
UNIT 2 APPROACHES TO SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

On having studied this unit you should be able to:

- discuss the functional approach;
- delineate Weber's theory of Stratification;
- outline the dialectical theory; and
- summarize the anthropological approach.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Social stratification implies relations of superiority and inferiority among individuals, families and groups. Such relations are governed by a set of norms and values upheld and enforced by the state and the society. Talcott Parsons calls 'patterning' or 'ordering' of social relations a stratification system of society. A number of variables would be involved in 'ordering' of social relations including value-system, power structure, ascription, achievement, conformity/deviance to norms etc. Parsons considers social stratification as ubiquitous and inevitable because it ensures smooth functioning of society by way of defining different positions and their allocation to members of a society based on certain principles of recruitment and reward. He writes: "social stratification is regarded here as the differential ranking of the human individuals who compose a given social system and their treatment as superior and inferior to one another in certain socially important respects".

Obviously the Parsonian view is 'systemic' as its main emphasis is on ordering or integration of different aspects of society. No society can remain in a situation of conflict perpetually, and no society can ever remain completely integrated. 'Dynamic equilibrium' is the essence of all human societies. Such a view is known as the 'functional' approach to the study of society. Contrary of this approach is the 'dialectical approach' in which emphasis is on the understanding for contradictions between the interests of the 'superior'

and the inferior' people whom Karl Marx designates as 'bourgeoisie' and proletariat'. The dialectical approach also claims itself as historically valid and universally relevant. A critique of the functional approach is seen in the anthropological approach too in which emphasis is laid on the criteria such as age, sex and kinship as 'biological' as rather than 'social' even in the context of 'pre-industrial' societies. We propose to discuss these approaches along with these variations and ramifications to the understanding of social stratification. Further, these approaches have been applied discretely to the understanding of caste, class and tribe in India.

2.2 THE FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

The word 'function' refers to manifest positive consequences of aspects like economy, policy, religion etc. for the maintenance of the social system. Hence, the functional approach explains social stratification as inevitable phenomenon. Functional differentiation is inevitable because an individual cannot fulfill all his needs by himself/herself. A person is not equipped for meeting all the requirements, hence persons with different abilities are required. Different functions are not required in equal measure. Therefore, different persons are rewarded differentially according to the value attached to the functions they perform. Such a differential pattern of reward gives rise to stratification and hierarchy.

2.2.1 Davis and Moore

The functional theory of social stratification formulated by Kingsley Davis and Willbert E. Moore conforms to the above characterization. The salient features of their theory are as follows:

- i) Inevitability of social stratification;
- ii) Need for differential talent and ability for different functions;
- iii) Differential evaluation of different social positions and duties;
- iv) Reward on the basis of differential value attached with different functions; and
- v) Values and rewards constituting the social differential and stratification.



There are differences in individual status and power

Courtesy : B. Kiranmayi

Thus, social stratification is a consequence of inevitability of differentiation of roles and duties. Further, different duties and roles carry differential power and prestige. And the differentiation of roles and duties is inevitable for the survival of human society. Hence, stratification becomes inevitable in social life.

Box 2.01

Logically, though functional theory seems to be a sound proposition, it has received a wide range of criticism. Joseph Schumpeter accords significance to the formation, nature and basic laws of classes based on the significance of the function performed by a class and on the degree to which the class performs the function. Evaluation is relative. Performance of an individual as a member of a class is a decisive factor. Thus, Schumpeter accords significance to historical conditions in the emergence of classes.

2.2.2 Tumin's Critique

However, a scathing attack on Davis-Moore approach comes from Melvin M. Tumin who challenges social stratification as inherent feature of social organization. He doubts the historical validity of the functional importance for the necessity of social stratification. The idea of positions with greater and lesser power and prestige as posited by Davis-Moore is a 'tautology and unsound procedure' in Tumin's understanding. Assignments and performances are the bases of rewards rather than positions. Distinction between the 'less functional' and 'more functional' as drawn by Davis-Moore is also misleading because an engineer alone cannot perform a task without equally important contributions of workers and other functionaries.

Activity 1

Discuss the functional theory with other students, at the study centre and pinpoint its strength and weaknesses. Write down your observations in your notebook.

Division of labour is a necessity, but not social differentiation as envisaged by Davis-Moore. The functional approach is also dubbed as a general and vague formulation because it does not spell out the range of inequality and the determinants of the rank in concrete societies. According to Ralph Dahrendorf stratification lies neither in human nature nor in a historically dubious conception of private property. It lies in 'authority structure' of a society which is necessary for sustaining norms and sanctions. 'Institutionalized power' based on norms and sanctions creates inequality and hierarchy.

2.3 MAX WEBER'S THEORY OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

More concrete formulation of social stratification is presented by Max Weber in his analysis of 'class, status and party'. Weber not only clearly distinguishes between economic structure, status system and political power, he also finds interconnections between these three in the form of the system of social stratification. 'Class' is an economic phenomenon, a product of the 'market situation' which implies competition among different classes such as buyers and sellers. 'Status' is recognition of 'honour'. People are distributed among different classes, so are status groups based on distribution of honour which is identified in terms of a range of symbols in a given society. Though analytically, classes and status groups are independent phenomena, they are significantly related to each other depending upon the nature and formation of a given society at a given point of time. The word 'party' implies a house of power, and power is the keynote of Weberian theory of stratification. Power may be for the sake of power or it may be economically determined power. And the economically determined power is not always identical with the social or the legal power. Economic power may be a consequence of power existing on other groups. Striving for power is not always for economic well-being. As we have mentioned it may be for the sake of power or for social honour. All power does not provide social honour, and power is not the only source of social honour. Sometimes even the propertied and the

2) Put down the core of Weber's position in social stratification. Use about five lines for your answer.

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2.4 THE DIALECTICAL APPROACH

Karl Marx is the foremost architect of the dialectical approach to the study of society and history. His theory is not restricted to economic understanding and analysis only, it is a wide structural theory of society. However, despite such a grand theorization Marx accords preeminence to class over status and power, which Weber largely does not accept. 'Base' is economic structure, and 'superstructure' includes polity, religion, culture etc. To clarify further, according to Marx stratification is determined by the system of relations of production, and 'status' is determined by a person's position in the very system in terms of ownership and non-ownership of the means of production. The owners are named as 'bourgeoisie' and the non-owners are called as 'proletariat' by Marx. These are in fact social categories rather than bare economic entities. Production is by 'social individuals', hence production relations imply a 'social context' rather than a mere economic situation. Extrapolating this understanding relations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are 'social', and the two could be seen in terms of 'domination' and 'subjection', or as effective superiority-inferiority relationships. The basic features of the dialectical approach are:

2.4.1 Basic Features

- i) Economic interests are the basis of all other types of relationship: social, cultural, political, etc.
- ii) There are two main classes: (a) owners of the means of production (bourgeoisie), and (b) wage-earners (proletariat). Marx refers to these classes also as Haves and Have-Nots.
- iii) The interests of these two classes clash with each other, as the bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat, hence a class struggle.
- iv) The bourgeoisie gets more than its due share, hence appropriate surplus, and this accelerates class struggle, which finally leads to revolution and radical transformation of the stratification system of society.

Classes to Marx are basic features of society; they are the product of the processes of the productive system which is in effect a system of power relations. To own means of production tantamount to domination and power and to render services, and to supply the human labour amounts to subordination and dependence. In this sense, class is a social reality, a real group of people with a developed consciousness of its existence, its position, goals and capabilities. Class is like a looking glass of society by which one can see its social fabric and internal dynamics.

2.4.2 Bourgeoisie and Proletariat

Karl Marx and F. Engels considered the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as polar opposites always involved in clash of interests. The two hostile camps also united against each other. Marx harped upon unity of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie to defend their interests

as a political organization. This was necessary as the ruling classes (bourgeoisie) suppressed autonomy of ideas, culture, religion and polity. Even the state became subservient to the hegemony of the owners of the means of production. Thus, class for Marx was a perspective, a method and concrete reality to understand structure and ramification of society and culture. In a nutshell, class is an all-inclusive concept and reality.

Box 2.02

The Marxist notion of dialectics imbibes two philosophies, namely, materialism and idealism. The two seem to be opposed to each other, but Marx brought them together in his understanding of history and society. The opposites are unified in Marx and Engels as they accord primacy to the 'material' over the 'ideal' (or mind). The conflict of the two being a reality turns into a historical process of constant progressive change. Hence, Marxist theory is both evolutionary and dialectical at the same time.

According to Marx and Engels the fundamental laws of dialectical materialism are: (i) the law of the transformation of quantity into quality; (ii) the law of the unity of opposites, which holds that the unity of concrete reality is a unity of opposites or contradictions; and (iii) the law of the negation of the negation (the scheme of thesis, antithesis and synthesis), which means that in the clash of opposite one opposite negates another and is in its turn negated by a higher level of historical development that preserves something of both negated terms.

2.4.3 Dialectical Approach: An Appraisal

Thus, Marx's theory of society is not materialistic and dialectical, hence also scientific. But there is also persisting shared reality in human life. Discontinuities along don't characterise history and human society. Hence Marx's eternal assertion becomes relevant: "the history of all hitherto existing society in the history of class struggles". But both Marx and Engels realised that class itself was a uniquely prominent feature of capitalist society, and hence bourgeoisie and proletariat constituted the entire social advice of modern capitalist era. However, the main question relates to social ranking or stratification in relation to these basic classes. Engels and also to certain extent Marx realised that there were intermediate and transitional strata. These would disregard the two-classes theory, and it would be quite consistent with the development of capitalism and modern state system.

Activity 2

Discuss the dialectical approach to stratification with other students at the study centre. Is this approach valid in the present day world? Comment on this in your notebook.

Today, the newly emancipated developing states have a vibrant structure of middle classes, operating a sort of control mechanism on both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The non-capitalist formation having peripheral capitalism signifying crystallization of class structure in terms of bourgeoisie and proletariat has yet to emerge as a social reality. The controllers of the status apparatus in country like India are not the capitalists but the mandarins of political parties, bobbies and intellectuals. A new dominant class/elite drawn from the these categories of people has come to power. Bureaucracy plays significant role in controlling the state. Income, education and access to cultural goods have become in some societies the main basis of status and power. Economic standing along in terms of dichotomy of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has yet to emerge as a social reality.

2.4.4 Dahrendorf's Critique

Ralf Dahrendorf, while agreeing with Marxian theory of society in general, questions the ubiquitous character of class-conflict. Conflict is context-specific; and 'coercion' is key to social ranking in the context of given institutions of authority. The two groups of people are: (i) which is coercive, and (ii) which is coerced. Such domination and subjugation are found in all the areas of social life – economic, political, industrial, social, cultural etc. And coincidence of one type of conflict into another has ceased to exist. 'conflict groups' rather than 'classes' characterize conditions of social structure. 'Authority' is a legitimate relation of domination and subjection. Authority relations are always relations of super-ordination and sub-ordination, hence stratification.

2.4.5 The Indian Scenario

No doubt Marxist notions of class and class-conflict have become hallmarks of the studies of India's agricultural and urban industrial formations. Marx himself, however, thought of specific character of India's economic and social formation. Caste and class existed side by side in India in the pre-capitalist era. Features such as feudalism, caste, joint family, subsistence economy etc. were peculiar to India even during the colonial period. Today, not the classes such as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but like the pre-capitalist, independent workers, employers, white-collar employee, and blue-collar workers are clearly identifiable groups of people, out of which about fifteen per cent are in the organised sectors of economy. The framework implying large-scale industrialisation and monopoly capitalism does not account for these myriad classes. Trade unions and collective bargaining of workers have softened the bold of the employers of the workers. Class harmony is also a reality to certain extent. Wage-earners are a nebulous category as it includes a wide range of workers earning from, say, 1000 rupees to 15000 per month. Finally, caste is not simply a ritualistic system of relations; it inheres elements of class and power. All these points restrict application of the Marxist approach to the study of social stratification in Indian society.

2.5 THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

Like concrete and analytic structures of membership units and generalised aspects of social process there are 'analytic' and 'concrete' concepts of stratification. Analytically, stratification is an abstract necessity of all societies, and concretely, it refers to empirical distributions of power and privilege, advantages and benefits in specific societies. As such stratification is a process as well as a state of affairs (arrangement of statuses and roleations). To understand a given system of social stratification process is more fundamental. The state of affairs (structure of statuses) is both a product and a condition of social process.

The anthropological approach thus highlights on the processual aspects of status in the pre-industrial societies. The functionalist perspective emphasizes mainly on the 'social' criteria of status-determination like income, occupation, education, authority and power, and leaves out the 'non-social' criteria such as age, sex and kinship. However, in the pre-industrial societies the so-called 'social' criteria are non-existent as they are more applicable to the modern societies, and the so called 'non-social' criteria are in fact socially relevant considerations of the process of social differentiation in the pre-industrial societies. M.G. Smith, the principal architect of this approach, analyses sex-roles and age-sets as determinants of status and position in the pre-capitalist social formations. Sex-roles and age-sets are not a state of affairs; the two continuously change in the life-time of a person and bring out corresponding change in status and role. From birth onwards till death sex-roles and age-sets change. Hence, both a state of affairs and process are basic to all societies including the least advanced ones. Age, sex and kinship have always been very significant criteria in perception and reality of social status. Age-based distinctions reflecting ramifications of social status, gendered social and hierarchical relations, and status distinctions based on kinship-based ties are found all over in all families and communities.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write down the basic feature of the dialectical approach. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 2) Outline the anthropological approach to social stratification. Use about five lines for your answer.

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2.6 LET US SUM UP

The functionalist and the dialectical perspectives have influenced to a large extent the studies of social stratification, particularly caste and class, and these two approaches have also resulted in certain field-work traditions in India. For example, the synchronic analyses have been rooted into the functionalist perspective giving primacy to equilibrium or harmony of social structures at different levels of stratification. On the other hand, social change, replacement/ alteration of social structure is the prime concern of the dialectical approach. Social stratification is viewed according to this perspective moving from closed to open or from harmonic to disharmonic system of social relations. 'Integration' is inevitably existent in 'conflict' and vice-versa. 'Harmony' or 'unity' sustains the system, and the process/ change rekindles the static arrangements of social relations. Social stratification is multidimensional and a 'composite' phenomenon. Structural changes attack established hierarchies and bring about both downward and upward mobility. Differentiated evaluation at the group, family, and individual levels occurs due to basic structural transformation of society. But at no point of time a complete overthrow of the system takes place. This is why caste is found as an adaptive and resilient system. Family centred cooperation among members of three or more generations persists because of the resistance to the onslaught of some externally imposed forces of change. Community as an axis of primary relations is considered as a desirable mechanism of harmonious living. Thus, the functionalist, the dialectical, and the anthropological perspectives need to be applied discretely and not one as an alternative of the other. Their context-specific application can be quite fruitful and enriching for a better understanding and analysis of a given society.

2.7 KEY WORDS

- Anthropological :** The approach which highlights the processual aspects of status in pre industrial societies.
- Dialectical :** The approach which takes into account the antagonistic relationship between have's and have not's.
- Functional :** The approach which refers to manifest positive consequences of aspects like economy, polity, religion etc.
- Proletariat :** This refers to that section of society which does not own the means of products but works as wage labourers.

2.8 FURTHER READINGS

Smith, M.G., 1964, 'Pre-industrial Stratification Systems', S.M. Lipset and N.J. Smelser (ed.) *Social Structure and Mobility in Economic Development*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 141-76.

Weber, Max, 1947, 'Class, Status, Party, in H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills (ed.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 180-94.

2.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Tumin challenges that Social Stratification is an inherent feature of social organization. He finds that the functional theory uses circular reasoning (tautology). According to him assignments and performances have more to do with rewards than positions. According to Tumin division of labour is necessary but not social differentiation as envisaged by Davis and Moore.
- 2) Stratification according to Weber involves the 'inter relationships between economic structure, status system, and political power'. In Weber's theory class is an economic phenomenon, status is a recognition of honour and power is also economically determined. Economically determined power is not always identical with social or legal power. The inter relationship of these factors leads to different styles of life. This may not be necessarily influenced by economic and political standing in Society.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The dialectical approach comprises of :
 - i) economic interests are regarded as the basis of all other types of relationships
 - ii) there are two main classes (a) the owners of the means of production and (b) the workers
 - iii) the interests of owners and workers are clashing
 - iv) the bourgeoisie create a surplus and get more than their due share.
- 2) The anthropological approach stresses processual aspects in pre-industrial society. M.G. Smith analyses sex roles and age-sets as determinants of status and position. Further sex roles and age-sets are dynamic and keep changing during the life time of a person. Thus both a state of affairs and process are basic to any society.