
UNIT 31 FACTORS AND FORCES OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

Structure

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31.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- sum up the factors affecting mobility; and
- present the different views on this

31.1 INTRODUCTION

Social mobility is one of the most researched areas of social stratification. You have so far seen what is meant by mobility in different societies. In this section, we will look at some of the factors that have been identified as influencing social mobility. Certain things must be borne in mind before we begin this discussion. Firstly, no theory of social mobility (for, when we are talking of factors of social mobility, we implicitly have a theory in mind) can be separated from a theory of stratification, or of how society is structured more generally. In other words, the study of social mobility cannot be separated from social placement or recruitment. Secondly, while the following discussion will focus on factors affecting social mobility, it must not be regarded as a passive, dependent variable. Social mobility, or the denial of it, can itself have far reaching consequences for society and social stratification more specifically. Towards the end of this discussion, this will be touched upon in a little more detail. Lastly, there are differences among scholars on what are seen as the factors affecting social mobility. In this section, we will take a brief look at some of the different ways in which the questions of mobility has been dealt with.

While it is true that social mobility has existed in all societies, even the most 'closed' societies such as the caste system in India, industrialization, it has been argued has significantly increased the rates of social mobility. Consequently, much of the mobility research has focussed on the study of social mobility in industrial societies, and the factors affecting mobility there.

One of the pioneers in the study of social mobility is the Russian sociologist, Sorokin. According to him, there are certain primary factors that affect mobility in all societies, and secondary factors that are specific to particular societies at particular times. That is, he has argued that no society can be regarded as completely closed, denying any mobility, nor can it be completely open, as there are always barriers to mobility. He listed four primary factors, namely the demographic factor, the abilities of parents and children, the faulty distribution of individuals in social positions, and most importantly, the change of the environment. Let us now discuss each of these in turn.

31.2 THE DEMOGRAPHIC FACTOR

One factor that affects mobility in all societies is the demographic factor. In general, it has been observed that the birth rate of higher groups is lower than that of lower groups. Even though the death rates of the lower groups are higher, the net reproduction rate is such that there is usually some room at the top for members of lower groups. Perray, for e. g., found that out of 215 noble lineages in a certain region of France in 1200 only 149 were left a century later. In general, he found the life span of such lineages to be only 3 to 4 generations. They were then replaced by lineages of non noble birth, or by collateral lineages. Similarly, Alex Inkeles, in his study of stratification in the Soviet Union in the middle of this century, attributes the very high rates of mobility there partly to the loss of lives in the war, necessitating a high degree of mobility. The other important reason, of course, is rapid industrialization.

This is true not only in terms of higher and lower groups, but also in terms of urban and rural populations. The latter usually have higher net reproduction rates. Despite this, urban populations have been growing much more rapidly than rural ones. This is due largely to migration, rather than due to a natural increase in population.

Box 31.01

The demographic factor has a bearing on social mobility. Today advances in medical care and other factors have caused an increase in life expectancy. One consequence of this is a rise in the retirement age, and the consequent loss of vacancies for new recruits. From another angle, society has a larger pool of human resources to deploy, because the working age now extends longer. On another front this has caused the problem of looking after the aged, a problem which has been there for decades in the western societies.

There a concomitant of this has been the emergence of old age homes, hospitals for looking after terminally ill patients, etc. From the mobility angle, this means that new kind of vacancies are created which must then be filled.

Thus the demographic factor definitely has a bearing on social mobility, but is itself not a purely biological phenomenon, as social factors in general have a bearing on demography. Mandelbaum and others have for example written on how cultural factors such as son preference have affected population structures

31.3 TALENT AND ABILITY

Talent and ability as factors making for social mobility have been discussed in different ways by different people. Sorokin notes that usually, abilities of parents and children do not match. In ascriptive societies, children may not always be as suited to their inherited status positions as their parents. Many ways are suggested by Sorokin to get around this problem. Popular pressure may force individuals to vacate positions they are unsuited for. The incumbents may themselves preempt this by vacating their positions and so on. Lipset and Bendix state that there are always new supplies of talent which must be absorbed somewhere or the other. Even in societies with inherited status positions, there were always opportunities for talented individuals to be upwardly mobile. For example under feudalism's first age, Bloch shows how individuals with military prowess could rise. Similarly, Bergel, in his study of social stratification points out that even in the rigidly

hierarchical feudal system, there was opportunity for persons of low birth, even from among the bonded, to rise into favour, the 'ministeriales.' Closer to home, the bestowing of a jagir was a sign of appreciation for services rendered. Mobility of this kind, Turner has called 'sponsored mobility', contrasted to 'contest mobility', although these terms were not coined with respect to pre-industrial forms of mobility.

While the absorption of new talent might be regarded as problematic in societies with ascriptive status positions, even in societies that are regarded 'open', this may not prove to be easy. That is to say, an achievement oriented society may not really be as open as it is thought to be. In this context, it may be relevant to briefly mention the functionalist theory of Davis and Moore. In substance, this theory states that positions in society are filled on the basis of talent and training of individuals for the different social positions. The most able are attracted to the most important positions by the differential reward attached to them. In this way, society is able to use its best human resources in the most important positions. Thus stratification is a device by which social placement and motivation takes place.

Now while this theory has an appeal in terms of neatness and tightness, very fundamental criticisms can be and have been leveled against it. In the context of what we are at present discussing, namely the abilities of individuals, critics have pointed out that it is naïve to assume that even the 'open' societies, much less the more 'closed' ones, allocated individuals to positions on the basis of ability. Class of origin, if not overt forms of inequality such as caste or race, bring about a situation where there is a reproduction of inequality generation after generation. Inequality of opportunity means that even able individuals from the less privileged groups will not be able to rise. We can also mention here the satire on "The Rise of the Meritocracy" by Michael Young, where he effectively debunks the myth that the 'open' societies are really responsive to talent and ability. Various empirical studies of mobility in western industrial societies have also shown that a large amount of that mobility recorded is 'mass mobility', that is mobility across the manual/ non manual divide. The class of origin still matters in that the topmost positions and the lowest positions are largely self recruiting. Therefore talent as a factor has a limited role in explaining mobility.

31.3.1 Elite Theories

Talent and ability as the main reason for why individuals come to occupy certain positions was the chief argument of Vilfredo Pareto, one of the elite theorists. He contended that over time generations lose their innate qualities, or persons from lower strata might exhibit those qualities, and thus a change in the personnel of the elite would take place. "History is the graveyard of aristocracies," and Pareto. This was his famous theory of the circulation of elites.

This circulation in Pareto's theory was of two types. In the first, talented individuals from lower strata enter higher strata. At other times, when the abilities of higher groups are called into question, it is likely that groups from lower strata challenge and overthrow the supremacy of such groups. In other words, both individual and group mobility is possible. Max Gluckman has referred to this as 'repetitive change', in the context of changes in African chiefdoms. Of course, it may also happen that such a change does not take place within the confines of a given system, but ends in changing the system itself, i.e. the structure of positions itself. Maurice Duverger has referred to this as the difference between conflicts 'within the regime' and conflicts 'over the regime.'

31.4 CHANGE IN THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Of all the factors that Sorokin deemed relevant, the changes that take place in the social environment is the most important. Indirectly in fact, this can influence the demographic factor (for e.g. advances in medicine lengthening life expectancy), as well the talents of individuals (expansion of educational opportunities may allow the discovery of talent, for e.g.)

A major factor for mobility is thus social change. Changes of various kinds, economic, social, political, legal, technological, and other, have an effect on social mobility. These macro processes of change which affect not only mobility, but other aspects of society as well. One of the important economic changes that have been unidentified by sociologists as having an impact on social mobility is industrialization.

31.4.1 Industrialization and Mobility

Much of the theorizing on mobility has been concerned with the relationship of industrialization with social mobility. One of the leading arguments in this field, associated with Lipset and Bendix is that industrialization leads to an increase in mobility over pre industrial rates, and that once all societies have reached a certain level of industrialization, there is a similarity in their rates of social mobility. A different but related thesis is the Convergence thesis, which has been propounded by Kerr and others, that all industrial societies converge towards a common pattern of mobility among other things, like overall patterns of stratification.

Let us discuss first the theory of Lipset and Bendix. In a famous comparative study of a number of European countries and the USA, they sought to test two main hypotheses. First, that once all societies have reached a certain level of industrialization, they experience higher rates of mobility than pre industrial societies, Second, the common perception that the USA offers significantly greater opportunities for mobility than the countries of Europe. Their data confirmed the first hypothesis but not the second. Lipset and Bendix, list five main points, the factors of social mobility in industrial societies. These are:

- i) Changes in the number of available vacancies
- ii) Different rates of fertility
- iii) Changes in the rank accorded to occupations
- iv) Changes in the number of inheritable status positions
- v) Changes in legal restrictions pertaining to potential opportunities.

Some of these, such as the different rates of fertility have already been discussed. Let us discuss the other.

31.4.2 Available Vacancies

It is commonly agreed that with industrialization, there is a shift in the occupational structure from Agriculture, to Industry, and later on, the Services. With the shift to industry, there is a sudden spurt in economic activity, an increase in the number of positions available in society. This has been well documented in numerous cases. The migration of people to cities from rural areas in order to work at the new factory jobs is one form of mobility. This has both geographical aspects, as well as a vertical aspect, as usually, city jobs are ranked higher in prestige hierarchies than rural ones. Other examples, can also be cited. New white collar positions also come into existence, as for example in the computer profession. All of these result in the expansion in the number of available vacancies. In this way then industrialization acts as a major factor generating social mobility.

31.4.3 Legal Restrictions

Changes in the political and legal framework can also be an important source of social mobility. The traditional caste order in India assigned individuals to traditional occupations, and certain occupations such as the learned occupations were legally or customarily forbidden to people of low birth. The democratization of political systems, with the concept of all citizens having equal rights under the law, removed barriers to social mobility. At the same time, the introduction of measures such as universal franchise, Panchayati Raj, etc. enabled persons hitherto denied political rights to enter into the

political arena. Anand Chakravarti's study of village Devisar in Rajasthan, shows how changes in the wider political system were used for social mobility. Other examples abound.

Related to this is the fact that with industrialization and its demand for skills hitherto not known, it is unlikely that positions will come to be occupied on the basis of traditional specializations. Thus there is a reduction in the number of inheritable positions, and far larger increase in the number of positions filled through criteria of achievement. In this the education system play a major role. It is not the place of this section to discuss the relation of education to stratification, which is done elsewhere in your course, but this is directly related to the increase in non ascriptive positions.

31.4.4 Rank and Position

Mobility can also occur without any change in an individual's position, if the ranking of positions changes. For example, in the USA, one study shows that government positions have enhanced their prestige in the fifties compared to the twenties. Therefore government servants have experienced upward mobility without changing their jobs. This could, of course, lead to downward mobility as well. Due to reranking some occupations would come to be less important in the society and economy than formerly, and thus those occupying those positions would be demoted.

31.4.5 The Convergence Hypothesis

A well known and much debated hypothesis regarding the relationship of industrialization and stratification is the Convergence Hypothesis. This was most clearly articulated by Kerr and others who stated that in today's world, the fact of industrialization was a common denominator which would impel all industrialized societies towards a common future society which they called a pluralistic industrialist society. These societies would have common patterns of stratification as well as common patterns of mobility. Mobility would be high, as the demands of industrialization would necessitate the free and easy mobility of persons from one position to another. This was a functionalist argument in one sense. They also implied that there would be a continuous increase in mobility rate over time.

The argument of Kerr and others has been comprehensively criticized by Goldthorpe. He cites the work of Miller, who, using more data than Lipset and Bendix, shows that in fact there is a lack of convergence between the rates of mobility of industrial societies. This shows that perhaps it is not industrialization per se, but also other factors, such as cultural factors, the education system etc., which also have a bearing on social mobility. Goldthorpe himself holds the view that it is the political and ideological differences that are important between the socialist and capitalist societies, which Kerr and Company include under one umbrella category of 'industrial society'.

Activity 1

Converse with other students and teachers regarding the thesis. To what extent can it be upheld? Note down your findings.

There is a superficial similarity between the argument of Kerr and that of Lipset and Bendix, but in fact the latter's argument as already discussed simply states that after a certain level of industrialization, there is a rise in mobility rates. A continuous increase is not predicted, nor also a convergence. We may also note here that Sorokin did not predict either a continuous increase in mobility rates over time, nor did he predict a fall. He in fact believed that industrialised societies are not completely open, nor are pre-industrial ones completely closed. If at all, he held to a cyclical view of the rates of mobility, which would rise and fall.

31.5 DOWNWARD MOBILITY

So far we have only been looking at how various kinds of changes have enabled people to

become upwardly mobile, however this is defined. The same argument has another side as well. Just as industrialization is seen as increasing rates of upward mobility, it also brings about a great deal of downward mobility. Downward mobility can occur because certain occupations have lost in prestige through a reranking of positions, and thus their occupants have moved down. In a number of cases however, it may not merely be a case of demotion, but rather, that those very positions cease to exist. So this would be a case of structural (downward) mobility, rather than circulation (downward) mobility if such terms can be used. For example the coming of polyester and other synthetic fabrics in India has drastically reduced the demand for cotton. Coupled with a fall in global demand for Indian short staple cotton, many cotton farmers in India have had to face ruin. Some have turned to other crops, others to other occupations, and some have even committed suicide. With the coming of modern household gadgets for example, traditional occupations such as the washing of clothes can no longer employ so many people. What is of concern is not so much the loss of traditional jobs, which may have been quite demeaning to human dignity as in the case of the tasks performed by the lower castes in India, as that if no alternative sources of livelihood are offered, large sections of people may sink deeper into poverty. Unemployment therefore is a consequence or aspect of downward mobility.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Explain what are 'elite theories' in about five lines.

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2) Describe the importance of the social environment in about five lines.

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3) Convergence Hypothesis implies:
(Tick the right answer)

- i) low mobility rates
- ii) high mobility rates
- iii) no change in mobility rates
- iv) increase in rates of mobility



The Locomotive links the society and nation state. There are different compartments and 'classes' for travellers

Courtesy : Kiranmayi Bushi

31.6 BARRIERS TO MOBILITY

Another aspect that is often ignored by the proponents of the view that industrialisation provides avenues of upward mobility, are the barriers to mobility. We have already mentioned during the discussion on talent as a factor of mobility, that industrial societies are not as open as they are made out to be. Some writers suggest that today the systematic class inequalities have given way to 'case' inequalities. There is also the view that capitalist societies are no longer as inegalitarian as Marx had predicted they would become, and that there is a reduction in inequalities. It is doubtful whether this is true of the western countries today, but it is certainly not true of countries like India, where groups of various kinds have systematically been denied access to things that are valued. It is true that many of the occupations today are filled on the basis of formal qualifications acquired through the education system; however, it would be wrong to assume that all have equal access to education, or to education of uniform quality. Thus though legal barriers to mobility may have been removed, social inequalities themselves prove to be barriers to mobility.

31.7 THE MARXIST VIEW

At this point, it may be relevant to discuss the Marxist view, as many of the critical viewpoints may be directly or indirectly derived from it. The Marxist view of stratification and mobility is based on the class nature of society. Although Marxist view of these matters. Marx posited that as capitalism (he would not have used the term industrial society) developed, there would be a tendency towards polarization. By this he meant that the stratification system would come to resemble a pyramid, with the masses of people bunched at the bottom.) Even the intermediate groups such as the petty bourgeoisie, small landowners and others would in course of time find themselves demoted. Thus if at all mobility was a feature of capitalism, it was downward, rather than upward. The result of this polarization and pauperization would be the overthrow of the capitalist system and the creation of socialism.

Box 31.02

Marxist writers have further developed the theme of proletarianization. Given the growth in service sector occupations, they have sought to see whether the lower rungs of white collar occupations can in fact be included into the proletariat, and have concluded that they can be. Notable amongst those who have argued thus are Braverman and others, although other Marxists have disagreed. Outside the Marxist fold, there are those like Dahrendorf and others who argue that the changes that have taken place since the analysis of Marx have been so far reaching, that today's societies can no longer even be called capitalist, but rather, post-capitalist.

Therefore, from the Marxist perspective, the factors causing mobility are those that are basic to the system of capitalism, and furthermore, the opportunities for upward mobility are negligible, and the bulk of mobility is downward.

31.8 SUBJECTIVE FACTORS

The foregoing discussion has been about the various objective factors affecting social mobility, as seen from the different perspectives. Let us now look at the subjective factors, namely those factors that motivate people to be mobile. Here we are obviously talking about aspirations for upward mobility. In many cases, of course, mobility takes place involuntarily, as many happen in the case of a re ranking occupations. But given individuals in similar positions, what motivates one to strive for mobility and another not to. Let us look therefore at some of the subjective factors of social mobility. We can assume safely that individuals usually wish to be upwardly rather than downwardly mobile. Veblen's book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* allows us to infer that every stratification system is automatically a source of mobility. This is because every individual's estimation of himself or herself is largely based on other's evaluation of them. And individuals will always seek to be well thought of in the eyes of their fellow men. Thus they will aspire to those positions which society deems to be worthwhile. The process of Sanskritization shows how it is in fact a commitment to the values of the caste system that is the source of aspiration for mobility.

Activity 2

Try to locate the subjective factor in people you know have had any kind of social mobility. Discuss your findings with other students in the study centre.

But as Beteille points out, while the upwardly aspiring groups wish to be included among the higher groups, once they arrive there, they try to retain their exclusivity. Thus in the case of the caste system both processes, those of inclusion and exclusion paradoxically coexist. This idea is similar to that of social closure, used by Weber.

But to return to the main argument, we may generalise by saying that wherever there exist systems of values, commitment to those values will automatically generate motivations for mobility.

Merton has also written about the importance of the reference group in determining social behaviour. He states that the individual who seeks to be mobile has as a reference group a non membership group, rather than his own group. Thus the norms which he adopts are deviant so far as his own groups is concerned. This process he terms "anticipatory socialization". Those individuals who for a variety of reasons are at the periphery of their social groups may undergo such anticipatory socialization. The process of Sanskritization can once again be used as an example of this, where a caste adopts the life style and customs of a higher caste, and over a period of time strives to be recognized as higher in the hierarchy.

31.9 SOCIAL MOBILITY AND SOCIAL CHANGES

In the discussion so far social mobility has been treated as a dependent variable, whereas social structure is the independent one. However, as the brief mention of Marx above shows, mobility, or the lack of it can itself be a source of the system. Thus instead of a discussion in terms of objective factors versus subjective factors as distinct and separate, one should link structure and agency, and look at their interrelation. Giddens criticizes conventional discussions of mobility which look at classes as fixed categories which can be populated by different people at different times. Schumpeter for example likens classes to buses, which have different passengers at different times. The problem here is two-fold. Firstly, one cannot separate a discussion of mobility from factors that structure class relations in general, and secondly, the very process of mobility from factors that structure class relations in general, and secondly, the very process of mobility can bring about changes in the system of stratification.

Merton's work on social structure and anomie, sheds more light on this. He differentiates between socially accepted goals and means of achieving these goals. The goals refer to the values of society. Those who accept the goals and the means of achieving them are Conformists. But there may be those who reject the goals, i.e. The values, as well as the means of achieving them. These people may either retreat from social life, Retreatism, or may rebel against society, Rebellion. In the latter case, they may, as referred to earliest, postulate a new structure of society, rather than seek advancement within the given structure.

When a discontent with the existing system leads to change of the system, this itself will throw up new positions and therefore mobility. Therefore it is difficult to clearly separate the objective and subjective factors into watertight compartments. Social structure may itself generate anomie.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Marx has posited that in capitalism.
 - i) these would be pauperization
 - ii) there would be low mobility
 - iii) there would be a tendency for polarization
 - iv) all of the above

- 2) Describe some of subjective factors is social mobility in about five lines.

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31.10 LET US SUM UP

This discussion has tried to present some of the main macro structural as well as more subjective factors that affect social mobility. At the same time, we have tried to take a somewhat critical look at the factors generating social mobility. An attempt has also been made to present differing viewpoints to enable student to develop their own critical faculties. A brief reading list is provided for students who wish to go further. Unfortunately there is no a comparable amount of empirical work on mobility in India as there is on the developed countries of the west.

31.11 KEY WORDS

- Convergence** : A theory which stresses advent of a common industrial society as capitalism progresses.
- Demographic** : Pertaining to population, its growth rates and various other aspects such as life expectancy
- Elite** : The strata of society which has all the benefits of wealth and property.
- Subjective** : That which depends upon inter-person attitudes

31.12 FURTHER READINGS

Goldthorpe, J.H. (1967) *Social Stratification in Industrial Society*, in Bendix and Lipset, ed, *Class, Status and Power*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Lipset, Seymour and Bendix, Reinhard, (1959). *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

31.13 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) According to Pareto, talent and ability is the chief reason why individuals occupy certain positions. Pareto argued that it was innate superiority that created the elite. Yet it was possible that the elite might lose their abilities, or persons from lower strata can exhibit those qualities and thus a change in the elite could take place.
- 2) Sorokin is of the view that changes in the social environment lead to changes in the demographic factors such as life expectancy, and the talents of the individuals. Thus a change in social environment is a major factor in creating social mobility. Changes of different kinds like the economic, social, political, legal, technological all affect mobility.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) (iii)
- 2) Every stratification system according to Weber is a source of mobility. This is because self-evaluation depends on the other evaluation of oneself. A good example of the subjective factors also, is the process of Sanskritization in which it is commitment to the caste system which is the source of aspiration for mobility.