**SOCIAL STRATIFICATION**

Social stratification is the social arrangement in which the different groups of a society are arranged in a higher and lower status and enjoy privilege and suffer disabilities according to their status. Thus social stratification is a social system of categorizing the members of society into higher and lower classes with corresponding status and role. In other words, social stratification is the social system of categorizing social groups not only according to social status and role but also according to social rights, power, authority and disabilities.

**Definition**

According to Melvin M. Tumin, ”Social stratification refers to arrangement of any social group or society into a hierarchy of positions that are unequal with regard to power, property, social valuation and psychic gratification”.

In the words of Gilbert, “Social stratification is the division of society in permanent groups or categories linked with each other by the relationship of superiority and subordination.”

As Raymond Murray puts it, “Stratification is horizontal division of society into ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ social units.”

**Elements/Features of Social Stratification**

1. **Inequality or Higher-lower positions –** Social stratification involves division of society into several layers which stand hierarchically placed in social relations. While some positions or levels carry more rewards, more privileges, more respect and these are considered to be higher levels, others enjoy lower positions and status. In this way stratification acts as a source of social inequality which is , however deemed to be natural and essential for orderly, systematic and healthy social life.
2. **Social Stratification is a source of Competition –** The persons belonging to higher levels are conscious of their higher position while the persons belonging to lower levels always try to secure higher positions. This gives rise to social competition which acts as a means of social progress. However, when this competition becomes unhealthy and very big, it leads to the birth of social conflict, struggles, jealousies and rivalries.
3. **Every Status has a particular prestige associated with it –** In ancient India, the Brahmins used to enjoy a superior position by birth but with the passage of time the position of the Brahmins got greatly diluted. Now persons belonging to other classes have also secure higher position in the society. Every social class is now entitled to a life of dignity and respect.
4. **Stratification involves a stable, enduring and hierarchical division of Society –** Division between two classes of rich and poor has been continuously present in every society. In India, Caste based stratification has been so strong, rigid and permanent and a person belonging to one caste can never join another caste.
5. **Different Statuses are Inter-dependent –** Social stratification involves the division of society into several classes and statuses. Each one enjoys a particular position in the social hierarchy. However, all the statuses are related and inter-dependent. Changes in social stratification always lead to changes in statuses of person belonging to various classes.
6. **Stratification is based on Social Values –** In every society, the system of social stratification is based upon social values and traditions. In India, caste has been the main basis of social stratification. The class-structure in every society is in turn based upon the prevailing social values.
7. **Social Stratification restricts Interactions –** The persons belonging to a particular level have a similar social style and they do not fully interact with the person belonging to other levels. Social stratification defines and limits interactions among the people belonging to different social statuses or levels or classes.
8. **Possibility and chances of circulation or change in the position of various classes of persons –** In every society there are social levels based upon economic position – the rich, the middle and the poor. However, the members of these classes can earn changes in their economic positions. The members of the rich class can become poor by suffering a loss of money a mixed stratification on the basis of the relation between Ascribed and Earned Statuses.

**Basis of Social Stratification**

The bases of social stratification may be categorized as biological and socio cultural. They are:

1. ***Biological basis.***
2. **Sex:** The distinction between male and female is primarily biological. However, it takes a cultural form in every society since everywhere male and female are given higher or lower status in social stratification.
3. **Age:** In most of the primitive and ancient societies the aged enjoy higher status than the younger persons. This is particularly due to better and wider experience and knowledge. Thus the age distinctions among the child, the adolescent, the youth, the middle aged and the old males and females, are the basis of different status accorded to these persons in social stratification.
4. **Race:** Since the whit race usually captured more power in social, political, economic and religious affair, the white men considered themselves superior to the black people and social stratification was based upon race. This basis of social stratification is irrational, meaningless and deplorable.
5. **Birth:** India is a glaring example of the social stratification based upon birth. This is known as caste system. In caste system the class is absolutely hereditary.
6. ***Socio-Cultural Basis***.
7. **Economic Status:** According to Marx, since ancient times society has been divided in two classes one having power over property, capital and means of production and the other subservient to this class. As Marx puts it, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.” Thus societies have always been divided into haves and haves not, bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Veblen calls the higher class ‘leisure class’ and Pareto calls it ‘the elite’.
8. **Political power:** Besides the economic status, one finds a social stratification based upon distinctions of political power. In a democratic society where equality of political power is the slogan, one finds a distinction in the social status of the president, the prime minister, the common citizen and so on wielding different political power.
9. **Religious power:** In Christian social organization the different ranks of papal clergymen occupy different status in society while the pope himself occupies the highest social status. Similar religious bases of social stratification may be observed in some other societies. However, religion is no more an acknowledged and sanctioned socio-cultural basis of social stratification.

**Stratification based on Ascribed Status and Earned/Achieved Status**

**(a)Stratification based on Ascribed Status –** Ascribed status is given by the society. It is based upon the birth of the child and not the earned one. Stratification based upon birth is present in almost all societies because in every society, a particular status is ascribed to the child right at the time of his birth.

**(b)Stratification based on Earned/Achieved Status –** In every society newer and newer professions, occupations and services keep on emerging from time to time. These can be filled only by open competition in which every competitor can earn a place and status on the basis of his merit. A child born in a poor family can become a doctor, an engineer or a scientist. Education, knowledge, training, merit, ability, public support, nature of occupation or profession or job are the main basis of stratification based upon earned statuses.

**Major Theories of Social Stratification**

**I.Marxist Theory of Social Stratification**

In the Communist Manifesto, ’Marx enunciated the theory of social stratification which is based on division rather than integration of classes. In the concerted view of Marx and his followers in all stratified societies, there are two major social groups, a ruling class (the Haves) and the masses(Have-nots). The ruling class exploits the masses. As a result a conflict of interest and class struggle between the two classes emerges and continues to characterize the society. The history of hitherto existing societies has been a history of class struggle between the Haves and Have-nots classes.

Marxian theory defines social stratification as the existence of two economic classes in each society and the relationship of class struggle between these two. These are based on the reality of the existence the class of the owners of means of production and the class of the workers. In the capitalist society these two classes are, the bourgeoisie which owns the means of production, and the proletariat or the working class which works the means of production and sells his labor for earning wages. The Capitalist accumulate wealth at the expense of the workers. The Haves exploit the Have-nots for their profits and use their dominance and power to maintain their domination and rule over the workers. In the Capitalist society, the rich become richer and the workers become poorer. The workers continuously face exploitation and always want to end this. Thus, stratification occurs in the society which also gives rise to conflict between these two classes.

**Marxian theory of stratification can be divided into five propositions.**

1.The greater the industrialist, the greater the inequality between the two classes.

2. The greater the industrialization the more cohesive and united class of subordinates emerges in society.

3. The more is the number of subordinates in the cohesive class, the greater is the rate of conflict between dominant and subordinate classes.

4. The more polarized are the dominants and the subordinates, the conflict is much violent.

5. The greater the inequality in society, the greater is the rate of conflict and its revolutionary nature.

**Criticism of Marxian theory**

1.It is indeed wrong to define class on the basis of only the economic factor.

2. Marxian view of society as a society divided into two classes of the Haves and Have-nots is an over-simplified and unreal view of the society.

3. Marxian theory is guilty of ignoring the presence of several other social classes in society.

4. The theory wrongly defines class antagonism as the only relationship between the two economic classes. It is indeed wrong to define and discuss social conflict as a bipolar conflict between the rich and the poor.

5. The theory is wrong in so far as it believes that in a capitalist society power is always in the hands of the rich capitalists, the propertied class.

**II. Equilibrium Theory of Social Stratification**

All such social theorists who accept the existing social order are popularly called “Equilibrium Theorists”. They place stress on “order within a society” as well as the process by which the “order is maintained”.

Society is viewed as an organism. It is held that all organisms seek to perpetuate themselves. It is asserted that society seeks a balance, an integration, a consensus and a synthesis of its all parts or sections. The assumption of this theory are as follows:

a)society is a relatively persistent and stable structure of elements.

b) society is a well integrated structure of elements.

c) Every element has a function in society. It makes a contribution to the maintenance of the social system.

d) Every functioning social structure is based on a set of accepted values of its members. There is a general consensus behind these values.

While explaining social stratification, the structural-functionalists argue that there are certain essential tasks that are to be performed in each society. Knowledge and responsibility are distributed unequally in the society. In this condition, the society has the need to attract competent persons to the functionally essential positions. Those with greater knowledge and responsibility tend to get the most out of their qualities. Such persons get higher rewards and positions. They are socially recognized as worthy of higher prestige and rewards. The society, therefore, always works and maintains itself s a stratified social system.

**III. Conflict Theory of Social Stratification**

This theory takes a different view of society. It views stratification as the result of a differential distribution of power in society in which coercion, domination and exploitation are the key processes.

**Major assumptions of conflict theory:-**

a)Every society is consistently subject to processes of change.

b) Every society displays some dissensions and conflicts.

c) Every element in a society contributes towards its integration, adaptation and change.

d) Every society is based on the coercion of some of its members on others.

Conflict theorists view stratification in terms of individuals and sub-groups within a society. They argue that inequality exists in society because there is always a shortage of valued goods and services. Therefore, there is always a struggle over who shall get what. Inequality results because valued society positions are attained not by talent or ability but by force or coercion. These are also inherited by birth or by dominance, exploitation or coercion. Thus, the theory seeks to explain social stratification in terms of the presence of conflict and coercion in society

**IV. Functionalist Theory of Stratification given by Davis and Moore**

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore accept the existence of inequality in social relations i.e. social stratification. They approach the problem of social inequality from the functionalist perspective and generally follow Talcott Parsons. They claim that the functioning of a society depends upon the adequate performance of different positions within it. Some positions require different amounts of talent and training for their performance than the others. Society must motivates its talented members to enter such positions/occupations which are more important and necessary and enjoy high income, high status and power. The rewards and their distribution become a part of the social order, and thus give rise to stratification. This theory advocates that:-

a)Social stratification is a functional necessity for each society.

b) It involves a solution to a problem faced by each society.

c) It is an inevitable feature of each society.

**V. Max Weber’s Theory of Social Stratification**

This theory enjoys tremendous popularity among American sociologists. Weber gives a three dimensional model of stratification in terms of **Class, Status and Party**. All of these are kinds of competing interest groups in society.

Weber concept of class is similar to the one given by Karl Marx. He defines class as an economic interest group and as a function of the market place. He is concerned with the distribution of power within a community. A class consists of group of people who stand in the same relationship to the economic opportunity structure in a given society. He did not conceive of classes as self- conscious groups. He identifies three types of classes – Property class, acquisition class and social class.

Status groups are usually understood as the opposite of economic class stratification. Whereas classes are based on old economic considerations, the status groups are based on similar interests resulting from similar market positions. They are not mere statistical categories but real communities. These are people with a common life style and viewpoint of the world, people who identify with one another as belonging to a group.

Parties, however, may represent interests determined through “class situation” or “status situation” and these may recruit their followers respectively from one or the other. According to Weber, “Parties live in the house of power”. These inhibit the state. He identifies two different types of parties – Parties of Patronage and Parties of Principles. Weber makes subtle and important distinctions between three types of inequality and three forms of social stratification. No doubt, there does exist, with some imperfections, a correlation between Class, Status and Party.