Competitive Exams: Introduction to Social Stratification

Get unlimited access to the best preparation resource for UGC : Get detailed illustrated notes covering entire syllabus: point-by-point for high retention.

Every complex society faces the difficult task of placing its members into roles that are necessary for the society to survive. These roles must be filled with as little conflict and confusion as possible. There must be people willing to perform jobs (roles) with little status and those that carry a great deal of prestige. In your community there are people who are doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Others collect trash, direct traffic, and put out fires. Social inequality is a universal phenomenon in all societies. It can exist either in form of a hierarchy of groups or individuals or it may exist without the creation of a hierarchy. In the former case it is called social hierarchy. While in the latter case it is known as social differentiation for in almost all societies men and women are treated unequally. If social inequality manifests itself in the form of a hierarchy involving ranking of groups then it is known as social stratification, thus social stratification is a particular case of the social inequality. Although these roles do not all carry the same prestige, there is very little conflict involved in determining who will perform which one.

Consider roles as a deck of cards. You and I will be dealt numerous role cards in our lifetime. In fact, we are playing several roles at any given time. Right now you have been dealt a student role card to play, but you also have other role cards in your hand, such as friend, son or daughter, basketball player, cheerleader, clerk in a drugstore, etc. Many of your role cards came as a result of your birth, age, or gender. Other cards you have earned, such as honor student or basketball captain.

In India, caste is one set of role cards and perhaps the most important one. One's caste is ascribed; that is, children inherit the status and functions of their parents. At birth Indians are dealt their caste card. This is alien to what many people in the United States believe about the good society. Our parents, relatives, teachers, and friends tell us in a thousand ways that what we make of our lives depends on our efforts, and many of us think all societies should play by the same rules, or at least strive to do so. But it is important to remember that there is no society where individual effort is the sole criterion for status.

While caste is a very important set of role cards, Indians, like Americans, also use class (economic) cards. Both caste and class operate at the same time. A person of very low caste such as a sweeper may get a good job that has nothing to do with sweeping and save some money. With this wealth the sweeper may build a fancy house and educate

his children who then become doctors, lawyers, and government leaders. This type of role is usually achieved, although some people inherit their wealth.

There is also the possibility of achieving political power in India quite apart from class or caste status. A low caste person might be very good at winning elections and become a member of the central government. Jagjivan Ram, a member of one of the Dalit (ex-Untouchable) castes, has held many cabinet posts in his political career. This system of gaining status is based on power. Power is usually achieved status rather than a role that is dealt at birth. People in India participate in the caste game, the class game, and the power game.

In India, castes are ranked, and caste members in a specific geographical area can identify those castes that are above and below them. The ranking of castes is based on purity and pollution, often associated with functions of the human body. Roles associated with the head such as thinking, talking, teaching, and learning are considered pure. Activities associated with waste, feet, and skin are considered polluting. Consequently, Brahmins at the top of the purity scale were scholars who traditionally taught and presided at religious functions. Untouchables, at the bottom of the scale, cleared away human waste, collected garbage, cut hair, skinned animals, and washed clothes. Because their occupations mainly dealt with human, animal, and societal waste, society believed that contact with an Untouchable was highly polluting. Social stratification is essentially a group phenomena. According to Ogburn and Nimkoff the process by which individuals and groups are ranked in a more or less enduring hierarchy of status is known as stratification. Melvin Tumin defines social stratification as an arrangement of any social group or society into a hierarchy of positions that are unequal with regard to power, property, social evaluation and psychic gratification. According to Lundberg a stratified society is one marked by inequality by differences among people that are evaluated by them as being lower and higher.

Preparing and sharing of food reveals how castes are ranked. Food cooked in oil and prepared by a Brahmin can be accepted and eaten by any caste below it. Food cooked in water can generally be accepted by one's own caste members or inferior castes. Leftover, uneaten food almost always is taken only by the very low castes. Food that can be eaten raw is the most freely distributed and can be accepted by any caste from any caste. In addition, prasad, blessed food that is left over from religious offerings, is given to anyone regardless of caste.

There is also a range of pure and impure foods. Vegetables and grains are purer than meat and eggs. Fish is the purest of the non-vegetarian foods, followed by chicken, goats, pork, and water buffalo; the most impure is beef. Sweet pastries, fried in deep fat, are among the most widely acceptable foods from any caste. By observing how food is prepared and with whom it is shared, one can begin to determine the ranking on a purity-pollution scale of the caste groups involved.

Approaches to Social Stratification

There are two approaches to the study of stratification:

Conflict Approach under which Karl Marx and Weber's theories come.

Functionalist Approach under which Talcott Parsons and Davis and Moore's fall.

Conflict Theories

According to Karl Marx in all stratified societies there are two major social groups: a ruling class and a subject class. The ruling class derives its power from its ownership and control of the forces of production. The ruling class exploits and oppresses the subject class. As a result there is a basic conflict of interest between the two classes. The various institutions of society such as the legal and political system are instruments of ruling class domination and serve to further its interests. Marx believed that western society developed through four main epochs-primitive communism, ancient society, feudal society and capitalist society. Primitive communism is represented by the societies of pre-history and provides the only example of the classless society. From then all societies are divided into two major classes-master and slaves in ancient society, lords and serfs in feudal society and capitalist and wage labourers in capitalist society.

Weber sees class in economic terms. He argues that classes develop in market economies in which individuals compete for economic gain. He defines a class as a group of individuals who share a similar position in market economy and by virtue of that fact receive similar economic rewards. Thus a person's class situation is basically his market situation. Those who share a similar class situation also share similar life chances. Their economic position will directly affect their chances of obtaining those things defined as desirable in their society. Weber argues that the major class division is between those who own the forces of production and those who do not. He distinguished the following class grouping in capitalist society:

- The propertied upper class

- The property less white collar workers

- The petty bourgeoisie

- The manual working class.

Functionalist Theories

Talcott Parsons believe that order, stability and cooperation in society are based on value consensus that is a general agreement by members of society concerning what is good and worthwhile. Stratification system derives from common values it follows from the existence of values that individuals will be evaluated and therefore placed in some form of rank order. Stratification is the ranking of units in a social system in accordance with the common value system. Those who perform successfully in terms of society's values will be ranked highly and they will be likely to receive a variety of rewards and will be accorded high prestige since they exemplify and personify common values.

According to Kingsley Davis and Moore stratification exists in every known human society. All social system shares certain functional prerequisites which must be met if the system is to survive and operate efficiently. One such prerequisite is role allocation and performance. This means that all roles must be filled. They will be filled by those best able to perform them. The necessary training for them is undertaken and that the roles are performed conscientiously. Davis and Moore argue that all societies need some mechanism for insuring effective role allocation and performance. This mechanism is social stratification which they see as a system which attaches unequal rewards and privileges to the positions in society. They concluded that social stratification is a device by which societies insure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons.

Forms and Functions Social Stratification

It can be classified into four forms-slavery, estates, caste and class.

- The slavery system

- The estate system

- The caste system

The Slavery System

It is an extreme form of inequality in which some individuals are owned by others as their property. The slave owner has full control including using violence over the slave. L. T Hobhouse defined slave as a man whom law and custom regard as the property of another. In extreme cases he is wholly without rights. He is in lower condition as compared with freemen. The slaves have no political rights he does not choose his government, he does not attend the public councils. Socially he is despised. He is compelled to work. The slavery system has existed sporadically at many times and places but there are two major examples of slavery-societies of the ancient world based upon slavery (Greek and Roman) and southern states of USA in the 18th and 19th centuries. According to H. J Nieboer the basis of slavery is always economic because with it emerged a kind of aristocracy which lived upon slave labour.

The Estate System

The estate system is synonymous with Feudalism. The feudal estates had three important characteristics. In the first place they were legally defined; each estate had a status with legal rights and duties, privileges and obligations. Secondly the estates represented a broad division of labor and were regarded as having definite functions. The nobility were ordained to defend all, the clergy to pray for all and the commons to provide food for all. Thirdly the feudal estates were political groups. An assembly of estates possessed political power. From this point of view the serfs did not constitute an estate until 12th century. This period saw the emergence of third estate-burghers who were a distinctive group within the system. Thus the three estates-clergy, nobility and commoners functioned like three political groups.

The Caste System

Caste is closely connected with the Hindu philosophy and religion, custom and tradition. It is believed to have had a divine origin and sanction. It is deeply rooted social institution in India. There are more than 2800 castes and sub-castes with all their peculiarities. The term caste is derived from the Spanish word caste meaning breed or lineage.

The word caste also signifies race or kind. The Sanskrit word for caste is varna which means colour. The caste stratification of the Indian society had its origin in the chaturvarna system. According to this doctrine the Hindu society was divided into four main varnas-Brahmins, Kashtriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The Varna system prevalent during the Vedic period was mainly based on division of labour and occupation.

The caste system owns its origin to the Varna system. Ghurye says any attempt to define caste is bound to fail because of the complexity of the phenomenon. According to Risely caste is a collection of families bearing a common name claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor professing to follow the same hereditary calling and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community.

According to Maclver and Page when status is wholly predetermined so that men are born to their lot without any hope of changing it, then the class takes the extreme form of caste. Cooley says that when a class is somewhat strictly hereditary we may call it caste. M. N Srinivas sees caste as a segmentary system. Every caste for him divided into sub castes which are the units of endogamy whose members follow a common occupation, social and ritual life and common culture and whose members are governed by the same authoritative body viz the panchayat.

According to Bailey caste groups are united into a system through two principles of segregation and hierarchy. For Dumont caste is not a form of stratification but as a special form of inequality. The major attributes of caste are the hierarchy, the separation and the division of labour. Weber sees caste as the enhancement and transformation of social distance into religious or strictly a magical principle.

For Adrian Mayer caste hierarchy is not just determined by economic and political factors although these are important.

Developed by: Mindsprite Solutions