would be treated as equals.

According to Marx, society was divided into two groups, the capitalists (owners) and the proliterates (the working class). Marx argued that the capitalists mainly had control over everything and tried to dominate the working class population.

While discussing the domination of one class over the other, Marx said that while looking at the history of society, one can witness numerous changes within it. Such changes, according to Marx, can be understood only when we try to look at the opposing forces present in every society. These forces are constantly in struggle with one another. Such struggles ultimately lead to violent revolutions within the society. These ultimately leads to changes in the society as a whole. Marx's ideas were thought to be based on materialistic conception of history, that is, he continuously focussed upon changes which were related to the economy. Further Marx thought that human beings are affected by such changes in the society and at the same time they are also the ones who can intervene with the given circumstances and then change it accordingly.

4.7 DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CASTE AND CLASS SYSTEM

After having understood the concept of caste and class we now know

that they form two different type of Social Stratification. While caste system is unique to India, Class system is common to all countries. Further though both caste and class system is about division of people into different categories or hierarchical groups yet they are different in nature. Let us now try to understand some of the basic differences between the Caste and the Class system.

- Caste Status is ascribed while class is an achieved status. While caste status is determined by birth and is fixed in nature, class position is not fixed and can be changed.
- From the above point we can infer that caste is a closed system where mobility is restricted while class is an open system where mobility is allowed.
- Caste is religious in nature. It is sanctioned by religion. But class is neither sanctioned by religion nor by law. It is purely economic in nature.
- Caste is endogamous in nature but there is no such barriers in terms of class. Interclass marriages often takes place.
- Caste system adheres to strict rules and regulations such as fixed occupation, restriction on food, drink and interaction so on and so forth while Class system is free from such rules and regulations.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Why classes are called De Facto groups?

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Q 5: Is mobility allowed in caste system?

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Q 6: Why is class status an achieved status?

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4.8 GENDER ROLES AND INEQUALITIES, SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

All human societies exhibit some degree of division of labour by gender. These divisions continue to exist as participation in paid work has increased over time. Gender divisions occur between household tasks, between unpaid and paid work, and within paid work. Economists have explained these divisions through reliance on essentialist arguments and/or the fundamental economic concepts of efficiency of specialization and division of labour, and investment in human capital. However, gender discrimination can also cause division of labour, and the feedback effects of such discrimination make it difficult to untangle the causes of the gender division of labour.

The role of wages in the gender division of labour It is clear that past decisions regarding labour supply and occupational choice will play an important role in gender wage differences that are observed in cross-sectional data on spouses. Wages are not assigned exogenously to individuals and it is not our aim in this paper to assess whether observed gender wage differences lead causally to the observed division of 10 labour. Such an investigation would require some exogenous variation in wages, or data with a panel aspect that could be used to relate changes in wages to changes in time allocation. Rather, our question is whether, given the earnings capacities of the two spouses in the labour market, individuals do in fact allocate time in the way economic theory would predict. If the allocation of time does appear sensitive to spousal wage differences then it is at least possible that changes in the gender distribution of wages would be accompanied by changes in the division of labour. If, however, other factors such as biological differences and social norms are relatively more important, then it is unlikely that the equalisation of pay between men and women would lead to a substantial erosion of gender specialization.

The sexual division of labor is a phenomenon found in virtually all human societies. Due to its importance, economists have attempted to model the causes and implications of gender roles across societies. Economic theory suggests that occupational segregation by gender might be due to supply side factors, demand side factors, or a combination of both. For instance, the major supply-side theory consists on the human capital explanation which states that since women generally anticipate shorter and less continuous work lives than men, it will be in their interest to choose occupations which require smaller human capital investments and have lower wage penalties for time spent out of the labor market (Polachek, 1981). The fact that women may face barriers to obtaining education and pre-job training in traditionally male fields is called "societal discrimination" and constitutes an alternative supply effect explanation (Blau, Ferber and Winkler, 1988).

On the demand side, the sexual division of labor is supported by discrimination against women within the paid labor force (eg. Aigner and Cain (1977), Danziger and Katz (1996) and Francois (1998). In Becker said (1991), the gender division of labor arises due to gains from specialized investments and intrinsic differences between the sexes. He assumes two types of human capital: the household and the market sector. Women's inherent comparative advantage in household activities and the presence of increasing returns to human capital investment prompt women to specialize in household work while their spouses specialize in market work. Thus, the model relies on biological differences across the sexes to support the sexual division of labor. However, as Hadfield (1999) points out, the sexual division of labor is fairly constant across societies, i.e. all tasks in a society tend to be gendered (easily identifiable as either women's work or men's work) but a particular division is not (to which sex, a task is specific, varies considerably across cultures). The biological model does not account for this fact. Furthermore, as time passes, technological developments contribute to the reduction of the comparative advantage enjoyed by any gender in the performance of a particular activity. For instance, through the ages, technological changes have lessened the brute physical component



Sexual division of labour is supported by discrimination against women within the paid labour force.

of labor. As a result, the absence of any significant biological advantage also calls into question the continued applicability of the biological model.



4.9 LET US SUM UP

- Social stratification is universal. It is present in every society.
- Social stratification has different forms for example caste, class etc.
- Caste syatem is unique to India. It refers to hierarchical divoision of society based on the notion of purity and pollution.
- Casteism implies extreme, irrational loyality to one's own caste group which often generates a feeling of disregard towards members of other caste groups.
- Class system is based on the economy. It means classification of groups in society according to their wealth or material well being.
- Caste system and Class system differ in many aspect, The notion of purity and pollution which forms the basis of caste systems finds no palce in the class system. While Caste is religious, class system is economic in nature.



4.10 FURTHER READING

1. *Beteile, A. 1975. Six Essays in Comparative Sociology. Delhi : Oxford University Press.*

2. *Dube, S.C. 1990. Indian Society. New Delhi : National Book Trust.*

3. *Jacobsen, Joyce P. "Gender Roles and Division of Labour." The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics. Second Edition. Eds. Steven N. Durlauf and Lawrence E. Blume. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.*

4.11 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

Ans to Q No. 1: Social Stratification is a Universal Phenomenon because it is present in every society.

Ans to Q No. 2: The four Varna's are Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.

Ans to Q No. 3: Caste is endogamous in nature and therefore marriage outside one's own caste group is not allowed.

Ans to Q No. 4: Classes are called De Facto groups because they are neither sanctioned by law nor by religion.

Ans to Q No. 5: Yes mobility is allowed in the caste system.

Ans to Q No. 6: Class Status is and achieved status because it is not determined by birth but by one's one works and achievements.

4.12 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q 1: Distinguish between Varna and Jati.

Q 2: Why are caste groups endogamous?

Q 3: How is superstition and orthodoxy a cause of casteism?

C) Long Question (Answer in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: Define Social stratification. Discuss its Characteristics.

Q 2: Discuss the concept of caste. How is Caste discriminatory in nature?

Q 3: Define Class. Elaborate the distinction between Caste and Class.

Q 4: Discuss sexual division of labour.