
UNIT 1 SOCIAL STRATIFICATION: MEANING AND APPROACHES

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

On going through this unit you should be able to:

- outline evolutionary processes in societies and social stratification;
- discuss its organizing principles: status, wealth and power;
- describe social stratification in India: caste and class;
- distinguish concepts and theories of social stratification, and
- describe social stratification and social change.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Social stratification is a process through which groups and social categories in societies are ranked as higher or lower to one another in terms of their relative position on the scales of prestige, privileges, wealth and power. A distinction could be made between the criteria which place emphasis upon the ascribed or innate qualities with which the strata are relatively endowed and those which are acquired by the strata through their own achievement. Ascription and achievement are, therefore, two types of scales which generally define the normative principles which work as determinants of social stratification in all societies.

Social stratification is also historical process. It emerged as a social institution of societies at a certain level of social evolution and social development. The hunting and food gathering societies had individual levels of social differentiation, for example, a top hunter or shaman acquired higher status due to his personal qualities or skills which society considered to be mystical or divine in origin; or differentiation could be in terms of age and sex of the members of the society. But owing to the limits on the population growth due to less developed production technologies and precarious and often nomadic nature of these societies, their social structure was quite simple endowed as it was with elementary skills among people for communication (limited language vocabulary), simple technologies, elementary forms of belief systems, and rules of social control such societies did not produce any substantial economic surpluses and accumulation of wealth for any member was impossible. Such simpler societies did have social differentiation, but were without the institution of social stratification.

1.2 THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

Social stratification as a institution evolved when the technologies of production under went basic changes. Innovations of animal husbandry and agriculture necessitated more complex technologies and settled forms of community life. These economies also began to generate economic surpluses and accumulation of wealth either in the form of cattle or food grains. With assured food resources population began to grow as never before and barter and exchange, or commodities began to take place on a larger scale. In course of time, tools of exchange were invented which could reflect values of commodities in a growth of sections of societies who had more control on wealth and power, with development of relatively complex technologies and division of labour, not only specialized groups emerged but a division between the rural and urban centres also came into existence in course of time. The complexity of social structure necessitated more elaborate institutions of social control over the emerging new social realities, such as institutionalized form of religion, strata of functionaries specialized into different forms of work, culture specialists and the ruling classes etc. The institution of social stratification came into being as a result of an evolutionary functional necessity at such a historical moment.

1.3 ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

There are three major organizing principles of social stratification. These are, status, wealth and power. Sociological observations of many societies over a period of time have revealed some linkages among these principles in any evolutionary process. For example, even in societies which did not have the institution of social stratification, such as the food gathering and hunting communities, some individuals enjoyed higher social status and were treated as leaders. The magicians (shamans), persons with exceptional skills in hunting or in any other sphere of social economic and defense were accorded higher status in the community. Yet, it did not result into the arrival of the institution of social stratification because such accrual of individual distinction contributed to social differentiation which could be on the basis of merit, age, gender or any other marker in society. Social stratification comes into being in societies when social gradation or ranking is done on the basis of an entire group of people such as the gradations based on caste and class in our society.

1.3.1 Status

The earliest principle of social stratification is that of status. Status in the language of social stratification means ranking of groups in a society on the basis of their relative position in terms of honour or respect. Honour is a qualitative attribute which members in a status group enjoy by birth. Any such attribute which is inherited by birth is ascribed and cannot be acquired by effort. Therefore, status principle of social stratification is also termed as the principle of ascription. In our country, caste is a very appropriate example of status groups. The qualities which go to make a status groups are related more to values and beliefs, to legends and myths perpetuated in societies over a period of time than to principles which are achievable by efforts, whether economic, political or cultural.

1.3.2 Wealth

The second organizing principle of social stratification is wealth. Wealth is generated in societies only when technologies advancement takes place and there is a change in the mode of production. Examples are: change from hunting and food gathering economy to settled agriculture, change from agriculture based economy to one based predominantly upon manufacturing and industry. Such changes, not only brought about the institution of social stratification, but in course of time also altered the principles of organization of social stratification. Economic advancement led to generation of more wealth in society, more accumulation of markers of wealth be it in the form of food grains or cattle, or metals and minerals (silver, gold precious stones etc.) or money. At this stage, the groups which had greater control over the economic resources and wealth or which possessed more wealth were ranked higher in society than groups which controlled less of it, or groups which had little or negligible access to wealth (for example, landless workers or industrial workers). The social stratification based on class is its prime example.

1.3.3 Power

The third organizing principle of social stratification is power. Unlike status and wealth which can be clearly linked with group characteristics of ranking in societies, the principle of power is a relatively diffused attribute because it is not exclusive in character. It is always possible that a group with higher status in society or that which enjoys greater wealth, also exercises more power in society. Nevertheless, one could make a distinction between say, principle of privileges where as the latter tends to be based on the group's ability to use coercive means for other group's conformity with actions, values and beliefs determined by it. The concept of power as Max Weber has discussed in his treatment of social stratification rests on the fact that it endows the persons or groups which have power to impose their will on other groups by legitimate use of coercive method. In this sense, state offers us a good example of an institution which has maximum power. It has sovereign authority to impose its will on citizens of the society. When legitimacy of exercise of power, is widely accepted by groups, in other words, when it is institutionalized in society, power becomes authority. Authority as a concept could be defined as legitimate power. Power as a principle also enters into the notion of social stratification when its functions or its social ramifications begin to be influenced by the political processes in society, and when state begins to take more active or direct role in influencing the principles of social stratification. A relevant example of this could be found in the policy of positive discrimination or reservation of jobs, political offices and entry into educational institutions in our country by the state in favour of castes and tribes now declared as 'scheduled' or as 'other backward classes'. Max Weber, in his treatment of power as an element in the formation of social stratification has rightly emphasised the significance of politics, political parties and their role in optimizing their access to power.

Activity 1

Discuss 'status' 'wealth' and 'power' with other students in the study centre. In which way are they related to one another? Put your findings down in your notebook.

1.4 CASTE AND CLASS IN INDIA

We have discussed so far the principles of status, wealth and power as the main determinants of ranking of groups in relative order in societies which lay down the foundation of social stratification. Caste and class are principles of social stratification which illustrate respectively the role of status and wealth in the ranking of groups in societies. Caste is a prime example of a status group. Class, on the other hand, is based on the principle where groups are ranked on their access to wealth or their relative ability to have a control upon the wealth resources in society. There is a greater degree of consensus among sociologists about the processes by which status groups are formed and constitute the rank order in social stratification. But the same degree of consensus does not seem to exist about the processes which contribute to the emergence of classes by their differential

access to possession of wealth. The principle of wealth is no doubt, widely accepted as leading to social stratification. For instance, class is seen as emerging out of the 'market situation' by Max Weber, whereas Karl Marx connects it with the 'modes of production' which determines both access to wealth or its control as well as ranking of groups in society. No doubt, the central role of wealth in determining social stratification is implicit in both formulations. Modes of production vary with the changing forms of capital (wealth invested for production of commodities) as discussed by Marx. So also, market situation is determined by supply and demand of commodities, labour and employment conditions, all of which function within the matrix of available capital or wealth resources in society, Social stratification enters into this process when one section of people in society have or control more wealth or capital than others. Or when market situation has also to deal with sections of people whom Marx describes as 'proletariat' or working classes who have no wealth and depend upon their physical labour power to survive. The debates among sociologists on these issues are related closely to the various theories of social stratification which will be discussed later.

1.5 CASTE AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The traditional Indian society was organised primarily on the basis of caste stratification. This stratification was such where caste functioned as the central principle in all aspects of social life, such as economy, polity and culture. To understand this, we have to make a distinction between varna and jati the former being a frame of reference or model for classification and the latter being the specific caste groups ranked in order of social status. The four varnas were the Brahmins, (priests), the Kshatriyas (warriors), the Vaisyas (traders) and the Shudras (working classes). Later, a fifth varna, or the Panchama also came into existence. It comprised those who were thrown out of the caste system itself due to their having been judged by society as to have violated some of its basis norms. The Panchamas were also declared by the society as 'untouchable', the acutest form of social discrimination imposed on any group in a society. Some of the basic characteristics of the caste system were: membership by birth, hereditary occupation, pollution and purity ascribed to different castes in terms of varna hierarchy, endogamy, and mutual repulsion or segregation.

1.5.1 Demography of Caste

The demography of caste or jati in India has remained extremely diversified over millennia. Studies show that beyond a radius of 20 to 200 miles, a jati is not recognized as social group; it is only recognizable with reference to the varna model. Hence, the significance of the varna as a sociological frame of reference. Also, jatis have always existed as regional or sub-regional groups numbering into thousands. The recent survey by the Anthropological Survey of India reports the existence of 4635 communities or caste-like groups in India; it also finds that almost all religious groups are divided into various communities which have jati-traits. Jatis also bear local and regional cultural markers based on the ecology, local history or mythology. Traditionally, however, castes both in villages and the urban centres were bound into systemic relationship of reciprocities or work and economic exchange or exchange of services etc. In this sense, caste system functioned on the basis of mutual cooperation and interdependence. It formed an organic system. Both in villages and cities, castes had their panchayat organisations. Even though these had nucleus in a particular village or urban centre, such panchayats or guilds (in the cities) had a network of organization beyond a village or urban centre. If an inter-caste conflict emerged for any reason which violated the caste norms of reciprocity and if dispute could not be settled in the council of the village or the city (comprising elders from various castes) the matter was taken up in the caste panchayats. It functioned both as a body to protect rights and privileges of the caste as well as served as a mechanism for resolution of conflicts.

1) Write a note on caste and social stratification. Use about five lines for your answer.

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2) Pick out the concepts that does not fit in the following list.

- i) Status
- ii) Wealth
- iii) Feudal
- iv) Power
- v) Urbanization

The stability of the caste as a system of social stratification was based on the economy which remained agrarian mercantile or a very long time. This was coupled with the stable population which due to high rate of mortality continued to remain at the level of about hundred millions for several centuries. This spell of stable population was only broken after the industrial revolution which made more advanced life-saving medical aids available to control the death rate rampant though epidemics and natural disasters of the past. The British rule in India on the one hand, destroyed the traditional base of the economy and its integrative relationship with the social structure, particularly the caste system, and on the other, new technologies of medical care were available which brought down the death rate. Thus, population of India began to go up as the Census records from 1931 onwards reveal. The British colonial policy made India a dependant economy and destroyed the foundation of its traditional manufacturing economy and trade.

Massive de-urbanization and de-industrialization followed and pressure on land in villages increased. The traditional balance of economy and social structure which existed between the rural and urban centres and between agriculture and manufacture and trade was vitally destabilized. At the same time, the British policy was also geared to continue the use of caste and religion as a frame of reference in the implementation of social and political policies; caste based Census operations conducted by the British made people for the first time conscious of caste as a political phenomenon throughout the country and it led to the growth of public demand by various castes placed lower in caste ranking for being placed into higher caste hierarchy. This triggered the process of not only Sanskritization, that is adopting the style of life, food habits, dress and ways of worship etc. of the upper castes by lower castes and then demanding to be recognized as a higher caste status, but it also contributed to, as described by M.N. Srinivas, to the process of Westernization (adopting the western style dress, way of living and modes of cultural expression etc.)

1.5.2 Social Mobility

This phase of the process of change in the caste system of stratification set into motion the process of new social mobility, linked it directly with the state policies and introduced elements of politicization in its social movements from which the system has never turned back. This process with some variation has continued to grow even after Independence.

Independence which resulted from national political movement against the British rule was ideologically against any discrimination in India based on caste, religion or ethnic differences; its normative foundation was located in secularism and citizenship rights equally available to all. The Constitution of India which was adopted, therefore, recognizes for state purposes only the civic status of its citizens and soon after Independence derecognized caste from village and city level civic institutions. The Constitution, however, recognized caste status as a matter of welfare policy for selected castes and tribes who it was felt were exploited over centuries and were unprepared to face up with open competition from well to do sections of other castes; these castes and tribes were listed in the Schedule of Constitution and they were provided reservations, 7.5 per cent for the scheduled tribes and 15.0 per cent for the scheduled castes for entry into government jobs, educational institutions and elected political offices.

Box 1.01

A provision for reservations was made in the Constitution, and its Directive Principles also laid down the desirability to offer the benefits of reservation to the 'socially and educationally backward classes'. Two Commissions were set up to identify the categories of backward classes, Kaka Karlekar Commission in 1955 and Mandal Commission in 1977. The Karlekar Commission could not arrive at any definitive recommendation, but the Mandal Commission recommended 27 per cent reservation to the backward classes whom it identified through castes. A list of such castes was also given by the Commission. It may, however, be noted that several states of the Union already provided for reservation to the backward classes much before this policy was undertaken by the central government, and these states too identified backwardness through caste groups which were deprived social and educational opportunities traditionally.

The policy of reservation for castes in employment education and political offices etc. represents the dynamics of social change in India which itself is a product of political, economic and social developments. Democratic employment, increased productivity in agriculture led by the peasant castes in various parts of the country (most of whom comprise backward class category in the centre and the states) and the rise in the aspiration of such castes for social mobility in the fields of education and services have been the factors that have contributed to this policy. The policy of reservation for the backward classes has gained momentum in stages from the states to the centre as a result of the backward class movements gaining impetus due to relative improvement in their economic and political status during the half a century of the history of nations investment in economic and social development as a democratic policy.

1.5.3 Principles of Hierarchy

Caste is also considered to reflect the principle of hierarchy in social stratification. Louis Dumont, a French social anthropologist has sought to position the Indian social structure in contradistinction to that of the west in term of the unique institution of caste which both structurally and as a civilization reflects the principle of hierarchy (in contrast to the principle of equality in the West). Hierarchy is defined by Dumont as the feature of a social system where normative principles govern or determine the instrumental or utilitarian principles in the affairs of society. He calls it being encompassed and encompassing, a process by which the values and beliefs traditionally prescribed encompass the rational utilitarian principles. In other words, in a hierarchical system it is not the economic, political and other secular factors which define the standards of evaluation of the normative or value aspects of society, but is it the other way round. So, according to Dumont, the notions of pollution-purity and inequalities existent in the caste system could not be understood when judged from the western secular standards which belong to an altogether different matrix of civilization. Dumont's treatment of caste as hierarchy has led to debate both in India and abroad and has been criticized for neglecting the role of economic and political factors in the formation and perpetuation caste stratification. Evidently, as caste in adapting successfully today to the demands of political, economic and social modernization and its mobilization is increasingly brought into effect for achievement of higher economic and political goals, it already seems to have lost most of its traditional features located in the principle of hierarchy.

There are extensive studies of the Indian social structure in terms of its class composition and its processes. Economists, sociologists and social anthropologists have contributed to such studies. Several studies also attempt to establish a very close relationship between caste and class in India. Most such studies are based on empirical observations and have a regional character, but are nevertheless, indicative of class structure in India as well as its closer linkages with caste stratification.

1.6.1 Summation of Status

Traditionally, it has been observed that caste reflected a feature described as 'summation of status' principle. If the status of a caste was low in ritual (pollution-purity) hierarchy, it was also lower in its access to economic, political and social statuses. In such a situation, caste also encompassed the feature of class in a manner of speaking, but not all of its features. By definition, caste is a closed group, its membership is by birth, thus caste status is ascribed, it cannot be achieved by economic or social mobility. On the other hand, class is an open group its membership is based on achievement criteria, which could be economic, political or social in character. Caste also constitutes a community, its mobility is group based and to this extend efforts to arise status by Sanskritization in the past involved an entire caste group. Class, unlike caste does not have a communitarian attribute, although it may evolve group cohesiveness based on common interest. Class in this sense is an interest group where as caste constitutes a community. With new social and economic developments and activating of the caste based social and political movements (including the reservation policy) caste groups do have evolved as interest groups, and to that extent some features of class have also been incorporated in the caste organizations. This is particularly true for a large number of caste associations which have been in existence in India since the time of the British rule and which have only proliferated following Independence.

Activity 2

Discuss with other students the concept of 'Summation of Status'. Put down the main findings in your notebook.

The class structure in India differs as between rural and urban settlements. Studies of rural society by sociologists and social anthropologists have identified the rural class structure as comprising the landlords, peasants and working classes. A small population of artisans and functionary castes too have existed in villages as a separate economic interest group with some features of class. Kathleen Gough and a few other sociologists who have followed Marxist categories have described the class structure in village using classifications such as: bourgeoisie class (big landlords), petite bourgeoisie class (medium, and small landlords and traders and artisans) rural proletariat or working classes (who do not possess land and subsist only as wage labourers).

1.6.2 Marxist Method and Concepts

The application of Marxist methods and concepts for the analysis of India's class structure has been more common among the economists, which has been later applied by sociologists. Since, Marxist method of social analysis locates class structure in the modes of production, such as the primitive, the feudal and the capitalist, debate about the nature of class structure in India has hinged mostly upon the debates about the modes of production that prevails in the rural and the industrial economy. In the rural context, much debate has followed as to whether its economy and social structure have feudal, semi-feudal precapitalist or capitalist features. These distinctions are based upon whether the analyst starts from the premise of feudal economy as the beginning point of analysis of its capitalist features in the agrarian economy. Broadly, the findings suggest that class structure of villages which are still located in the agricultural economy are fast moving

towards capitalist orientation. This implies, money wages instead of wages in kind, agriculture for profit rather than for livelihood, greater role of banking credit and cooperatives in investment for production; a movement from production cash crops rather than cereals with increased linkage with markets, etc.

Box 1.02

Changes in agriculture have brought into existence the class of capitalist farmers, and where the winds of change have not reached fully the pre-capitalist features of class are moving fast towards capitalistic potential. But the level of changes in the rural economy in India are so uneven and diverse that in many states which are backward, one can still find feudalistic and semi-feudalistic (or pre-capitalist) features in the agricultural economy. Hence, the composition of the class structure of the Indian villages continues to remain complex with multiple features.

In the urban centres, class structure comprises generally the industrialists, traders and business classes, the professional or service classes, the semi-skilled workers and daily wagers. Since Independence, the number of the professional classes has increased and the service sector in the economy now occupies about 51 per cent of the share of the gross domestic product. Agriculture now contributes to about 28 per cent of its share in the gross domestic product. Evidently, the class composition of urban-industrial India is changing fast due to new technological advancement and the liberalization of economy. This change has increased the composition of the middle classes in both the rural and urban sectors of our society. Green revolution in villages which was led by the peasant castes (the backbone of the backward class movement) created a strong rural middle class; similarly the expansion of the service sector in our economy have added urban middle class numbers in our cities and towns as never before. It is estimated that middle classes taken as a whole number about 350 million now; this is likely to grow to 500 million or 50 per cent of our total population in the next two to three decades if the economy continues to grow.



Caste rank is indicated in the attire of an individual

— Courtesy: B. Kirmamayi

1.6.3 Service Oriented Economy

The class structure of the Indian society is increasingly moving from its primacy of the agrarian economy towards industrial and particularly service oriented economy. This may have important sociological consequences in the existing nexus between caste and class structure in the society. Due to increased momentum of the new economies which also are likely to trigger greater degree of urbanization and migration between regions and communities in India the political mobilization based on caste is bound to give way to new principles of structural location of political and social force. In such a situation, class and ethnicity will gain prominence than a set of caste groups. Social anthropologists have already noted the increased process of caste ethnicization in our society.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write a note of about five lines on caste and class in India.

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- 2) Say True and False.

- i) Weber used the dialectical approach to stratification.
- ii) A low caste status means a low place in the caste hierarchy.
- iii) Class is an interest group while caste constitutes a community.

1.7 SOME CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

Issues related to concepts and theories of social stratification have essentially been oriented towards the relationship between social stratification and social order. Max Weber made a distinction among three orders of society: the social, the economic and the political. The complexion of social stratification, according to him varied with the nature of the 'order' of the society. The 'social order' has its primacy in the normative principle of 'honour' and its institutional structures are influenced by it. It is located in the 'status groups'. The institution of feudalism, aristocracy, the formation of different 'estates' in traditional European society were its example; hereditary rights and patrimony and various forms of ascribed privileges and authorities followed in this kind of social order. In India, the caste social stratification reflects this principle. It is operative in the principle of purity and pollution, hereditary occupation and caste privileges or sanctioned forms of discrimination; it can also be found in the principle of endogamy. Castes also constitute unlike class social communities. The 'economic order' is based on the normative principle of rationality and market situation. It manifest in the form of interest groups. Class, according to Max Weber is a product of market situation; it is competitive, it comprises social categories which do not constitute communities and one's social mobility in the class situation depends upon achieved skills or merits governed by the laws of supply and demand. Its manifestation as a institution could be seen in the rise of capitalism, which gives rise to the market situation. The third order of society is 'political'; it is based on the pursuit of 'power'. It makes institutional manifestation in the organised system of political parties and various associations which are orientated to its acquisition. The political order

of society and its institutional processes have a tendency to extend to the social institutions of other orders, such as the social and political orders.

1.7.1 Weber's Approach

The conceptual and theoretical approach of Weber is primarily interpretive and systemic. He considered that theoretical advancement in sociology could be achieved both for understanding and explanation of social phenomena by uses of the 'ideal type' concepts. These concepts are not based on empirical induction from observed reality, but are an abstraction from the 'historical individual' or a configuration of historical events over a period of time from which the sociologists constructs concepts by interpretive understanding. Ideal type concepts are thus not real types although they are derived from a certain understanding of reality. Even though ideal they are not normative (either desirable or undesirable; good / bad) but ideational or mental constructions. Weber believed, that sociological theories do have explanatory significance but still they did not have law-like power of generalization. His theory of social stratification should, therefore, be treated as such; it is based on comparative understanding of the typical manifestations of the principles of social stratification over a period of time. It makes significant contribution to both understanding of social stratification as system, as well as its processes of change.

1.7.2 The Dialectical Approach

The theory of 'dialectical and historical materialism' enunciated by Karl Marx is another very established theory of social stratification. Just as Weber uses the basic notion of 'order' to locate the type concepts for the understanding of social stratification, Marx uses terms of 'mode of production' and 'relations of production' for classification of the conceptual categories of social stratification. The important modes of production are: primitive, feudal and capitalist. These distinctions are based on modes of uses of or nature of labour power and means of technology for production of commodities. The primitive mode was characterized by communal or collective mode of labour with elementary tools as in the food gathering and hunting communities. As we have discussed, the institutions of social stratification could not have evolved at this stage. It institutional organs begin to develop with the rise of feudalism; accumulation of wealth and productive resources developed by this time; it led to the stratification in society with feudal landlord or aristocrat at the top, who exercised control over his estate (land and all other productive resources), and those dependent upon it which was indeed very inclusive. The peasants, serfs and traders and artisans were other social strata who were part of the system but entirely dependent upon the means of production and labour power which remained under the control of the landlord. Most these strata were in fact attached to the estate of the feudal lord. Feudalism evolved its own typical political, economic, social and cultural institutions but most of these were based on the principle of hereditary privileges and patrimonial authority. The feudal lord had a control on the means of productions and this led to a form of relationship between him and other social strata which was based on status obligations and privileges.

Box 1.03

According to Marx, conflict and tension were endemic to the system, may be in explicit or implicit form; often this conflictual relationship was not overt due to 'false consciousness' which prevailed; for example, between the relationship of the lord and the peasant which instead of being perceived by peasant as being exploitative, was seen as being patronage. One viewpoint also exists about the modalities by which wealth determines ranking of groups as social strata.

1.7.3 The Rise of Capitalism

The rise of capitalism ushered a new period in social evolution. The dialectical process of historical change both through the innovation of new technologies and social institutions made feudalism obsolescent and it was replaced by the institution of capitalism. Class structure emerges in full measure by this time by the industrial revolution. The growth in

the factory mode of production of commodities, massive migration of peasants and worker from the rural areas to the urban centres and accumulation of capital by expanded use of the market made possible by the new technology of transport and colonial expansion of the European powers changed the system of social stratification. The main classes which emerged in the new scheme of social stratification were; the capitalist entrepreneurs and the working classes. A new form of acute antagonistic relationship now emerges between these two classes; this relates to demand of reasonable working hours, reasonable wages, better conditions of employment and work etc. These forces of conflict, according to Marx should have culminated into the replacement of capitalism by its obsolescence like in the case of feudalism by a socialist system of society, it would be, according to Marx based on collective mode of production without private ownership of capital and pursuit of profit. In many countries, socialist societies did come into existence by revolution of the peasants and working classes; for example, former USSR, China, Vietnam etc., but as envisaged by Marx, capitalism has not been rendered obsolete as yet. On the contrary it has shown new resilience where as many socialist economies have either been weakened or have been replaced by capitalist institutions.

The essence of Marxist theory, however, does not depend upon the processes of the formation of social strata or its structural composition as much as upon its basic premise on the nature of social order.. Marx treats social order as a product of historical-materialistic conditions; these are defined by the modes of production and relations of production, and are continually undergoing change due to technological innovations and attempts within the society to resolve various social conflicts which are universal. Social order is thus based on the relationship among various groups which are inherently antagonistic, and cannot be resolved without basically altering the social order or system itself. The process by which this takes place, and in which the exploited classes such as the industrial workers and peasants are partners in class struggle against the capitalist classes is termed as revolution. The new social order, the socialist society which emerges through revolution does not have a place for strata based on inequalities which generate antagonism, but has social differentiation of work without class or social stratification. Such strata are called 'nonantagonistic'.

1.7.4 Darhendorf and Coser

In addition to the Marxist formulation, there are other theoretical perspectives in sociology of social stratification which treat conflict as the universal feature in form of social gradations in society. Ralph Daharendorf and Lewis Coser are for example, a few among many such western sociologists who accept the universality of conflict in all form of stratification but locate these conflicts in the institutional anomalies within the system rather than linking it with the theory of class struggle and revolution. Conflict according to these sociologists arises out of antagonism of interests and exercise of power by one stratum over the other which seeks upward social mobility. It represents, therefore, internal dynamics of the stratification system rather than a movement towards its total replacement or change of social order itself by revolutionary means as Marx envisaged. Such theories of social stratification, which are known as conflict theories do not accept the Marxist position of historical materialism which postulates invariable stages of social evolution through series of revolutionary movements. The notion of social order in the conflict theory is closer to functional viewpoint rather than dialectical materialist interpretation.

1.7.5 The Functional Theory

The functional theory of social stratification which is very widely followed in the studies of social stratification, particularly among the American sociologists takes a view of social order very different from Marxist position. Instead of treating social order as being inherently endowed with self-annulling contradictions or conflicts based on the inequalities of social strata, the functional theory treats social order to be endowed with inherent capacity of self-maintenance and self-regulation. It treats society and its institutions, including social stratification to be constituted by inter-dependent sets of social relationships with capacity to contain to and resolve conflicts which this theory does not deny. This theory postulates an analogy between social order and organism; both have

internal mechanisms for self-regulation and self-corrections. Social stratification from a functional view point is a dynamic system characterized by social mobility and continual restructuring of the rules of consensus building. It acknowledges the role of competition and conflict but also postulates the existence of institutional mechanism such as, processes of socialization, education, empowerment by democratic participation etc. through which aspirations for social mobility are or can be realised and contradiction arising out of asymmetrical opportunities of various strata in society resolved with a meaningful degree of social consensus.

The studies of social stratification by Indian sociologists have employed all the theoretical approaches we have described above. Most studies of class structure and peasantry in India have employed Marxist theory of historical materialism and attempted to adapt it to the Indian historical conditions. Weberian perspective on stratification theory has also influenced many studies of rural and urban systems of social stratification. Caste, class and power have been used as conceptual typologies in many studies to measure the changes in social stratification arising out of the forces of social mobility, particularly education, policies of democratic participation, positive discrimination favouring SCs, STs and OBCs, industrial and entrepreneurial developments etc. of sociological interest in particularly the observation that due to processes of social mobility and policy of empowerment, the traditional congruence among factors such as economic status, ritual status and power status of strata within the caste system has broken down. In other words, higher castes no longer enjoy high economic status or power status only because they by tradition have been accorded a higher ritual status in the caste system. Sociologists have used in this context, class to define economic status, power to define political status and ritual to define caste status, and have concluded that due to social mobility during to past decades following Independence, social development policies have broken the summation of status principle in the caste mode of social stratification. The emergence of class and ethnic mobilization of caste and religion are new dynamic processes which today challenge the traditional forms and institutions of social stratification.

1.8 LET US SUM UP

It is obvious from the above analysis that social stratification within the Indian society is undergoing changes due to impact of technological innovations, modernization of agriculture, industrial and entrepreneurial development, political empowerment of the weaker sections of society and revolution in mass media. The policy of positive discrimination in favour of the SCs, STs and OBCs has also impacted significantly in bringing about social mobility among these sections of society. Studies show that the SCs and STs for whom reservation was provided in the Constitution have benefited from the policy and a significant section of middle classes has by now emerged from among them. But the process of mobility which this policy has brought about still remains highly constrained due to massive incidence of illiteracy, malnutrition and health problem among these people. Social mobility through positive discrimination is highly dependent upon the level of education of the concerned groups. For this reason, the reservation policy tends to only supplement but does not function as a decisive element in the process of social mobility. The need is for taking effective steps to augment the process of removal of illiteracy among these sections of society.

The OBCs are comparatively in a better position with regard to social mobility. Generally being peasants and endowed with landed resources, which does not obtain in case of the most of the SCs and STs, they have contributed to the green revolution and benefitted from it. They have now emerged in most parts of India as rural middle class and having gained better status in the realm of economy (agriculture) and political power seek through reservation now elevation of social status by entering into technological, professional and

managerial offices and entry into central government civil services, from which they have been relatively deprived. This seems to provide the new momentum to the backward class movement and ethnicization of castes in this category (as also among the SCs and STs or Dalits) in India.

Yet another process of change in the structure of society and system of social stratification can be observed through the indicators of growth in the professional entrepreneurial classes in India and the rise in the services sectors in the economy. As we have already discussed, the middle classes in India roughly amounts to one third of the population, being estimated at 350 millions. This is a very significant number, and it is associated with the growth in the industrial – urban and information technology related sectors of our society. The process of change in this area has just begun and the policy of economic liberalization might add new momentum to this process. However, qualitatively, the class structure both in the rural and urban India does continues to make adaptive and integrative responses to the forces of change which it encounters on an increasing scale from exposure to western cultural and social institutional values.

1.9 KEY WORDS

- Demography:** Concerned with various facets of a population such as gender ratios, distribution of a trait, gross numbers etc.
- Dialectical:** Taking into account the two opposing or antagonistic views on a topic and resolving them at a higher level of abstraction.
- Hierarchy:** A rank order of castes or groups from top to bottom.
- Caste:** An ascriptive grouping which is community based
- Class:** A achievement oriented interest group.
- Power:** The capacity of a group or persons to influence decisions in their own way in the group or community.
- Status:** Ranking of groups in a society on basis of their relative position in terms of honour or respect.

1.10 FURTHER READINGS

Yogendra Singh: *Social Stratification and Social Change in India*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishing House, 1997.

K.L. Sharma: *Social Stratification in India : Themes and Issues*, New Delhi: Sage Publishers, 1997.

1.11 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Traditional Indian society was organised mainly on the basis of caste. Caste functioned as the central principle in all aspects of social life, such as economy polity and culture. In this Scheme Varna is the frame of reference for classification while jati is the specific caste groups ranked in order.
- 2) iii)
v)

- 1) Caste reflects the 'Summation of Status'. If it is low in ritual hierarchy, then it is usually low in the economic, political and social statuses. By definition caste is a closed group, based on ascription. Class on the other hand is an open group its membership is based on achievement criteria. Thus caste is community based while class represents a status group.
- 2)
 - i) False
 - ii) True
 - iii) True