UNIT 23  NATURE AND TYPES OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- Describe the significance of Social Mobility studies;
- Define the meaning and types of social mobility;
- Appreciate the factors that have a bearing on social mobility; and
- Grasp how social mobility contributes to social change.

23.1  INTRODUCTION

Social mobility studies are important for understanding the way in which a society is changing, and the changes that have been taking place in the social position of individuals as well as groups, as they help in formulating social policies. This can also provide us insight into the way different development and welfare programmes are operating and the way they are influencing the changes in the social status, especially among the deprived classes of the society. This also can tell us the way different groups adapt different strategies to compete and improve their status to climb up in the social ladder. Social mobility studies are, therefore, valuable to assess the direction of status changes across different sections of the population in a country, state and region. Social mobility studies not only deal with social climbing but also with the declining or with the status quo contexts. It is important to note that there are diversities in approaches, opportunities offered by a system and the way they are accessed or utilised that influence the mobility chances. Social mobility studies have a key role in the studies of social transformation and change. These studies inform us about the way a social structure works across social groups. Social mobility plays key role in constructing and transforming social...
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identities. It is influenced by an individual’s social life, including the family, education, local resources, social network, gender, ethnicity and race, etc.

Abrahamson et. al. identified two factors in studying social mobility, “The first is concerned with the extent to which social inequalities and differential access to advantages, opportunities, and scarce benefits are perpetuated across generations… A second purpose for studying social mobility is to locate the social structural and psychological factors that play a role in the status attainment (that is, social mobility) of individuals” (1976: 205-206). What is significant to understand here is that how social mobility sometimes reinforces as well as reinforced by the social structures and inequalities. It also implies that opportunity structures are reinforced by the existing social inequalities and they have a bearing on social mobility.

Thus, when we speak of social mobility, we invariably need to understand its linkage with social inequality, because both complement each other. It is pertinent to note that changes in any one get reflected in the other. P.M. Blau and O.D. Duncan (1967: 18) aptly described social mobility as the “process of social stratification”. Therefore, in order to understand the problems pertaining to social mobility we need to have a good knowledge about the prevailing inequalities and pattern of social mobility in a given society. Dahrendorf aptly stated that “Social mobility represents one of the most studied and, at the same time, least understood areas of sociological inquiry. Today, we know a great deal about social mobility in various countries, and yet we do not really know what we know. Not only do we not have any satisfactory answer to the question about the causes and consequences of social mobility…, but we cannot even be sure about the so-called facts of the case. The evidence we have is most conclusive with respect to mobility between generations, although even here generalisations rest on extrapolations as much as on interpretation” (1963: 57-58). In this regard, Hauser noted that, “a mobility regime consists of a set of rules or processes governing access to social positions which is articulated with the flow of persons through the life cycle and the social organization of production” (1978: 920).

What is important to note is that social mobility concept like the concepts of class, caste and other elements of stratification is equally controversial and ideologically loaded. It has been rightly observed by Richardson that, ‘social mobility has attracted more than its fair share of polemical and speculative writing while being short-changed when it comes to theory grounded in systematic empirical research. In other words, opinions are plentiful; facts about social mobility are relatively scarce and hard to come by’ (1977: 13). It must also be recognised that many of the social mobility studies neglected or ignored female social mobility based on the premise that ‘women derive their status from males and not from their individual efforts’ Siva Prasad, 1987: 240). However, it is important to note that the status of a family is related to the relative status that women enjoy in it (Siva Prasad, ibid.). In this regard, Richardson (1977: 15) aptly stated that the existing theories and measures of stratification are not adequate to appreciate female social mobility. In a way, the concept of social mobility is largely androcentric.

23.2 WHAT IS SOCIAL MOBILITY

Goldhamer defined social mobility as “the movement of individuals, families, and groups from one social position to another” (1968: 429). Social mobility is always a contest with claims and counter claims, as it happens within a given social stratification. In a sense, it is derived from many elements, such as a person’s social status and that of
their relatives and friends, the place they stay, as well as their education, career, social networks, and other facets that influence one’s social mobility chances. In a way, the above-mentioned factors influence social mobility of a group or an individual in varying degrees and affect different groups differently. The success of any individual or group in attaining upward mobility or its failure leading to downward mobility has its consequence on others or other groups. This can alter the relations amongst different groups.

It has been observed aptly by Coxon and Jones that, “The study of social mobility involves consideration of the strategies which individuals and groups use, and are in turn used by. It involves the sociologist finding the ways in which different perceptions of opportunity structures arise, and the life-styles implied by particular mobility patterns; it involves consideration of the relationship between institutional, demographic and local economic factors” (1975: 9). In one sense, social mobility is ‘the result of (a) opportunities offered by a system; (b) awareness of the existence of such opportunities; (c) capability of people in realizing them; and (d) competition, strategies and struggles for gaining control over the opportunities and resources by the individuals, families or groups to better their position’ (Siva Prasad, 1987: 14-15). There is always a tussle that the individuals or groups usually engage in in order to improve their statuses.

Sorokin defined social mobility as “any transition of an individual or social object or value—anything that has been created or modified by human activity—from one social position to another.” (1964: 133). In a given social structure, every individual or a group may rise up or lower his/her status according to one’s efforts. This change in social status is called social mobility, which may be upward or downward mobility. In a way, it is a movement from one social level to another. Social mobility is different from spatial mobility, while the former is an upward or downward movement of individuals or groups in the social space, the latter is migration of individuals or groups in physical space.

### 23.3 FACTORS PROMOTING SOCIAL MOBILITY

Because of the new developments, advancements, population explosion, constant emergence of new occupations or positions for undertaking various tasks of governance, tasks in industry, etc., and a drastic decline in the unskilled labour occupations. In developing, like India, and underdeveloped countries, many traditional occupational groups lost most of their occupations and had either to adapt or switch over to new occupations. This also has altered evaluation of traditional occupations. The need to fill the positions or jobs created due to emerging demands and opportunities that have generated opportunities for social mobility among different groups or individuals. This has opened up opportunities for the lower-class groups or individuals due to many reasons, including the opening up of channels of education, improved opportunities for ameliorating their economic status. The social mobility aspirations, according to Lipset and Zitterberg (1970) are due to motivational factors as well as structural factors. According to them, social mobility attempts to fill the void in the social statuses in a society where positions of statuses are in a constant state of flux. In a sense, these actually provide opportunities constantly for promoting social mobility, especially among the lower-classes who aspire to push themselves up in the social status ladder.
23.4 TYPES OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

Based on varying nature and characteristics, social mobility can be categorised into the following types: 1) Horizontal mobility, 2) Vertical mobility – Upward mobility and Downward mobility, and 3) Inter- and Intra-generational mobility. There are the other forms of social mobility – such as ritual, secular, contest and sponsored mobilities, etc., that can be placed under any of the above three. Social mobility is always conditioned by many factors like one’s class of birth, region of birth – rural, urban, small town, metropolis, etc., order of birth, family background, gender, ethnicity, etc.

23.4.1 Horizontal Social Mobility

Sorokin defined it as “the transition of an individual or social object from one social group to another situated on the same level… ‘shifting’ may take place without any noticeable change of the social position of an individual or social object in the vertical direction” (1964: 133). In a way, it is only a movement on the same plane of social status without any noticeable alteration. In fact, horizontal mobility does not bring in any significant changes in the status position of the individuals or groups.

23.4.2 Vertical Social Mobility

Following Sorokin, it is “the relations involved in a transition of an individual (or a social object) from one social stratum to another” (ibid.). This is categorised into upward or ascending and downward or descending social mobility. He also aptly terms it as social climbing or social sinking. He further elaborates that, “According to the nature of the stratification, there are ascending and descending currents of economic, political, and occupational mobility, not to mention other lesser important types. The ascending currents exist in two principal forms: as an infiltration of the individuals of a lower stratum into an existing higher one; and as a creation of a new by such individuals, and the insertion of such a group into a higher stratum instead of, or side by side with, the existing groups of this stratum. Correspondingly, the descending current has also two principal forms: the first consists in a dropping of individuals from a higher social position into an existing lower one, without a degradation or disintegration of the higher group to which they belonged; the second is manifested in a degradation of a social group as a whole, in an abasement of its rank among other groups, or in its disintegration as a social unit. The first case of ‘sinking’ reminds one of an individual falling from a ship; the second of the sinking of the ship itself with all on board, or of the ship as wreck breaking itself to pieces. … The cases of individual infiltration into an existing higher stratum or of individuals dropping from a higher social layer into a lower one are relatively common and comprehensible. They need no explanation. The second form of social ascending and descending, the rise and fall of group, must be considered more carefully” (ibid.: 133-134).

Most of the time social mobility, either upward or downward, happens over a length of time. Thus, social mobility is a process and whether upward or downward mobility is related to many other strategies and how they work out in their materialisation. It is also related to changing concepts of economy, property, education, status or hierarchy, social structural aspects, etc. As Siva Prasad observed that, ‘when we want to understand social mobility in the Indian context it has to be considered within the framework of India stratification and cultural systems, social context and Indian ideologies about social mobility’ (1987: 41-42).
As Coxon and Jones observed, “The driving force behind many mobility studies has been an interest in the degree to which modern stratification systems are ‘open’ in the sense of allowing a high incidence of social mobility” (ibid.: 10). Today, whether a system is ‘open’ or ‘closed’, there is an increased awareness that acquisition of education enhances the chances of social mobility for the individuals as well as groups. In fact, the notion that caste system is a ‘closed’ system when compared to class system, which is supposed to be ‘open’, is a misnomer. Both are equally ‘closed’ and ‘open’ when it comes to social mobility. Studies on social mobility in India have fairly established that hierarchical India did promote social mobility in the past as well as today. Srinivas’ concept of sanskritisation and westernisation explains social mobility, both upward and downward mobility that has taken place in the historical past and also during the British rule. In fact, as Srinivas (1962 and 1966) observed, the Caste based Census in 1931 actually opened opportunities for social mobility among many middle and lower caste classes. In his book *Social Change in Modern India* Srinivas (1966) points out how certain castes claim for higher status has actually lowered their status in the social hierarchy because of the contending groups that are either at the same level or at a higher level or lower level. Upward mobility usually a ritual mobility, contest mobility, sponsored mobility or even a secular mobility, as in the case of westernisation.

### 23.4.3 Inter- and Intra-Generational Mobility

When we attempt to analyse mobility across generations, we call that as Inter-generational Mobility, and when we try to understand the mobility that is taking place across the same generation, we categorise it as Intra-generational Mobility. Both Inter- and Intra-generation mobility are assessed based on the changes in mobility through the lens of education and occupation. Inter-generational mobility usually compares son’s occupation and educational level with that of father and the preceding generations. Here, the mobility of individuals is dependent on many factors that include once birth order, familial status, ascriptive or achieved background, available opportunity structures, etc. In fact, if inter-generational mobility observed is high among different lower-class groups, it indicates that the society is becoming more ‘open’ and offers equal chances to all the classes of people.

Inter-generational mobility studies will examine the social position of parent juxtaposed with that of the offspring. Here, the parent’s social position has a large part in shaping his or her offspring’s status. Both ‘intra-generational’ and ‘career mobility’ studies examine a person’s social status when compared at different points in time. To a large extent, both these ignore the influence of many other factors that influence the mobility of an individual. This is because of their narrow understanding of social mobility. Unlike ‘inter’ and ‘intra-generational’ mobility studies, group mobility studies focusing on the fluctuating social positions of particular groups when compared to others in a social hierarchy. The social mobility studies in India are mostly ‘group-mobility’ oriented.

It is important to note that social mobility of lower class / caste members leads to relative mobility of these members or groups and does not lead to any absolute mobility. Siva Prasad observed in his study on ‘Social Mobility in Bangalore City’ that ‘even if a person from a lower caste moves up in the occupational or educational ladder he may not enjoy an equivalent social status to that of an equally mobile upper caste person. For instance, a lower class Brahmin may be treated differentially by other castes but a Harijan or an artisan caste member of a similar class status may not get a similar treatment’ (1987: 58-59). This only implies that the system of social stratification...
or hierarchy have a significant bearing on the social mobility of individuals as well as groups. In one sense, social mobility becomes a mirage for the large majority of lower caste class members or groups.

### 23.5 FACTORS IMPACTING SOCIAL MOBILITY

Social mobility is a complex process. A number of factors have their impact on social mobility. These include economic background or class or ethnic background, social capital, cultural capital, political capital, early familial influences, changing employment and labour markets, health condition of the family members, place of residence, local or regional factors, etc., also impact the chances of social mobility of individuals as well as groups. Government policies and programmes have also a bearing on the mobility chances of individuals and groups. In case of India, the constitutional provisions as well as safeguard measures have played a greater role in opening up of opportunities for educational and occupational mobilities for the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and now recently added Economically Backward Classes (EBCs). These along with several other provisions had a large role in enhancing the chances of upward mobility for the members from these sections. In the current situation, the members belonging to these communities, barring EBCs, because of their sheer numbers are an important factor for political bargaining. These communities because of the advantage of their numbers are in a position to bargain for better share for their members in the arena of education, occupations and political power.

### 23.6 SUMMARY

This Unit tries to show how social mobility studies are important for understanding the social change and policy making. It also helps us to understand how different development and welfare programmes alter the opportunity structures for social mobility of the lower caste class individuals and groups. It also shows that how different groups adapt different strategies to improve their status in the stratification system. It also shows how social mobility studies help us to understand the direction of status changes in a comparative manner across nations or regions. Social mobility studies help us to understand the changes taking place in the social identities. It also helps us to better social stratification and the social mobility that is possible, or not, within a social hierarchy.

This Unit provides us the understanding of what social mobility is and what are the various aspects that one needs to look into for a proper understanding of the concept and its application. It enables us to understand the various factors that have a role in promoting social mobility, which is a complex process. An understanding of these factors helps us in better planning and policy formulation to ameliorate the conditions of lower caste classes. This also can be a tool for assessing the way planned changes have been impacting the mobility chances of the deprived sections of the society.

This Unit provides a clear understanding of different types of social mobility and the role that they play in understanding and analysing social mobility and its implication to a given social structure. By understanding different types of mobility, we will be able to comparatively analyse the direction of social change, both the desired and unanticipated. In this regard, it also delineates the factors that have a bearing on
social mobility. Thus, this Unit enables one to analyse different aspects that have an important role in reducing the inequalities of opportunities and access to resources of social mobility.

**References:**


**Suggested Readings:**


Sample Questions:

1) Why social mobility studies are important?

2) Discuss the relationship between social stratification and social mobility.

3) What is the difference between inter-generational and intra-generational mobility?

4) What are the factors that have a bearing on social mobility?

5) Deliberate the role of social policies, development and welfare programmes in the promotion of social mobility.