

SECTION A: Agricultural Extension (Fundamentals of Rural Sociology and Methodologies for transfer of Agricultural Technology) THEORY

MODULE 5: Social stratification – meaning – forms – class system and caste system

Objectives:

The main objectives of this module are to make the students understand:

- the meaning and different forms of Social Stratification.
- the meaning of Caste System and the different views given by various eminent social scientists.
- the characteristics of Caste System in India.

Summary:

In this lecture, we examined the phenomena of social stratification, its meaning and different forms. We also looked into how caste system, one of the most prevalent forms of social stratification, operates in the Indian society. Stratification is the arrangement of people in hierarchical layers in a society and it determines the social status or rank of the individual belonging to a particular layer. Social stratification assumes different forms in different societies on different criteria. These forms are slavery, estate, caste and class. Other forms of stratification can be divided. On the basis of age and gender. Stratification of people on the basis of class is most prevalent in the world. A social class is defined as a large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources that in turn influence their lifestyle. Classes are the consequences of economic factors. On the other hand, caste refers to distinctions based on lineage or race. Caste system is an important characteristic of Indian society. It determines the relationship between the various groups and individuals. Caste system in India is based upon birth while in other advanced countries it is based upon the colour or the skin and wealth etc. Caste system in India especially in villages was very rigid in the past. But it is becoming weaker due to the influence of multiple factors such as industrialization, urbanization, and increase means of transportation, democratic government and laws abolishing untouchability.

Introduction

In this lecture, we examined the phenomena of social stratification, its meaning and different forms. We also looked into how caste system, one of the most prevalent forms of social stratification, operates in the Indian society. Stratification is the arrangement of people in hierarchical layers in a society and it determines the social status or rank of the individual belonging to a particular layer. Social stratification assumes different forms in different societies on different criteria. These forms are slavery, estate, caste and class. Other forms of stratification can be divided on the basis of age and gender. Stratification of people on the basis of class is most prevalent in the world. A social class is defined as a large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources that in turn influence their lifestyle. Classes are the consequences of economic factors. On the other hand, caste refers to distinctions based on lineage or race. Caste system is an important characteristic of Indian society. It determines the relationship between the various groups and individuals. Caste system in India is based upon birth while in other advanced countries it is based upon the colour or the skin and wealth etc. Caste system in India especially in villages was very rigid in the past. But it is becoming weaker due to the influence of multiple factors such as industrialization, urbanization, and increase mean of transportation, democratic government and laws abolishing untouchability.

Inequality is an important aspect of human society. While in many cases inequality had its historical origin and is a culturally and religiously determined phenomenon, inequality can also be a result of economic conditions. Thus, in many countries attempts in the modern times have been to

remove inequalities through constitutional measures and through knowledge disseminated in education. This has been done so in order to bring about justice and equality. In this lesson, we shall look into the phenomena of social stratification, its meaning and different forms. Finally, we shall look into how caste system operates in the Indian society.

Meaning of Social Stratification

Stratification stands for the arrangement of people in a society into various layers on the basis of social status. The term stratification was originally derived from geology. In geological terms 'stratum' means layer and 'strata' means layers. The term stratification refers to the structure of earth in terms of its natural properties as revealed in its crests or layers. Social sciences have borrowed this term and applied it to the arrangement of people in society.

Groups in a society are arranged in a hierarchy depending upon its rank. All the people who occupy the same status within a society occupy a single stratum. Status and stratum are interlinked. Stratum is divided into units. Stratum implies equality, strata refers to inequality.

Stratification is a universal phenomenon, it occurs in every society. It rests on both social and psychological characteristics. Stratification is socially patterned or based on collective elements. It is governed by norms and sanctions. Social stratification has its own mechanisms of socialization. It is not static but dynamic. Stratification is a product of history. All strata in a society are articulated in a systematic way with their function.

George A. Lundberg states that social stratification is the division of population into two or more layers, each of which is relatively homogeneous and between which there are differences in privileges (opportunities), restrictions, rewards and obligations. John F. Cuber termed social stratification as a pattern of superimposed categories of differential privileges. The movement of individuals or groups from one stratum of society to another is known as social mobility. The existence of a system of social stratification also implies some form of legitimation of the ranking of people and the unequal distribution of valued goods, services, and prestige. Without belief systems justifying the inequality and unequal ranking, it is unlikely that a stratification system would remain stable over time.

The legacy of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber is profound on the theory of social stratification. More than anyone, it was Karl Marx who attempted a more or less comprehensive theory of social stratification. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Friedrich Engels stated, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles: free man and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman. In a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."

Although Marx referred to several different classes or class segments throughout history, he clearly saw the ownership of property as the basis of class divisions. In preindustrial agricultural societies, the primary division was between the landowners or landed aristocracy and those who owned no land, peasants and serfs. In capitalist industrial societies, the primary division was between the owners of industrial capital and the working class, or proletariat. It was this exclusively economic definition of class—that is, owners versus non-owners that allowed Marx to conclude that the elimination of private property in any future communist nation would eliminate extensive inequality and even social stratification itself.

In contrast to Marxian theory of social stratification, Emile Durkheim established a general perspective on social stratification. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, he discusses about two types of inequalities – external inequality and internal inequality. According to him, "External inequalities are those imposed on the individual by the social circumstances of birth (ascribed status)". External inequalities predominated in mechanical solidarity or preindustrial societies. In industrial society, on the other hand, there was a need for internal inequality, which was based on individual talent or achieved status. For the proper functioning of the industrial system, Durkheim implied that the people with the proper talents must be allowed to move into positions for which their talents are best suited. The dominance of internal over external inequality, he believed, was most important for the maintenance of social solidarity.

Max Weber disagreed with Marx's view of social stratification. Weber recognized that humans

have always been divided by not only economic ownership but also occupational skills, organizational power or class, status and power/party. One of the foremost contributions of Max Weber on social stratification is his more complex view of social stratification, which allows sociologists to explain the rapidly growing middle class, as more occupations emerged between the owners of capital and the unskilled working class.

Forms of Social Stratification

Social stratification assumes different forms in different societies on different criteria. These forms are slavery, estate, class and caste.

Slavery is the earliest form of social stratification. It is the legally recognized division of society into slaves and citizens. Citizens have the citizenship rights whereas the slaves do not have citizenship rights. It existed in most of the parts of Europe and other ancient nations between 500 BC to 600 BC. But there are evidences that in modern times, the practice is alive and well. According to Lisa Kristine, who has been documenting those caught up in slave trade, “There are more than 27 million people enslaved in the world today — that’s double the amount of people taken from Africa during the entire trans-Atlantic slave trade.” Modern forms of slavery includes slavery (including women and children) in brick kilns of India and Nepal, stone quarries in the Himalayas, where children are forced to carry stone slates which are heavier than the children carrying them, textile factory in India, enslaved children forced to fishing on the Lake Volta (largest man-made lake in the world) in Ghana, enslaved miners in gold mine shafts in Ghana, slaves in “cabin restaurants” forced into prostitution in Kathmandu, Nepal, etc. Slavery is not confined to the developing world. On the contrary, it is also a problem in the United States and form of slavery in such countries are child trafficking and woman trafficked for sex.

Estate is a later form of social stratification. Estates were owned by the feudal. They were established in the Europe in seventh century and they lasted into the sixteenth century. Estates include serf, lord and clergy. Serf is an agricultural labourer bound by the feudal system who was tied to working on his lord’s estate. On the other hand, clergy is the body of all people ordained for religious duties, especially in the Christian Church, who are exempted from paying taxes to the king.

Caste system and class system are the other two of the major types or forms of social stratification. Communities are socially stratified in various ways. Sex division is a major sociological difference, age groups and so on. Society is divided into layers, some of which occupy a higher position than others. These layers are generally accepted as social classes. So the principal type of social stratification is seen in the phenomenon of ‘class’.

Caste is the social stratification which exists only in India. It is a system of classification which states that a person born into a particular position in a society and that no action on his/her part raise or lower that position. When an individual born into a caste he remains to be a member of the same caste forever, it is an ascribed group. Each caste has a name and is endogamous, the membership is by birth. Castes are arranged in hierarchy and each caste has a fixed occupation.

Social Class

The term “class” means a number of individuals in the same society whose status is similar. Social status refers to positions of individual or group in relation to other. As a sociological concept, social status is the difference between higher and lower. According to Robert M. MacIver a social class is any portion of a community marked off from the rest of social status. A social class is defined as a large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources that in turn influence their lifestyle. Class stands apart from other systems of stratification.

The social class involves three features:

- a. Hierarchy of status (always graded order)
- b. Recognition of superiority and inferiority and
- c. Change and mobility is present

At the same time, when looked from the perspective of social stratification, four main distinctions can be drawn as far as social classes are concerned:

- (1) Classes are not dependent on legal or religious decrees and are thus (formally at least) more fluid.

(2) Class is in part achieved rather than ascribed. Some mobility between groupings can and does occur.

(3) Classes are dependent on economic differentials between groups, usually either ownership of or access to material resources.

(4) Class systems are more impersonal than other forms of stratification. Inequalities operate at a macro-level across occupational categories; other forms of stratification operate at the level of personal relationships, involving duties and privileges.

Social class had its origin in the feudal estates of Europe. Classes are the consequences of economic factors. According to Karl Marx the ownership of the means of production is the crucial factor that shapes the class system. Those who own the means of production like land and capital, form one class and those who do not, form another class. Marx believe that throughout human history only two classes have appeared (mentioned above).

Max Weber disagreed with the Karl Marx. According to him there are more than two classes. Weber recognized two forms of economic divisions under the term class-divisions based on ownership as well as divisions based on occupational skills (or one's relation to the marketplace). Weber then recognized that people could be divided over honour, status or prestige with respect to a strongly held value system (particularly one based on religion) and political or organizational power. It was this power/party dimension that Weber believed would be increasingly important in modern industrial societies, especially because of the necessity of political and corporate bureaucracies and organizations (such as labour unions), which challenge those in higher ranks in these bureaucracies. He said that class system emerges when economic status, social status and political status and political power converge into what he called "Status Crystallization".

In the latter half of the twentieth century, sociological studies of inequality shifted away from an almost exclusive focus on social class to explore other inequalities of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability. One influential attempt to connect different forms of inequality has been via the concept of intersectionality – the complex interweaving of diverse social inequalities which shapes individual lives and complicates the earlier, comparatively simple class analysis.

It is noted that class has to be operationalized in some way in order to be observed and measured. Occupation has of course been primary among these methods. The distinction is made between descriptive and relational class schemes, with Erik Olin Wright's 'class map' being an example of the latter. In the Goldthorpe classification, market situation and work situation (more recently 'employment relations') are crucial in evaluating the place of an occupation within the scheme. Areas that remain inaccessible to this form of measurement are economic inactivity and the ownership of property and wealth. While John H. Goldthorpe regards the super-rich as so few in number as to be of residual importance, John Westergaard highlights their disproportionate socio-structural weight acquired through sheer concentration of wealth.

Caste System

The term 'Caste' was derived from the Portuguese word 'casta' meaning lineage or race. Every society has its caste system, which is an integral part of its social system. It is more or less impossible to do away with the system. Caste system is an important characteristic of Indian society. It determines the relationship between the various groups and individuals. It is, therefore, necessary to have some knowledge about caste system in order to understand the structure and functioning of the Indian society. Caste system in India is based upon the birth while in other advanced countries it is based upon the colour or the skin and wealth etc.

Meaning of Caste System

According to Sir Herbert Risley, "A caste may be defined as a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional calling and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming single and homogeneous community".

The caste system is logically tied to the Hindu belief in reincarnation, the caste system representing a ladder down which one may slip in the next life if not virtuous in this. Estates have

existed from traditional states through to the end of feudalism. In Europe the three estates were the nobility, the clergy and then the commoners. The Third Estate, the common people, was an important element in the French Revolution. Unlike castes, estates are permeable through intermarriage or the granting or purchase of titles.

Characteristics of Caste System in India

1. Hereditary: Caste status of an individual is determined strictly by his heredity, i.e. the caste into which one is born. No amount of personal accomplishments or efforts can alter his caste status.
2. Endogamous: Its endogamous character strictly prohibits inter-caste marriages. Accordingly a person born in low caste can never hope to marry someone in higher caste. Each individual is supposed to marry within his caste and sub-caste.
3. Hierarchical: Caste system has a system of superiority and subordination. According to Hindu Caste hierarchy, Brahmin occupies the highest followed by Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.
4. Fixed Occupations: Members of any caste are obligated to adopt the professions of their caste. Having developed from Varna system the occupation in caste system is definite; son of blacksmith pursues the occupation of his father, son of carpenter becomes carpenter and so on. (With development of industries people belong to many castes have lost their occupation and have taken agriculture or some other occupation).
5. Restricted Food Habits: Higher castes try maintaining their traditional purity by different food habits. Thus Brahmins will only take 'Satwil' or 'Pure' food. Kshatriya and Vaishya will take 'Royal' food. A Shudra takes 'Tamsi' food. Each individual caste has its own laws which govern the food habits. There is no restriction against fruit, milk, butter, dry fruit etc. but food can be accepted only from the members of one's own or higher caste.
6. Untouchability: In Indian caste system, Shudra and out castes are considered to be untouchables. In certain times of day even seeing a Shudra is considered to be polluted. Even if shadow of a low caste falls on a Brahmin, the latter is said to have been polluted.
7. Absence of Vertical Mobility: In a caste system, there is no mobility movement of its members, up or down, the social status ladder. A person's status at birth is his life time status.
8. Reinforcement by Religious Beliefs: Religious beliefs have played a significant role in making caste system unavoidable. Religion has described Brahmin as sacred and also an element of reverence and awe is attached to him. In absence of religious support such rigid caste system was not possible.

Erosion of Caste System in India

Caste system in India especially in villages was very rigid in the past. Caste orientated people were orthodox. But the greater exponent of the rigid caste system was Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi who wanted to abolish caste. In India the caste system is becoming weaker due to the influence of the factors like industrialization, urbanization, and increase mean of transportation, democratic government and laws abolishing untouchability. The Republic of India 1950 provides for justice, liberty, equality and fraternity and caste, colour and creed has no special consideration. The sense of superiority or inferiority is now based on wealth and social power rather than on caste. Social welfare departments, backward class wings are trying to remove castism. There are reservations of admissions or posts in appointment for lower caste. This way the caste system is now vanishing.

Conclusion

Stratification is a universal phenomenon, it occurs in every society. It rests on both social and psychological characteristics. Stratification is socially patterned or based on collective elements. It is governed by norms and sanctions. Social stratification has its own mechanisms of socialization. It is not static but dynamic. Stratification is a product of history. All strata in a society are articulated in a systematic way with their function. In India we witness operation of social stratification in terms of class, caste and ethnicity. Caste system although operates in the larger part of India, in the case of the Northeastern states, this phenomena is absent. Rather, the people in this region of India are divided in terms of tribes and ethnicity. Caste system in India was very rigid in the traditional past. However, it has become weaker as a result of constitutional safeguards and creation of statutory bodies to prevent

discrimination based on caste. The Republic of India 1950 provides for justice, liberty, equality and fraternity and caste, colour and creed has no special consideration. However, the politics of vote bank has induced majority of the political parties in India to bank on caste politics.

FAQs:

Q. 1. Is caste-based discrimination equal to racism?

Ans.: Caste discrimination is recognised by the United Nations as a contemporary form of racial discrimination, although casteism cannot be said to be the same as racism.

Q. 2. Is the struggle against caste discrimination equal to an anti-Hinduism and anti-religion stance as such?

Ans.: The struggle against caste discrimination is a struggle for dignity and human rights. As such the struggle should not be equated with an anti-Hinduism and anti-religion.

Q. 3. What are affirmative action and special measures?

Ans.: The term affirmative action describes many policies intended to promote access to education or employment for historically and socio-politically disadvantaged and non-dominant groups. The motivation for affirmative action is to redress negative effects of past or current discrimination that has negatively affected the possibilities of discriminated groups to participate in society on an equal footing with other groups.

Likewise, special measures are necessary in social, development, health and education programmes to make sure that Dalits and other groups subjected to caste discrimination are not excluded due to the deeply rooted culture of discrimination.

Q. 4. What types of slavery exist today?

Ans.: Slavery exists today despite the fact that it is illegal in all the countries where it is practiced. It is also prohibited by the *1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1956 UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery*. Various types of slavery exist today, such as, bonded labour, child slavery, early and forced marriage, descent-based slavery and trafficking, etc.

Q. 5. What is untouchability?

Ans.: Untouchability is the practice of ostracizing a group by segregating them from the mainstream by social custom or legal mandate. It is a direct product of the caste system. It is not merely the inability to touch a human being of a certain caste or sub-caste. It is an attitude on the part of a whole group of people that relates to a deeper psychological process of thought and belief, invisible to the naked eye, translated into various physical acts and behaviours, norms and practices.

Q. 6. Who was the champion of the rights of the oppressed sections and communities in India during the drafting of the Indian Constitution?

Ans.: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

Glossary:

Endogamous: Pertaining to or characterized by the custom of marrying only within the limits of a clan or tribe.

Geology: Geology is the study of the earth, the materials of which it is made, the structure of those materials, and the processes acting upon them. It includes the study of organisms that have inhabited our planet. An important part of geology is the study of how earth's materials, structures, processes and organisms have changed over time.

Means of production: In economics and sociology, means of production refers to physical, non-human inputs used in production. "Means of production" includes capital assets used to produce wealth, such as machinery, tools and factories, including both infrastructural capital and natural capital. This includes the "factors of production" described in classical economics minus financial capital and minus human capital.

Phenomenon: Phenomenon is a fact or situation that is observed to exist or happen, especially one whose cause or explanation is in question

Sanctions: Social control is enforced by sanctions which are the rewards or punishments, meted out

to those who conform to, or disobey, these often unwritten social laws. Sanctions can range from informal controls to legal proscriptions.