

Unit 25

Concepts of Difference and Inequality

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit you will be able to

- distinguish between natural and social inequality
- explain the causes and consequences of social inequality
- discuss the major theoretical approaches towards the understanding of social inequality

25.1 Introduction

The concept of inequality lies at the root of some of the major theoretical formulations in society. It constitutes the basic component of the phenomenon of stratification in society which some of the senior and established sociologists as also younger scholars have studied extensively and on which they have written articles, monographs, and textbooks. In a general sense, inequality refers to imbalance in quantity, size, degree, value, or status. This often implies an imbalance in ability or resources to meet a challenge. Inequality in societies in general is manifest in caste, class, gender, and power relations. In simple societies based on kinship, stratification is evident in status distinctions determined by age, sex, and personal characteristics as among Australian aboriginal communities (see Sahlins, 1969).

In this unit, we will explore the twin concepts of difference and inequality intensively. The major concern here is with finding out how and in what conditions differences between people get transformed into inequalities. Having determined the point of departure between difference and inequality, we will explore the two broad types of inequality, i.e., natural inequality, and social inequality. We will subsequently discuss the major theoretical approaches towards the understanding of social inequality.

25.2 Difference and Inequality: Conceptual Understanding

People in a society are divided into different categories based on one or a set of criteria. Social stratification refers to the division of people into different categories. These categories may simply reflect differences between people grouped into them. The implicit assumption here is that the difference

between categories is important, however, no weightage is given to the difference between them, i.e., the categories are not assigned unequal statuses or unequal rewards. The different categories of people are treated alike and one is not treated as more significant than the other. This is the concept of difference in social categories. When unequal statuses and rewards are attached to social categories and these are ranked on the basis of one or more defining factors, they are treated as unequal. According to Gupta (2004), differences assume importance when ranking diversities becomes difficult. Social stratification incorporates concepts of both difference and inequality.

Box 25.1: Social Stratification: Difference and Inequality

“If instead of power or wealth one takes into account forms of stratification based on difference then the geological model cannot be easily invoked. For example, linguistic differences cannot be placed in a hierarchical order. Looked at closely, neither should differences between men and women be understood in terms of inequality. Sadly, however, such differences are never always allowed to retain their horizontal status. They usually tend to get hierarchised in popular consciousness. This is where prejudice takes over. Men are deemed to be superior to women, certain linguistic groups are held to be less civilised and cultivated than others, and religious bigotry prevails, all because most of us are not conditioned to tolerate difference qua difference.

The conceptual need to separate these two orders arises because in the sociology of social stratification attention is directed to the manner in which hierarchy and difference relate to each other. If hierarchy and difference could hold on to their respective terrains then there would be no real need to study stratification as a special area of interest. If it is hierarchy alone that is of interest, then ‘social inequality’ would be a good enough rubric within which to organise our study. If, on the other hand, it is only difference that is of concern then the tried and tested term ‘social differentiation’ should do adequately. The term ‘social stratification’, however, is not a synonym of either social inequality or of social differentiation” (Gupta, 2004:120-121).

Béteille (1969) suggests that two aspects of social inequality deserve mention. The first is the distributive aspect which refers to the different factors (e.g. income, wealth, occupation, education, power, skill) that are distributed in the population. It provides the basis of inter-personal interactions in society. The second is the relational aspect which refers to the ways in which the individuals differentiated by the different factors relate to each other within a system of groups and categories. Here the thrust is on interaction of people belonging to one group or category. He explains that the major forms of social inequality that have been studied by sociologists intensively are those that arise out of disparities of wealth and income; those that have a bearing on unequal prestige or honour; and those that are born out of imbalance in the distribution of power.

Unequal distribution of wealth and honour in society affords the following widespread consequences,

- 1) “Differences in wealth will produce fairly distinct strata of people who will be separated from each other by those differences and who may come over time to form quite distinct social units.

- 2) Such segmentation of the society lessens the possibility of social solidarity and, in turn, of societywide consensus on the most important issues, such as the uses of public funds.
- 3) The unequal earnings of people in different positions may produce unequal commitment to the society's norms and laws and result in higher rates of deviant behaviour, such as crime, than might otherwise occur.
- 4) Strata that are separated by unequal wealth and the unequal ability to purchase basic life chances, such as education and health, are likely to engage in hostile or conflictual encounters as they struggle for shares of wealth.
- 5) Very low income and honour may produce high rates of pathologies, such as mental disorder, physical illness, shortened life, crime, and high rates of accidents.
- 6) The chances to achieve full equality of opportunity for all and, with that, a high degree of fairness in the system will be lessened as wealthier people use their wealth to give their children special advantages over the children of poorer families.
- 7) Through such transmission of unequal advantage over generations, the social divisions among people may become hardened.
- 8) The discovery of the full range of talent in society is likely to be less effective when mobility is restricted by the transmission of advantages from parent to child.
- 9) Low income may make it difficult to induce the less well rewarded people to give their conscientious best to the tasks for which they are suited" (Tumin, 1985: 158-159).

Welfare states intervene in order to supplement small incomes when they are not enough to meet basic needs.

We often encounter inequality in our daily lives in terms of differentiation and comparison of people based on wealth, power, and gender. At the international level too, countries are compared and ranked on the basis of economic and political power. Countries of the world are divided into three categories, (i) the First World comprising of U.S. and its allies in the cold war, these were the developed, capitalist nations, (ii) the Second World comprising the U.S.S.R. and to its allies, these were the developed communist nations; and (iii) the Third World comprising most of Latin America and recently independent African and Asian states, these were the underdeveloped countries that did not align with the west or the east in the cold war — many of them were members of the Non-Aligned Movement. There is no denying that this terminology is being increasingly replaced with developed and developing nations to refer to First World nations and Third World nations respectively. Developed nations are those in which economy is based on industrialisation and people's standard of life is high as also their literacy rate and life expectancy. Developing nations, on the other hand are those in which the process of industrialisation set in late and the people's standard of life, literacy rate and life expectancy is low. These nations struggle to acquire the standard of life in developed nations. The human development index (based on indicators such as life expectancy at birth, literacy rates, and gross development product) measures the degree of development in a country and in doing so forms the basis of ranking them.

Economic inequality among world nations may be understood through dependency theory developed in the late 1950s under the guidance of Prebisch – the then Director of the United Nations Commission for Latin America. Prebisch and his colleagues were deeply concerned about the fact that economic development in industrialised countries did not lead to a similar trend in the poorer countries, rather, it often resulted in economic problems in the latter. Dependency theory was developed in order to explain the persistent poverty of poorer countries by examining patterns of interaction among nations and by suggesting that inequality between them was an intrinsic part of those interactions (see Ferraro, 1996).

More clearly stated, dependency theory explains that countries in the world fall into two categories: wealthy nations that are the core countries and poorer nations that are the peripheral countries. The core countries obtain the resources and raw material from peripheral countries. Here, they are processed and finally returned to the peripheral nations as manufactured goods. While the poor nations provide the natural resources, cheap labour and confirmed destination of finished products that are priced exorbitantly, the wealthy nations maintain their superiority over them. Surely, without the input from peripheral nations, the core nations will not be able to maintain their position. Since it is in their interest, the core nations perpetuate the situation of inequality through different economic and human resource development policies. Resistance by peripheral countries is met with imposition of economic sanctions, stringent policies of international trade and commerce, sometimes military invasion.

25.3 Natural and Social Inequality

Interest in the subject of the origin and foundation of inequality in society may be traced to the times of Rousseau. He explained that equality prevailed so long as people remained content with their way of life – one in which they wore clothes of animal hides, adorned their bodies with feathers and shells and confined themselves to the activities that each person could perform individually. From the time one person began to stand in need of help of another, when one person began to collect provisions, work became inevitable and equality in relationships disappeared. Rousseau (1754) identified two kinds of inequality among people, (i) natural or physical inequality referring to difference of age, health, bodily strength, and mental abilities; and (ii) moral or political inequality referring to differences in privileges that are established or authorized by the consent of people themselves e.g. power, honour.

Tocqueville (1956) accepted that inequality imposed by nature on people was difficult to get rid of and that equality remained a cherished ideal. He distinguished between aristocratic society (which was characterised by rigid hierarchy of estates or castes) and democratic society (which was characterised by mobility of individuals across classes). Society in Europe prior to the nineteenth century was aristocratic; society in America in the first half of the nineteenth century was democratic in character. Tocqueville's contrast between aristocratic and democratic societies stretched beyond their political organisation to incorporate social distinctions, religious experiences, and aesthetic sensibilities. Despite the fact that Tocqueville belonged to aristocratic society, he was impressed with egalitarianism or the principle of equality pervading different dimensions of life. He firmly believed that some day, Europe and the rest of the world would be under the cover

of equality. He agreed that western civilisation did, in principle, recognise equality even though its own institutions were hierarchical.

Later, Béteille developed Tocqueville's idea that all systems are mixed and that in real situations pure hierarchy or equality does not exist. What exists, however is, "moving equilibrium between incompatible and ever-varying forces" (Macfarlane, 1999: 288). Béteille proposed a distinction between harmonic system (in which society is divided into groups that are hierarchically placed and the ordering is considered as appropriate) and disharmonic systems (in which there is no consistency between the order in which groups are arranged and the natural scheme of things i.e., there is a discrepancy between the existential and normative orders). He explained the disharmonic system in terms of one which upholds equality as an ideal but practices inequality. In Béteille's own words (1977:1), "The great paradox of the modern world is that everywhere men attach themselves to the principle of equality and everywhere, in their own lives as well as in the lives of others, they encounter the presence of inequality. The more strongly they attach themselves to the principles or the ideology of equality the more oppressive the reality becomes". We often encounter natural inequality in terms of differences in capacities in potential, abilities bestowed on individuals by nature that make for unequal endowment of opportunities available to them. Béteille (1983: 8) writes, "To an anthropologist for whom the variety of cultures has a central place in the human scheme of things, it would appear that the idea of natural inequality is inherently ambiguous, if not a contradiction in terms. Nature presents us only with differences or potential differences. With human beings these differences do not become inequalities unless and until they are selected, marked out and evaluated by processes that are cultural and not natural. In other words differences become inequalities only with the application of scales; and the scales with which we are concerned in talking about inequalities in a social context are not given to us by nature, but culturally constructed by particular human beings under particular historical conditions".

Consider the example of the two children – one who is blind by birth and the other who has normal vision. The two children are endowed with unequal abilities that make them perform the same task with unequal precision. So long as we do not evaluate the performance of the two children and judge their abilities, there is no perception of inequality – natural or social. The two children are said to be differently endowed by nature. Natural inequality between them is perceived when we assess their performance. We then refer to natural inequality to mean inequality meted out by nature itself. Natural inequality becomes the basis of providing opportunities and resources, providing privileges and discriminations that form the groundwork of social inequality. One example of social inequality is enfolded in division of labour which is accompanied with inequality in status and power. Simplistically viewed, division of labour corresponds with social differentiation. Some positions are held in esteem while are associated with subjugation.

Reflection and Action 25.1

Distinguish between natural inequality and social inequality.

25.4 Major Theoretical Perspectives

There are at least three theoretical perspectives on social stratification. The first is the functionalist perspective which seeks to explain social stratification

in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of social order and stability in society. Like other functionalists, Parsons believed that order and stability in society are based on values held in common by people in society. Those individuals who conduct themselves in accordance with these values are ranked above others. Thus, a successful business executive would be ranked above others in a society which values individual achievement while individuals who fight battles and wars would be ranked above others in a society which values bravery and gallantry. Functionalists uphold that relationship between social groups in society is one of cooperation and inter-dependence. Parsons explains that in a highly specialised industrial society, some people specialise in organisation and planning while others follow their directives. Certain positions are functionally more important in society than others. These are often ranked higher in the social hierarchy and fetch greater rewards than others. This inevitability leads to inequality in distribution of power and prestige.

The second is the Marxist perspective which differs from the functionalist perspective in focusing on divisive rather than integrative aspect of social stratification. Marxists regard social stratification as a means through which the group in the upper rungs exploits those in the lower rungs. Here the system of stratification is based on the relationship of social groups to the forces of production. More clearly stated, Marxists identify two major strata in society: one that controls the forces of production hence rules over others, second that works for the ruling class. From Marxian standpoint, economic power governs political power. The ruling class derives its power from ownership and control over forces of production. The relations of production prevail over major institutions, values and belief systems. Evidently the political and legal system pursue the interests of the ruling class. The ruling class oppresses the serving class. Thus, stratification in society serves to foster exploitation and hostility between the two major strata.

The critical terms in the Marxian framework of social stratification are, (i) class consciousness by which is meant the awareness, the recognition by the people belonging to a class (e.g., workers) of their place in the production process and of their relation with the owning class. Class consciousness also subsumes the awareness of the extent of exploitation by the owning class in terms of their deprivation of and appropriate share in the 'surplus value' of goods produced by them. Over time, workers realise that the way to relieve themselves of the exploitation and oppression is overthrowing the capitalist owners through unified, collective revolution; (ii) class solidarity by which is meant the extent to which the workers join together in order to achieve their economic and political objectives; and (iii) class conflict by which is meant struggle when class consciousness has not matured or it may be conscious struggle in the form of collective assertions and representations of workers intended to improve their lot.

The third is the Weberian perspective according to which social stratification is based on class situation which corresponds with market situation. Those who share common class situation also share similar life chances. They constitute one strata. Weber identified four groups in a capitalist society: the propertied upper-class, the property-less, white collar workers; the petty bourgeoisie; and the manual working class. Weber did agree with Marx on the significance of the economic dimension of stratification. He, however, added the aspects of power and prestige to the understanding of social

stratification. Weber was convinced that differences in status led to differences in lifestyles.

Tumin (1985:13) explains this more clearly, "As distinguished from the consequences of property differences for life chances, status differences, according to Weber, lead to differences in *life styles* which form an important element in the social exclusiveness of various status groups. Status groups acquire honour primarily by usurpation. They claim certain rewards and act out their claims in terms of certain manners and styles of behavior and certain socially exclusive activities. And while status groups do not usually rest on any legal basis in modern societies, corresponding legal privileges are not long in developing once the status groups stabilize their positions by securing economic power". In short, much like Marx, Weber agreed that property differences are important in forming of status groups. Property differences also define the lines of distinction and privileges among them. Unlike Marx, Weber assigned greater importance to status groups than to the development of community feeling and motivation for undertaking concerted action by members of an economic class against the system. Weber also laid stress on party which often represents interests determined through 'class situation and status situation'. According to Weber, the economic aspect is crucial in classes, honour is crucial in status groups, and power is crucial in parties.

Weber's perspective on social stratification derives from three components: class, status, and power. Betellie (1969: 370) writes, "In Weber's scheme, class and power appear to be generalised categories: the former arises from unequal life chances in a market situation and the latter from the nature of domination which is present in one form or another in all the societies. Status, on the other hand, seems to be a kind of residual category". Weber clarified that social honour (in capitalist societies of the west too) is not solely determined by possession of wealth or power. He said that social honour is linked with values, not material interests. Evidently, the determinants of status honour are not only economic power and political power but also style of life which includes material components and non-material components (e.g. literacy and /or artistic sensibilities). In case of material component, it is easy to superimpose economic advantages on advantages of status i.e., those who are able to strengthen their economic condition are also to acquire status in industrialized societies (given to mass production of consumer goods, and common media of communication). The spread of uniformised education greatly reduces distinction between non-material component of people's style of life. Béteille (1969) explains that economic advantages are not easily translated into status advantages because of several reasons. In order to acquire an exclusive style of life, an individual has to be a part of a particular social milieu. Often, he/she has to encounter resistance from those who are a part of that social circle. This resistance suggests the importance attached to inequality.

Reflection and Action 25.2

Discuss the major theoretical perspectives on social stratification.

25.5 The Debate

Kinsley Davis and Wilbert Moore discussed the issues of functional necessity of stratification, determinants of positional rank, societal functions and stratification, and variation in stratified system at length. They explained

that unequal distribution rights and perquisites making for social inequality provides the motivation to people to perform duties associated with a given position and to achieve position that affords more prestige and esteem. Social inequality, therefore ensures that "the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons. Hence every society, no matter how simple or complex, must differentiate persons in terms of both prestige or esteem, and must therefore possess a certain amount of institutionalised inequality" (Davis and Moore, 1967: 48). The positions that carry the best reward and highest rank are those that are excessively important for society, and require greatest training or talent. They clarify that in effect, a society needs to accord sufficient reward to position of high rank only to ensure that they are filled competently. It may also be understood that a position important in one society may not be equally important in another one.

Tumin (1953, rpt.1967: 53) summarises the central argument advanced by Davis and Moore in sequential propositions stated in the following words:

- 1) "Certain positions in any society are functionally more important than others, and require special skills for their performance.
- 2) Only a certain number of individuals in any society have the talents which can be trained into the skills appropriate to these positions.
- 3) The conversion of talents into skills involves a training period during which sacrifices of one kind or another are made by those undergoing the training.
- 4) In order to induce the talented persons to undergo these sacrifices and acquire the training, their future positions must carry an inducement value in the form of differential, i.e., privileged and disproportionate access to the scarce and desired rewards which the society has to offer.
- 5) These scarce and desired goods consist of the rights and perquisites attached to, or built into, the positions, and can be classified into those things which contribute to a) sustenance and comfort, b) humor or diversion, c) self-respect and expansion.
- 6) This differential access to the basic rewards of the society has a consequence the differentiation of the prestige and esteem which the various strata acquire.
- 7) Therefore, social inequality among different strata in the amounts of scarce and desired goods, and the amounts of prestige and esteem which they receive, is both positively functional or inevitable in any society".

Tumin argues that at the outset it is not proper to treat certain positions as functionally more important than others, e.g. it is not appropriate to judge that the engineers in a factory are functionally more important because of special skills than unskilled workmen. Surely, some labour force of unskilled workmen is as important and indispensable to the functioning of the factory as some labour force of engineers. Furthermore, relative indispensability and replaceability of a set of skills among a people largely depends upon the bargaining power of those who possess it. This power depends on the prevalent system of rating. Motivation is determined by several factors out of which rewards and other inducements are only some. There is also a likelihood that a system of norms concerning withdrawal of services "except under most extreme circumstances would be considered as absolute moral anathema". In such a situation, the notion of the relative functionality proposed by Davis and Moore would have to be substantially revised.

The second proposition regarding range of talent and the presence of limited number of individuals with talents is contested by Tumin on the ground that in any society there is no adequate knowledge to determine and judge the amount of talent present in society. He explains that societies that are rigidly stratified are less likely to be able to discover new facts about the talents of its members. "Smoothly working and stable systems of stratification tend to build- in obstacles to the further exploration of the range of available talent. This is especially true in those societies where the opportunity to discover talent in any one generation varied with the differential resources of the parent generation" (Tumin, 1953, rpt.1967: 54-55). If the differential rewards and opportunities are socially inherited by the subsequent generation, then the discovery of talents in the next generation becomes particularly difficult. More importantly, motivation depends on distribution of rewards in the previous generation. This means that unequal distinction motivation in a generation is because of unequal distribution of rewards in the preceding generation. Access to privileged position is restricted by the elites in society.

In the third proposition, Davis and Moore introduce the concept of sacrifice which Tumin (ibid) states is "the least critically thought-out concept in the repertoire, and can also be shown to be least supported by actual facts". He challenges the prevalence of sacrifice by talented people undergoing training since it involves losses that arise out of surrender of earning power and cost of the training. One of the basic issues here is the presumption that the training period in a system is essentially sacrificed. This is not always true because the costs involved in training people may be borne by the society at large. If this happens, the need to compensate someone in terms of differential rewards when the skilled positions are staffed become redundant as much as the need is stratify social position on these grounds.

Tumin argues that even if the training programme is sacrificed and the talent in society is rare, the fourth proposition of Davis and Moore suggesting differential access to desired rewards does not hold. The allocation of differential rewards is scarce and desired goods and services as the only or the most efficient was of inviting appropriate talent for to there position is itself questionable. The joy in work, work satisfaction, institutionalised social duty or social service also provide motivation for the most functionally important positions. This aspect has been overlooked by Davis and Moore.

In the fifth and sixth proposition, Davis and Moore classify rewards into three categories, those that contribute to sustenance and comfort, those that contribute to humor and diversion, and those that contribute to self-respect and ego-expansion. He draws correspondence between differentiation of prestige and esteem which various strata acquire and stratification as institutionalised social inequality. Tumin questions the allocation of equal amounts of the three kinds of reward for effective functioning of the stratification system could one type of reward not be emphasised to an extent that the others were neglected. He says that it is not possible to determine whether one type of reward or all three of them induced motivation. Societies emphasise different kinds of rewards in order to maintain balance between responsibility and record. Again, the differentiation in prestige between conformist or the deviation does not equate with distinction "between strata of individuals each of which operates within the normative order, and is composed of adults".

The seventh proposition of Davis and Moore focuses on social inequality among different strata in term of scarce and desired goods as also the amount of prestige and esteem they incur. These are positively functional and inevitable in society. Tumin (1953, rpt. 1967: 57) writes, "If such differential power and property are viewed by all as commensurate with the differential responsibilities, and if they are culturally defined as resources and not as rewards, then, no differentials in prestige and esteem need to follow".

Box 25.2: Dysfunctions of Stratification

Tumin (1967:58) proposed the following provisional assertions:

- 1) "Social stratification systems function to limit the possibility of discovery of the full range of talent available in a society. This results from the fact of unequal access to appropriate motivation, channels of recruitment and centers of training.
- 2) In foreshortening the range of available talent, social stratification systems function to set limits upon the possibility of expanding the productive resources of the society, at least relative to what might be the case under conditions of greater equality of opportunity.
- 3) Social stratification systems function to provide the elite with the political power necessary to procure acceptance and dominance of an ideology which rationalizes the status quo, whatever it may be as "logical", "natural", and "morally right". In this manner social stratification systems function as essentially conservative influences in the societies in which they are found.
- 4) Social stratification systems function to distribute favorable self-images unequally throughout a population. To the extent that such favorable self-images are requisite to the development of the creative potential inherent in men, to that extent stratification systems function to limit the development of this creative potential.
- 5) To the extent that inequalities in social reward cannot be made fully acceptable to the less privileged in a society, social stratification systems function to encourage hostility, suspicion and distrust among the various segments of a society and thus to limit the possibilities of extensive social integration.
- 6) To the extent that loyalty to a society depends on a sense of significant membership in the society depends on one's place on the prestige ladder of the society, social stratification systems function to distribute unequally the sense of significant membership in the population.
- 7) To the extent that participation and apathy depend upon the sense of significant membership in the society, social stratification systems function to distribute loyalty unequally in the population.
- 8) To the extent that participation and apathy depend upon the sense of significant membership in the society, social stratification functions to distribute the motivation to participate unequally in a population".

Davis, in turn, asserts that Tumin seeks to demolish the concept of institutionalised inequality. He offers no explanation of the universality of stratified inequality. While the interest of Davis and Moore lay in understanding why stratification exists in society, Tumin argues that stratification does not have to be. Evidently, they are addressing different issues. Further, Davis alleges that Tumin's critique suffers from confusion about abstract or theoretical reasoning with raw, empirical generalisations.

He defends his own position by stating that the chief concern was with stratified inequality as a general property of social systems involving high degree of abstraction. Again, Tumin's critical appraisal of the theory proposed by Davis and Moore is based on only one article conveniently ignoring other publications that answer several questions raised by him. His own understanding and presentation of Davis and Moore theory is inadequate. This, in fact, is why Tumin's concept of stratification is inconsistent. Moore too explicitly states that Tumin has not defined social stratification clearly. This led him to wrongly assume that differential rewards and inequality of opportunity were the same thing.

Tumin (1953, rpt 1967: 63) guards his position on several counts summarized in the following words, "Of course, all institutional arrangements of any complexity are bound to be mixed in their instrumentality. It is the recognition of this mixture, and the emphasised sensitivity to the undesired aspects, which impels men to engage in purposeful social reform. In turn, social scientists have been traditionally concerned with the range of possible social arrangements and their consequences for human society. One is impelled to explore that range after probing deeply into whether a given arrangement is unavoidable and discovering that it is not. One is even more impelled to such exploration when it is discovered that the avoidable arrangement is probably less efficient than other possible means to the stated end. It was toward such further probing that I directed my original remarks".

25.6 The Rise of Meritocracy

Michael Young projects a future British society in which all the members were provided equal opportunity to realise their talent and that would determine social roles i.e. the most able people would occupy the most important position in society; social status would be commensurate with merit. This arrangement of role allocation came to be referred to as meritocracy. Young (1961) emphasises that meritocracy was completely dysfunctional in society. Those who occupied upper position by virtue of their merit would treat those occupying the lower positions with contempt, and as inferior to them. This would happen because the people in important position would be absolutely convinced of their superiority, there would be no trace of self-doubt hence no restraint on their arrogance. Haralambos (1980: 37) explains Young's argument the following words, "Members of the upper strata in a meritocracy deserve their positions; their privileges are based on merit. In the past they had a degree of self-doubt because many realised that they owed their position to factors other than merit. Since they could recognise intelligence, wit and wisdom in members of the lower strata, they appreciated that their social inferiors were at least their equals in certain respects". As a result they would treat the lower orders with some respect. Meritocracy confirms that those in the lower rungs are inferior. They are hence treated with despise and arrogance. Those in the lower strata may resent it and take offence leading to conflict and tension between the ruling minority and the rest of the society. In corollary, those in the lower strata would be greatly demoralised because they would not be able to assign lack of opportunity to be successful as the cause of their situation, neither would they be able explain the success of others in terms of advantages of birth, influence, wealth and power. This would lead to loss of self esteem and of inner vitality.

25.7 Conclusion

In this unit, we have explored the concepts of difference and inequality in the larger framework of societies and social relationships. We identified the determinants of inequality and distinguished between natural and social inequality. Sahlins (1969) identifies three functional criteria of stratification: economic (referring to the extent of control over production, distribution, and consumption and the privileges associated with them), socio-political (referring to power and authority to regulate interpersonal affairs and impose sanctions on those who go wrong), and ceremonial (referring to access to the supernatural and in distinctive ritual behaviour).

The degree of stratification varies in different societies. Simple societies are less stratified than complex societies that are characterised by large number of social classes, ranks and groups differentiated on the basis of economic and socio-political criteria. All societies are, however, stratified to lesser or larger extent. Egalitarian societies (those in which every individual has equal status) are only theoretically real, for all societies do afford differences in status and privileges to some individuals. Social inequality, therefore, continues to remain relevant in society and in sociological writings too.

25.8 Further Reading

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Unit 26

Class

Contents

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Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to discuss the

- sociological perspective on class
- interrelationship between classes
- movement between class positions

26.1 Introduction

Prior to the French Revolution, the term 'class' was used in a general sense as in the writings of Adam Smith, Madison and other scholars of the eighteenth century. Several of them used it interchangeably with 'group' or 'estate'. It was in the nineteenth century that class as a category came to be recognised as a relevant concept in explaining social theories, ideologies, social movements, social structure, and social change. The heuristic potential of 'class' was particularly important in the context of social stratification. In fact, class was identified as one of the most significant basis of stratification in society. Several sociologists have proposed theories of class structure and explained the phenomena of mobility between class positions. In this unit, we begin with the meaning and concept of class and class society and then explore the sociological perspective on class and the theoretical approaches crucial to understanding class and classless society in sociological writings. We also discuss the issue of struggle between classes and mobility between classes.

26.2 The Concept of Class

According to Ossowski (1967), the following three assumptions are common to all conceptions of 'class' society.

- 1) Classes constitute the most comprehensive groups in the social structure. While classes are differentiated groups in society, they are not independent of each other. It is not possible to speak of one class without reference to other classes.
- 2) Division of people into classes concerns social status connected with a system of privileges and discriminations not determined by biological criteria. This implies that each class is accorded certain privileges and discriminations that have a bearing on its social status. Now, the social

status, in this case, has nothing to do with sex or any other criteria that is biological in nature. Evidently, some classes receive more privileges. They occupy higher status in comparison to those who receive more discrimination and occupy lower status. The differentiation and disparity constitutes the basis of social stratification and determines inter-class relations.

- 3) The membership of individuals in a social class is relatively permanent. This does not, in any way, rule out the possibility of transition from one class to another. What is stressed here is the fact that such transition is made by some individuals only. Often, one remains in a particular class throughout one's life.

Against this backdrop, it may be noted that while some classes are treated as superior on the basis of social status, privileges, and discriminations, others are treated as inferior. These socially relevant privileges and discriminations may be of different kinds. In a specific sense, however, the concern here is with wealth and power. This is notwithstanding the fact that Marx identified the privilege of exploiting other men's labour as the fundamental basis of class differentiation. Again, each class occupies a distinct place in the class hierarchy. The awareness of the place of one's class in the class hierarchy is referred to as class-consciousness. Class-consciousness is usually entwined with class interests and class solidarity. The other characteristic of class society is social isolation that refers to social distance and absence of close social contact between classes. One needs to understand that social isolation or lack of interaction between classes fosters class-consciousness and class solidarity that perpetuates class structure. In fact, Marx asserted that consciousness or awareness of class interest and feeling of class solidarity are the guiding basis of identifying a group as class. People belonging to a particular class exhibit distinctive behaviour and make use of specific vocabulary or pronunciation or speech. This implies that, among others, behaviour and speech also sets one class apart from another. These differences as also differences in access to wealth and power together with social distance and isolation of one class from another deepen cleavages between classes. As cleavages deepen and class distance increases, conflict in class interests emerges and conflict between classes becomes common.

There are two fundamental perspectives from which the concept of class may be understood. The first is the nominalist perspective that is identified with the American school of thought; the second is the realist perspective that is identified with the European school of thought. The nominalist perspective treats the class as an ensemble, a conglomeration of people who share common status. The emphasis is on the social status of each individual in terms of respect that others bestow on him/her. In the words of Aron (1969: 71), "Each person enjoys a certain position of esteem or prestige which results from the totality of situations in which he exists, and each situation can be analyzed from three points of view: in relation to property, occupation and power." Surely the place of an individual in the social domain is subjective and dependent on the judgment of the other people. There is, however, agreement on the notion that different individuals hold different positions in society. The position of an individual in hierarchy, as mentioned earlier, is a play of three elements: relations of property, occupation, and power upon which his/ her position is determined in the class structure. It may be understood as this stage that no single element determines the class to which an individual belongs. The emphasis rather is on the sum total of

social considerations. Individuals with similar prestige and status belong to one class. The realist perspective, on the other hand, treats social class as a real ensemble that is determined by material facts and by the collective consciousness of the people. Two ideas emerge from this approach. One is that a class is characterised by collective unity which is real, and the second is that people belonging to a particular class share collective consciousness.

Let us distinguish between the nominalist school and the realist school more clearly.

- 1) The nominalist school lays emphasis on individuals and interpersonal relations while the realist school lays emphasis on collective realities in explaining class.
- 2) The nominalist school postulates that people who have similar status or social prestige constitute a class. When social status changes, the class of a person also changes which means that it is easy to move from one class to another. There is no conflict between classes because the limits and boundaries of classes are not rigid and clearly defined, and more importantly classes are not associated with seizing of power. In simple terms, power is held and exercised by upper classes while the workers are never able to use it. The realist school, on the other hand, asserts that the conflict of power is inherent in relations between the classes. This is due to collective unity and collective consciousness of people belonging to each class. The people of a particular class seek to foster the interests of its own class that are often in conflict with those of other classes and in doing so each class tries to consolidate its own position in society.
- 3) The nominalist school upholds that the collective reality which the realists of boast of does not exist or hardly exists or, if it all, exists unequally while the realists school emphasises that by ignoring collective consciousness in explaining class, the nominalists have missed the essence of what constitutes the class.

The distinction between the American concept of class and the European concept of class proposed by Aron roughly corresponds to the hierarchical view of class and the dichotomous view of class proposed by Ossowski. The hierarchical view is associated with the nominalist position, and the dichotomous view is associated with the realist position.

Box 26.1: Denotation of the Term 'Class'

Ossowski (1967:90) identifies three meanings of the term class each of which has been used in sociological theories and in different accounts of the system of social relations.

- 1) "In the general sense each group which is regarded as one of the basic components of The social of the social structure may be called a 'class' of the social structure,..... In any case such a comprehensive concept includes both estate and caste, and also class in the second and third meanings distinguished here.
- 2) Of the two specifying versions of the concept of class that I should like to consider here, the first shows us a social class as a group distinguished in respect of the relations of property,...

..... Some caste or estate-systems can at the same time be economic class systems, but such a coincidence can only be empirically established. In cases where such a coincidence does apply one can speak of the "class" aspect of caste relation or the "estate" aspect of the class-system.

In a somewhat different meaning it is also possible to speak of the "class" aspect of an estate-system or a caste-system even when the coincidence does not occur, if we assume that between an estate-system and a class-system there holds some more or less complicated causal dependence...

- 3) In the second version specifying the concept of class, the class-system is contrasted with group-systems in the social structure in which an individual's membership of a group is institutionally determined and in which privileges or discriminations result from an individual's ascription to a certain group. In contradistinction to such groups of a caste or estate type, a class in this version is a group of which membership is not assigned by a birth-certificate nor any official document, such as a title of nobility or an act of manumission, but is the consequence of social status otherwise achieved.

The privileges and discriminations, which in this case require no sanction from any source, are not the effect but the cause of the individual's placement in the capitalist or proletarian class: one is reckoned among the capitalists because one possesses capital, and one belongs to the proletariat because one possesses no other source of income than the capacity to hire out one's labour".

26.3 Theories of Class Structure

a) The Classical View: Aristotle

Aristotle (1943) maintained that people are differentiated into three 'elements': one class is very rich; the other class is very poor. The third class occupies a position between the two in being neither very rich nor very poor. Those who are very poor feel too degraded and find it difficult to follow rational principle there is a possibility that they "grow into petty rogues and rascals". Those who are very rich are not willing to submit to authority. They also find it difficult to follow rational principle and are likely to grow into great criminals who commit offences from violence. The poor are not able to command so others often rule them. The rich are given to despising. They demand unquestioning subservience from others and make good masters. The people of middle class follow the rational principle and obey rules. They do not eye others' goods, others do not eye their goods; and they do not make plans against others, others do not make plans against them. They are free from factions and disputes. The presence of a large middle class ensures a well-governed state and safe democracy. Democracies are safer and more permanent than oligarchies because they have a large middle class that has a substantial share in the government.

When there is no middle class, the poor and the rich quarrel with each other and the class that is able to get an upper hold, regards political supremacy as the reward for victory. The result is that it sets up either democracy or

oligarchy that is geared to its own interests and advantage and not of the public rather than a just or popular government.

b) Capitalism and Social Classes: Karl Marx

Here we will critically discuss Marx's views on social classes. We begin with his perspective of social classes in detail and then go on to its critical appraisal.

i) Marx's perspective on social classes

Three periods in history are identified: ancient civilization, feudalism, and capitalism. Each period is marked by a predominant mode of production. Some of the predominant means of production identified by Marx are: primitive communism, ancient empires, feudalism, capitalism, and advanced communism. He clarified that class relations are characteristics of those means of production in which a section of population controls the means of production while others are excluded from it. Those who control the means of production exploit those who transform the means of production into finished products. The mode of production constitutes the basis of class structure. The capitalist or ruling class and the wage labour or the oppressed class makes up the class structure. In Marxian sense, a social class is an aggregate of people who perform the same function in the production process. These classes occupy different positions in the economy. The position that a person occupies in the social organisation of production determines the social class to which he/she belongs. The basic determinant of class is the way in which an individual cooperates with others in the satisfaction of basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Cooperation implies division of labour and organisation of production. Marx propounded that the first concern of human beings is to satisfy basic needs which forms the basis of production of material life. Once a need is satisfied, new ones emerge. Rising needs create new social relations. Social relationships enfold cooperation of several individuals. The relation between them is governed by struggle because the ruling class owns and controls the means of production. It also exercises control over the moral and intellectual life of the people. The entire law and governance machinery, art, literature, science and philosophy serve the interest of the capitalist class (or the bourgeoisie). This is typical in capitalist mode of production. A vast majority of Marx's writings are concerned with class relations in capitalism. In the capitalist mode of production, the raw material for production, the tools, the land and all that is necessary for production belongs to the capitalist class as its private property. Those who are actually engaged in the production process do not own the means of production. They work for the bourgeoisie by selling their labour, their ability to work, and their expertise for wages by which they subsist. They constitute the non-owning class, the wage labour, or the proletariat. The sale of finished products in the market fetches money that is more than the cost of production. This is the net profit to the capitalist class. It is often reinvested and in this way more and more profit gets generated for the capitalist class. Now, while the labour process and means of production (what Marx calls 'constant capital') does not change quickly, the labour-power (what Marx calls 'variable capital') is pressed hard to maximise the output so that more and more returns from finished products are accrued. 'Surplus value' is the balance between the investment in the labour process and the returns from it (that are appropriated by the capitalist class).

There is no denying that the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the

proletariat is that of antagonism, hostility and strife since the capitalist class tries to exploit the wage labour class while the wage labour class tries to bring about an end to exploitation. Marx believed that class struggle was an important means through which social change could be effected.

Income, consumption patterns, educational attainments, or occupations are clues to the distribution of material goods and of prestige symbols. Income or occupation cannot be a determinant of class position because class is determined by the position of a person in the social organisation of production. Consider the case of two blacksmiths— one running his own shop, the other working in a factory. The two men belong to the same occupation but different social classes. Marx cited several conditions which were crucial for the development of social class: conflict over economic rewards, physical concentration of masses of people and easy communication among them, the development of solidarity and political organisation in place of competition between individuals and organisation for purely economic needs (Bendix and Lipset, 1967). It may be understood at this stage itself that the setting up of large industry brings together several people at one place. It is only natural that there will be competition between them. Common interest against their superior who exploits them for his\her advantage keeps, however, them united. They enter into strife with the capitalist rather than among themselves.

Workers are seen to sacrifice a part of their wages in favour of associations that are constituted of enterprising people representing the wage labour class who put up a strong resistance to exploitation by the capitalist. There is often the possibility that the association takes up a political character. Marx felt that the conflict between the workers and the capitalist class was not born out of struggle for economic advantage only. He emphasised the role of machine production under capitalism too. As machines made way into the production process, the social relations underwent major transformation and human beings came to be mere appendages of the machines. The machines did most of the work of men would only operate them. This deprived the workers of all opportunities to derive psychological satisfaction from their work. Marx referred to the lack of satisfaction as 'alienation of human labour'.

In the words of Bendix and Lipset (1967: 10), "Marx believed that the alienation of labour was inherent in capitalism and that it was a major psychological deprivation, which would lead eventually to proletarian revolution Marx contrasted the modern industrial worker with the medieval craftsman, and — along with many other writers of the period — observed that under modern conditions of production the worker had lost all opportunity to exercise his 'knowledge, judgment and will' in the manufacture of his product". To Marx this deprivation seemed more significant than the economic pauperism to which capitalism subjected the masses of workers.

ii) Appraisal of Marx's Perspective on Class

Marx's ideas on class were subsequently re-considered by later writers many of whom were convinced that the reality of the system of exploitation gets obscured to a great extent in the course of everyday life. This is because in everyday life the process of exploitation is not always obvious and identifiable as it was in slavery or feudalism in which the slave or the serf who worked for the whole day for a meal to fill his belly or the serf who tilled

the land of his lord the whole day to be given a strip of land for his use, could see clearly that the product of his labour was being kept away from him. The worker in the capitalist society who was given wages in return of his services (which was much less than the value of work the worker had produced) could not easily notice the process of exploitation. The other factor that obscures the reality of the process of exploitation in everyday life is that the ideas of the ruling class are reproduced and reinforced in newspapers, electronic media, schools, and other agencies. The working class accepts them innocently and unwittingly as obvious and part of common sense. Often the working class people do not see their situation the way Marx's theory projects. This has been the major reason for the lack of zeal in proletarian revolution.

Lukacs sought to demonstrate that left to its own devices, the working class would never fully understand the necessity of liberating itself through socialist revolution. It needed to be led by socialist thinkers. Louis Althusser blamed 'ideological state apparatuses' such as school and the media for reinforcing the idea that we are individuals in control of our own destiny among the working class people. This shadows the system of exploitation and the position of the working class as victims (Saunders, 1990). A. Gramsci refers to 'class domination' as 'hegemony' known more generally in Marxian theory as the dominant ideology thesis i.e. the existence of a powerful dominant class ideology that stresses the nature of private property and creates an acceptance of the whole capitalist social order among all classes. According to Giddens there are three main sources of class power: the possession of property, qualifications, and physical labour power. These tend to give rise to three-class structure: a dominant/upper class based on property, an intermediate/middle class based on credentials, and a working/lower class based on labour power. What Giddens laid out bears a relationship with the claim of Erik, Wright and Frank Parkin that class relations are determined by access to resources. Frank Parkin was chiefly concerned with the attributes such as race, religions, language and others that serve as the basis by which social collectivities seek to maximise rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited group of people whom they treat as eligible. Those who control the 'cultural capital' constitute a 'new class' referred to by Alvin Gouldner as 'cultural bourgeoisie'. The cultural bourgeoisie is in control of cultural capital wherein 'capital' is explained by Gouldner as any produced object that is used to make utilities that can be sold. The processor gets income or claim to income by virtue or the imputed contribution to economic productivity. Gouldner argues that these claims to income are enforced by modifying others' access to capital objects (Wright, 1985). By now, it is evident that there has been a fundamental and conspicuous shift from the thrust on exploitation as the basis of class relations in the capitalist societies to domination as the basis of class relations in the post-capitalist societies.

c) Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society: R. Dahrendorf

The second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century witnessed the legal recognition of joint stock companies in Germany, England, France and the United States. In the present day, joint stock companies have largely replaced the economic enterprises that were owned and managed by a capitalist or his/her family. The stock or the shares of a company are widely dispersed much in contrast to a capitalist set up in which the ownership lies in the hands of a single individual. In the post-capitalist era, the joint

stock companies afford far-reaching implications for the structure of industrial enterprises and for the broader structure of society of which social classes constitute an important component.

In the joint stock companies, the stockholders hold ownership, while the control lies in the hands of managers who are not like the capitalists. This arrangement keeps the owners away from the actual sphere of production and reduces the distance between managers and workers. This is the radical view upheld by Marx himself. The other is the conservative view that asserts that the owners (stockholders) and controllers (managers) are not widely different. They constitute a somewhat homogenous group. The stockholders and managers hold similar outlook and may be treated as similar to the class of capitalists. This view which comes out in the writings of C. Wright Mills (1954) stands out in sharp contrast to Marx's own analysis.

R. Dahrendorf (1959: 95) explained that the, "social structure of joint stock companies as well as co-operative and state owned enterprises differs from that of the classical capitalist enterprise, and that therefore a transition from the latter to the former is a process of social change". He suggested that the separation of ownership and control involved a change in the structure of social positions and also a change in the recruitment of personnel to these positions. This refers to the distribution of the roles of capitalist in two positions the owner, and the manager.

The owners are alienated from production process in the sense that they do not participate in the day-to-day affairs of production enterprise and do not have a defined place in the formal hierarchy of authority in the enterprise. This is so because the workers deal with and are answerable to the managers. It may be recalled that the capitalist exercised authority because he owned the means of production over which the subsistence of the workers depended. The managers on the other hand hold authority by virtue of the property rights delegated to them by the stockholders. Since the managers remain in contact with workers, they seek to exercise their authority with consensus of the workers or else the manual and clerical workers would make their interests felt in many complex and unregulated ways such as by disturbing the process of production significantly. The managers cannot afford to let this happen because the stockholders would reprimand them. Bendix (1956) explained that there are three kinds of entrepreneurs in the post-capitalist era, the capitalist, the heirs, and the bureaucrats. Thus, there is a definite change in the composition of the entrepreneurial class.

Dahrendorf maintained that capitalism has completely eroded and given way to different groups that bear a relationship with each other that is much different from the relationship between bourgeoisie and the proletariat highlighted by Marx. He outlined three effects of this development on class conflict: (i) when managers replace capitalists, there is a complete change in the composition of the groups participating in the conflict; (ii) change in recruitment and composition of the groups participating in the conflict leads to a change in the nature of issues that causes conflict; the managers who are like functionaries without capital do not act, behave and hold attitudes like the all powerful capitalists. Further the interests of the labour towards the new opponents are different; and (iii) the decomposition of capital (referring to differentiation in ownership and control of the means of production i.e. capital) involves a change in the patterns of conflict.

In the course of such developments, the capitalist class and the labour class cease to be homogenous classes. The labour also ceases to be homogenous class (there are unskilled labourers, semi skilled labourers, and skilled labourers, as also those equipped with different skills). The labourers who hitherto treated themselves as a single class with common interests and distinctive class consciousness now become increasingly aware of differences among themselves. This is referred to as decomposition of labour. The twin phenomena of decomposition of capital and decomposition of labour are almost inevitably accompanied with the emergence new middle class both within and outside the industry of modern societies. Lederer and Marschak coined the term 'new middle class'. In post-capitalist societies, the new middle class is constituted of salaried employees in tertiary industries, in commercial firms, in shops and restaurants, in cinemas, as also salaried skilled workers and foremen. The bureaucrats exercise authority and are positionally aligned with the ruling class. While it is true that bureaucrats do not constitute the ruling class, it is widely accepted that they are a part of it and in industrial, political and social conflicts they stand by the side of the ruling class. The other interesting fact is that a large number of salaried employees identify themselves with the interests, attitudes and lifestyles of the higher-ups.

The emergence of the new middle class has a profound impact on the class structure proposed by Marx. Dahrendorf suggested that the bureaucrats add to the bourgeoisie class while the white-collar workers add to the proletariat class. Both the classes become highly heterogeneous in composition, therefore, less united. Like the industrial workers, white color workers, have no property and no authority but they do exhibit many social characteristics that are entirely different from those of the working class. Similarly, though the bureaucrats do exercise authority that the older ruling class did too, they differ from the ruling class in several respects. Much more important than the decomposition of capital and the decomposition of labour, Dahrendorf explained is the question, whether the concept of class continues to remain relevant to the conflict groups of post-capitalist societies. Furthermore, the simplistic dichotomy in class structure in the Marxian framework no longer seems to be valid in explaining the structure and conflict in post-capitalist and advanced industrial societies.

d) Class and Status: Max Weber

Max Weber's major objection to Karl Marx's theory of class was the undue emphasis on the economic aspect. Weber did recognise the importance of the economic aspect of society but he did not rate it as the most important one. He said that specific life chances are created by the way the disposition over material property is distributed among some people who meet competitively in the market for the purpose of exchange. When we talk of disposition over material property, the focus is on owners only who get the monopoly to acquire valued goods while the non-owners are excluded from competing for highly valued goods. In acquiring capital goods and exercising monopoly over them, propertied people get an entrepreneurial function and the chance to share the returns on capital. The non-owners are without property and are able to offer their services, at best their labour while those who have property engage in price wars with them. Now, those who are without property are forced to get rid of their products in order to subsist. Weber explained that 'property' and 'lack of property' are the basic categories of class situation. Those who are propertied, for example, may belong to a

class of renters or entrepreneurs. Those who are without property are differentiated on the basis of services they offer. Thus, neither the propertied or the without property constitute a homogenous category. The former is differentiated on the basis of the kind of property that is usable for returns; the latter is differentiated on the basis of the kind of services that can be offered in the market.

In simple terms, Weber's concept of class has to do with the kind of chance in the market that affords a common condition for an individual's fate. Class situation, therefore, is market situation. It may also be noted that those people whose fate has nothing to do with the chance of using goods or services for themselves in the market such as the slaves do not form a class in the technical sense of the term. They constitute the status group. Weber emphasised that classes are not communities. They represent the basis of communal action (communal action refers to that action which is oriented to the feeling of individuals that they belong together). In Weber's own words (1946:251), "We may speak of a 'class' when (1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, in so far as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labour markets". The three elements form the class situation that, in more comprehensive sense, is market situation. For Marx, class has to be understood in the framework of an individual position in the structure of production; for Weber class needs to be understood in the framework of the individual's position in the context of the market of exchange.

Other than class, Weber proposed the concept of status groups. Status groups differ from classes in being communities. In place of purely economically determined class situation, status situation assumes importance. Weber said that status situation is determined by social estimation of honour. This honour may be any quality that is shared by the people and held in esteem. Possession of property is not always associated with social honour and, is therefore, not essentially a qualification for acquiring status. Income, family background, education and all those criteria that are valued may be identified as markers of status. People belonging to the same status group may interact with each other on many occasions. Status order refers to the stratification on the basis of honour and lifestyle that characterise status groups. What is interesting to note is the fact that the status honour may be accompanied with honorific preferences such as the privilege of wearing special costume. Furthermore, artistic and literary activity connected with physical labour or used for income generation is treated as degrading work and not held in high esteem. The social honour associated with it declines tremendously. Weber maintained that often status disqualification operates against the performance of physical labour. In Weber's words, (1946, cited here from Bendix and Lipset, 1967: 27), "With over simplification one might thus say that 'classes' are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas 'status groups' are stratified according to the principle of their *consumption* of goods as represented by special 'styles of life'". He further explained that class and status groups are distinguished on another count. Class has a bearing with the market and individual's position in it. There is no order of honour or personal distinctions in the market that is the critical feature of status groups. The status order would get weakened if the same honour were bestowed on people who acquire economic power that bears the stigma of extra-status origin as to those who seek to acquire

status by virtue of their lifestyle. Status however, rises if economic power comes over and above the virtue of lifestyle. It is therefore only natural that those who uphold status order react with peculiar sharpness to pretensions of purely economic acquisition. Status is the predominant and preferable means of social stratification in conditions when acquisition of goods and distribution of goods is fairly uniform and stable. Stratification by status gets pushed into the background and stratification by class becomes important each time economic transformation takes place and technological repercussions set in.

In addition to stratification by class and status, Weber proposed the concept of party as the third element according to which society is stratified. The people who constitute a party are those who have a goal towards which they strive collectively and in a planned manner. The goal may be a cause i.e., a party may seek to realise a programme for ideal or material purposes or the goal may be 'personal' e.g. honour for the leader or followers of the party. Parties may exist in a social club as well. Their action is geared towards acquisition of social power by which is meant the potential to influence communal action.

The existence of a party in a state always presumes the prevalence of rational order and the presence of a staff of persons who are willing to enforce it. In a specific sense, parties may pursue interests that are determined through class situation or through status situation. They may even recruit members from them. They may not, however, be fully class parties or fully status parties. They may be neither of the two. Their means of attaining power may range from violence to canvassing for votes through social influence, bribes, public addresses, or even obstruction in parliamentary proceedings.

Reflection and Action 26.1

Compare and contrast Weber's and Marx's concept of class.

26.4 Class Struggle

As mentioned earlier, competition, strife, conflict, and struggle are inherent among classes in society. Marx propounded that inherent in the structure of classes was the identification of a common 'class enemy' as an entity against which all the members of a class would unite. If there was no class enemy, the people of a class would compete with each other fiercely and there would be no class solidarity or class cohesion. Marx maintained that when a large-scale industry is set up, scores of people come together in the search of avenues for subsistence. Naturally, they compete with each other on several counts. But, their common wages, common interest against their superiors, and other similar conditions keep them united and curtail competition among themselves. The capitalists on the other hand unite in the idea of repression. In the event of united capital, the working class forms associations. The interests that they define are class interests but the struggle of a class against another class is a political struggle. It may be appreciated that the conflict between classes is restricted to the race for economic rewards and resources. It also develops because of psychological suffering that accompanies alienation of labour.

As specialisation and division of labour set in, the labourer gets more and more alienated from the production process. This alienation gets initiated at the time when the 'capitalist represents to the single workman, the oneness and the will of the associated labor. It is developed in manufacture that cuts down the laborer into a detail labourer. It is completed in modern industry, which makes science a productive force distinct from labour and presses it into the service of capital' (Bendix and Lipset, 1966: 10). Marx explained that in a capitalist system, social productiveness, and development of production are carried out at the cost of the laborer. This is done through excessive domination over, and exploitation of the labourers. The labourer is reduced to an appendage of the machine, the work itself loses charm. Labourer loses the motivation to work to his fullest potential. The conditions under which he is made to work are not encouraging. All this is done to accumulate capital. As the urge of the capitalists to accumulate capital increases, the plight of the labourer worsens.

Marx was sure that class conflict under capitalism leading to revolution and consequent overthrow of capitalist class would establish the workers as the major agent of social change. He envisaged that over a period of time, social division would cease to exist and with that would also end the exploitation of one class by another. The change would take place when the dissatisfaction of the workers would convince them completely that capitalism needed to be overthrown and that the way to do it was revolutionary political organisation. The labourer has to emerge as a strong political power and collectively negotiate for power.

Marx's prediction of a proletarian revolution is based on the premise that capitalist society would affirm conditions that establish and consolidate the position of two main classes in society. The bourgeoisie would surrender human values in the "icy waters of egoistical calculation". The proletariat, on the other hand, working in the constraints of factory production given to object degradation that collapses family life, religious beliefs, and national characteristics. They would rise to regain humanity. This prepares conditions for revolution that would usher in a new social order in which the process of material production 'would be consciously regulated by freely associated men'.

Weber, on the other hand believed that relative control over goods and services (that constitute the groundwork for the conception of class), produces income, opens up the possibility of procuring other goods, provides social position, and provisions a certain style of life. Those in common class situation are often led to similar sentiments and ideas but not necessarily to concerted action (Bendix, 1974). Class organisation emerges when there is an economic opponent. Weber (1968) proposed that it becomes important to curtail the competition when the number of competitors increases with respect to the profit span. For doing this, one group of competitors adopts some characteristics of its actual or potential group of competitors. The characteristics are externally identifiable such as language, religion, descent, residence and others. Sometimes associations are formed with rational regulations. Over, a period of time, if monopolistic interests persist, competitors establish a legal order that limits competition through formal bodies. Weber refers to this as domination by virtue of constellation of interest. Monopolisation calls for constitution of a common front against the interests of outsiders and solidarity of those who constitute it. The organisation of the group in defense against the interests of outsiders brings

an end to further competition. The membership to the group is restricted to ensure monopoly; and participation is controlled to ensure solidarity. If the monopoly is rooted in law, and the government enforces restrictions, then it is easy to restrain the competition and exercise control over the members of the organisation. Weber referred to this as domination by 'virtue of authority'.

26.5 Social Mobility

By social mobility is meant transition of individuals from one position in the social hierarchy to another. Here, we restrict the use of the term to mean movement between class positions. The concept of social mobility presupposes that people's position in modern class societies is not determined and fixed by virtue of their birth in a particular class. That an individual has the option to make transition between classes is the very basis of social mobility. The movement from one class to another may occur either in the lifetime of an individual or over a span of a generation or more. When an individual moves from class to another in his/ her own lifetime (for example, a person who joins service as a clerk and through a series of promotions becomes the managing director of a company) the mobility is referred to as 'intra-generational mobility'. On the other hand, when mobility occurs between generations (for example, children carpenters or cobblers become accountants, engineers or doctors and take up higher social positions than those of their parents), the mobility is referred to as 'inter-generational mobility.' Mobility may be both upward (as when the son of a blacksmith adopts the profession of a chartered accountant) or downwards (as when the son of a doctor becomes a typist).

Box 26.2: Social Mobility: Motivation Theory of Veblen

"Those members of the community who fall short of [a] somewhat indefinite, normal degree of prowess or of property suffer in the esteem of their fellowmen; and consequently they suffer also in their own esteem, since the usual basis for self-respect is the respect accorded by one's neighbours. Only individuals with an aberrant temperament can in the long run retain their self-esteem in the face of the dis-esteem of their fellows.

So as soon as the possession of property becomes the basis of popular esteem, therefore, it becomes also a requisite to that complacency which we call self-respect. In any community where goods are held in severality, it is necessary, in order to ensure his own peace of mind, that an individual should possess as large a portion of goods as others with whom he is accustomed to class himself; and it is extremely gratifying to possess something more than others. But as fast as a person makes new acquisitions, and becomes accustomed to the resulting new standard of wealth, the new standard forthwith ceases to afford appreciably greater satisfaction than the earlier standard did. The tendency in any case is constantly to make the present pecuniary standard the point of departure for a fresh increase of wealth; and this in turn gives rise to a new standard of sufficiency and a new pecuniary classification of one's self as compared with one's neighbours. So far as concerns the present question, the end sought by accumulation is to rank high in comparison with the rest of the community in point of pecuniary strength. So long as the comparison is distinctly unfavourable to himself, the normal, average individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present lot; and when he has reached what may be called the normal

pecuniary standard of the community, or of his class in the community, this chronic dissatisfaction will give place to a restless straining to place a wider and ever-widening pecuniary interval between himself and this average standard. The invidious comparison can never become so favourable to the individual making it that he would not gladly rate himself still higher relatively to his competitors in the struggle for pecuniary reputability" (Veblen, 1934:30-32).

It may be understood that in industrial societies, the rate of inter-generational mobility is significant. It is common to find children joining the workforce at a higher position than the one their parents attained when they started work. This happens because, industrial societies lay emphasis on formal qualifications at the time of recruitment. Children of working class parents often gain the qualifications before they set out to look for employment. Further, upward social mobility is more common than downward social mobility because the demand for unskilled manual labour has declined significantly in the wake of technological advancement and the shift from the need for industry workers to service that call for specialisation entail higher position. More and more children find that higher positions are open for them and that opportunities are much more abundant than those available to their parents. Movement across a short range of positions in the social hierarchy is more common than movement across a wide range. People usually find it possible to improve their position marginally than to improve it substantially (Saunders, 1990).

In the context of social mobility in America, Marx noted that the classes have not yet become fixed. There is constant flux of elements between them. Weber emphasised the non-economic forces and the desire for independence among the farm workers in the German economy. In fact, the emphasis on the role of non-economic forces and the differential social mobility of the Catholics and Protestants was the starting point of his thesis on the relationship between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. The writings of Marx and Weber greatly influenced Sorokin's study of social mobility in American, English and several other societies.

Sorokin stressed the extent and rapidity of the growth of new middle class of salaried employees in capitalist societies and concluded that large-scale intra-generational and inter-generational mobility occurs in occupational terms. More and more men were found to shift from manual labour non-manual forms of employment. He accepted that children seem to more likely to enter their fathers' occupational groups than any other and that mobility is more likely to occur between occupational groupings within the same class than between groupings in different classes. He maintained that membership of a social grouping consists of two elements, one is the relatively permanent and stable, the other is ever changing with entry into one occupation for a particular span of time then exit from it and entry into another one. Working class cannot be treated as an agency of social transformation for two reasons, (i) there is declining permanent element within the working class and the social democratic and communist affiliations are likely to be rejected by the expanding fluid element, and (ii) the revolutionary capacity of working class gets diminished, since it is made up those who are incapable of socially upward movement on the one hand and the calibre of its leaders on the other hand. Sorokin contents that the mobility rates and mobility patterns do not follow an identifiable design or pattern and even if proletariats

get the opportunity to be dictators, they would not be able to achieve much (Goldthorpe, 1987).

Lipset and Bendix upheld that industrialisation led to high mobility rates. What is more interesting to note is their observation that the overall pattern of social mobility appeared to be the same in the industrial societies of various western countries. This is better known as the Lipset - Zetterberg (or the LZ), thesis (Zetterberg was the co-author of the first paper in which this generalisation was proposed). Lipset and Bendix's study differs significantly from Sorokin's study in that it concentrated on movement from manual to non-manual occupations which they defined as upward mobility despite the fact that they were aware that some white collar positions are lower in income and prestige than skilled manual work. Another crucial study on social mobility in America was that undertaken by Blau and Duncan. They began the study with the assumption that systematic exploration of occupational status and mobility were important in understanding social stratification. They confirmed that the rate of mobility between blue-collar and white-collar occupations was only little among various industrial societies. Their claim was, however, that elite mobility in America was exceptionally high. This was perhaps due to high level of popular education in the United States and lesser emphasis on formal distinctions of social status. They also maintained that most men in America do not attain high occupational status but do get to improve their standard of living hence their social status by way of raising conspicuous consumption. Finally they noted, "The stability of American democracy is undoubtedly related to the superior chances of upward mobility in this country, its high standard of living and the low degree of status deference between social strata for these condition make it unlikely that large numbers of underprivileged men experience oppression, despair of all hope and become so dissatisfied with the existing system of differential rewards as well as with political institutions that they join extremist political movements committed to violent rebellion" (Blau and Duncan, 1967: 439).

Goldthorpe, Llewellyn, and Payne (1987) bespeak of three major theses on social mobility. The first thesis on social mobility is the 'counter-balance thesis' attributed to Westergaard and to Parkin. The counter-balance thesis proposes that opportunities for inter-generational mobility have expanded but these are countered by a decline in opportunities for intra-generational mobility. This has happened because of growing professionalism, bureaucratisation, and technical complexity in work. So, greater social mobility takes place inter-generationally. At the same time, there is lesser possibility of upward mobility in the course of an individual's working life. Goldthorpe, Llewellyn, and Payne contradict the counter-balance thesis through their findings based on older and younger cohorts in the sample. They concluded that it was not more difficult for younger group to work its way up after starting in employment than it has been for the older group. Avenues for upward mobility for the working class have increased due to wider educational opportunities. At the same time, none of the traditional avenues for upward mobility are closed.

The second thesis on social mobility is the 'closure thesis' attributed to Giddens, to Bottomore, and to Miliband. The closure thesis suggests that those who occupy the superior positions seek not only to retain them for their own selves and for their children but also to acquire control over the resources so that they are able to achieve what they want. This means that

social mobility remains confined to lower positions while higher positions are not open to its effects. Goldthorpe, Llewellyn, and Payne refute this claim after studying higher-grade professionals, administrators, managers and proprietors. They demonstrate that while only one quarter of them were born into this class, more than a quarter of them came from manual working class backgrounds. Thus, far from being closed to lower classes, the top class was found to be heterogeneous in composition.

The third thesis on social mobility is the 'buffer zone' thesis attributed to Parkin, to Giddens, to Bottomore and to Westergaard and Resler. The buffer zone thesis holds that the social mobility, in large part, is confined to skilled manual and routine clerical grades which often change places with each other but rarely move much higher and much lower in the system. This short range mobility is restricted to buffer zone which is constituted of manual-non-manual boundary restructuring longer range mobility which would lead to heterogeneous elements on either side. Goldthorpe, Llewellyn and Payne suggest that if there is no buffer effect against upward social mobility, there could be one in the case of downward social mobility. There, is thus, a kind of one - way screen that allows upward mobility and restricts downward mobility flows (Saunders, 1990).

26.6 Classlessness

For long, class relationships have been recognised as an integral component of social structure. Their importance in regulating economic and political domains of life has been well accepted. In academic discourse too, much attention has been laid on the analysis of class and class relationships. Marx emphasised that the overthrow of capitalist class by the revolutionary working class, the abolition of private property and capitalism were the pre-conditions for classless society founded on equality of condition. He projected that once the capitalist class was overthrown, new ruling class now constituted of the proletariat would dismantle capitalism. This could be understood as the conception of 'one-class classlessness'. After this period of transition, the older conditions of production that lay at the root of class conflict would be done away with. It is then that class distinctions would cease to exist and the foundation for a classless society with free development of one and all would be laid. Here, any one social group would not monopolize economic and political power. This is the conception of 'total classlessness'. The third conception of classlessness is that of 'multi-class classlessness' in which equality and fragmentation of class structure exists simultaneously. Weber argued that there was no escape from bureaucratic domination. Socialism, he maintained would aggravate rather than eliminate the problem. Bureaucratisation does involve equality of treatment favouring the leveling of social classes privileges. The socially privileged, however, close opportunities for others. Weber discussed classlessness in terms of provision of equality of opportunities following bureaucratisation. At the same time he expressed reservations against the anti-democratic nature of bureaucratisation itself. While the opportunity to reach the highest position is available to all and the social and economic status of an individual is not determined by birth, everybody may not be able to make use of the opportunities that seem to be available to them in order to enhance their social position. This is the irony inherent in multi-class classlessness.

The three conceptions of classlessness discussed here, viz. one class classlessness, total classlessness, and multi-class classlessness do not ensure

the end of class as a relevant category of sociological analysis, for class is the commonly encountered reality in society.

Reflection and Action 26.2

Can there be a society without classes? Discuss.

26.7 Conclusion

In this unit, we have tried to understand the different conceptions of class beginning with the widest concept of class. It would be clear by now that sociologists have proposed different determinants and criteria for defining class. These range from the economic positions of a group of people to their position in the market situation. Underlying all the theoretical propositions is the understanding that classes constitute the most comprehensive groups in social structure, they are associated with a system of privileges and discriminations (Ossowski, 1967) and that there is scope of mobility between classes. The classes, therefore, cannot be defined as watertight compartments with rigid boundaries.

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Unit 27

Gender and Social Stratification

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Learning Objectives

After you have read this unit you will be able to

- discuss gender and stratification
- discuss the contribution of Marx and Weber to understanding of social stratification

27.1 Introduction

In most societies the tasks of women are clearly differentiated. In the West as well as in the middle class sections of Indian society, men have been seen to be the bread winners and women were expected to take care of the house and raise children. This arrangement used to be considered as 'natural' and complementary, having roots in the biological makeup of the sexes. The economic dependence of women and sexual division of labour were closely interlinked.

The ideology of 'naturalness' of division of labour has been challenged as women started entering the labour force in large numbers in the West. The rise of feminist movement in the west raised questions about division of labour and almost universal subordination of women across societies and cultures. The questions like has employment changed women's status? Are they facing double burden of performing jobs which are negatively valued. For example housework not being considered as work whereas paid work outside the household as work. Statistics show that women all over the world earn much less than men for the same work. Occupations are also segregated along gender lines. Other questions relate to women's active participation in work force, its consistent devaluation and women's exclusion from decision making. In understanding these issues we look for answers in the stratification theories.

Feminist scholars resist to treat the problem of women essentially an artifact of the contemporary system of economic exploitation. They have argued that the oppression of women is not to be seen as 'secondary' to class oppression as a whole. Women are oppressed as a class by men and patriarchal structures are geographically and historically almost universal. The major axis

of differentiation in prevailing society is not class but gender and it is women who wait for the 'longest revolution'. Gender in class stratification theories attempts to uncover the sources of structured inequality and social change. Both Marxists and Weberians have been engaged in empirical research which both document and attempt to explain the forms and structures of inequality. It has been widely criticized that the class situation of family members is 'derived' from that of the main breadwinner who is usually a man. The question of gender raises serious problem for both theoretical and empirical work in social stratification. The active participation of women in all walks of life, the decrease in the number of households that have only male bread winners, passage of new laws created an environment for women's location in social stratification. According to Newby (1982) the issue of gender inequality arose from women's movement.

27.2 Weber, Marx and Stratification

Weber observed that societies can be stratified according to their degree for class or status formation, providing the most important and basic fact of social stratification theory. The first form of inquiry concerns with the extent to which class or status systems are the predominant modes of social action at the societal level. Theories of social stratification then presuppose as their explanatory object the inter and intra-societal variability of class or status formations. At this time the question of sexual inequality treated in terms of division of labour (Marxist approach) which considers women as 'reserve army' i.e. The labour of women could be called upon to facilitate expansionary 'deskilling' clerical work as well as in periods of acute labour shortage such as in wartime. According to Max Weber economic and technological changes favour class stratification and pushes status stratification in the background.

Since the determination and explanation of the variability of class and status formation have been the central concerns of the study of social stratification, the documentation of the inequality of opportunities and outcome occupied a subordinate place. It was justified on several grounds. First, because of interest in the distribution of unequal rewards, life-chances and how different social arrangements could procure 'better' outcomes and opportunities. The second reason was the importance given to the explanation of 'outcomes' of class or status differentiation, which were considered as by-product of stratification analysis. These approaches never gave serious thought to issues of gender inequality, because the emphasis was on class polarisation and status-group consolidation. Earlier it was always presumed that gender relations are usually heterosexual and therefore crosscut by class and status relations. It gave bearing on the view that gender relations are somehow similar to ethnic relations.

Box 27.1: Marx and Patriarchy

Marxist school of thought has led to the conceptualisation of sexual division in terms that have less to do with actual social relationship or patterns of social interaction, that with the determination of the 'place' of female labour within the class structure and of its 'functions for capital'. A major question arose from this perspective is whether or not female domestic has always had difficulties in formulating a stable and coherent theory of action which could relate the analysis of objective class position and of system contradictions to class formation. There was a fundamental difference from the kind of analysis that has accreted around the concept of 'patriarchy'

which refers to patterns of behaviour or forms of social interaction. Both Marxists and patriarchy approaches also differ on whether women constitute a class or not, while patriarchy is seen as a structure of social relations in men are privileged systematically and women disprivileged in such a variety of social contexts that it makes sense to think of gender relations as a form of 'stratification'.

Patriarchy constitutes a type of social formation that has been improperly ignored by conventional stratification analysis. According to Mann (1986) the omission of gender as a basis of social stratification created a crisis in stratification theory. The five main areas of stratification theory, which have been influenced by Gender, are individual, the family and household, the division of labour between the sexes, social class and nation-states.

27.3 Gender and Social Stratification in Cross-Cultural Perspective

The unequal accesses to resources, opportunities and rewards and to rights between men and women are legitimised by patriarchy across societies and cultures. Status inequality between men and women is not a new phenomena which is reinforced through patriarchy and its institutions, gendered division of labour and social institutions like marriage, dowry, property and inheritance and subordination. Sylvia Walby (1994:22-28) observes that patriarchy is not only differential distribution of power but also it is built into the very mechanism of production.

Reflection and Action 27.1

Write a note on gender in a cross-cultural perspective. Discuss your views with your friends.

Feminist sociologists working on the concept of class have challenged its basis solely derived from man's occupations. A major concern of feminist critique has been to consider what modification of class boundaries would be necessary if women in paid work are to be considered as well. Secondly they have sought to reevaluate the contribution of women's work to the family.

Cross cultural research on sexual division of labour attempted to describe wide range of women's productive activities in societies with different mode of subsistence but also the status implications of these on status of women.

For feminist anthropologists right from the very beginning the chief concern has been to explore the causes of universal gender inequality. They sought to explain its origin and perpetuation in terms of sociological, cultural and material terms. Each of these explanations rested upon a major dichotomy which was taken to be universal: public/domestic, nature/culture and production/reproduction.

In feminist anthropology, the relationship of gender with social stratification has been conceptualised primarily in the way gender informs social structures as a symbolic construct and as a metaphor for social action. Gender is conceptualised as symbolic representations and the behaviour of women and men and their relations. Anthropologists like Rosaldo, Lamphere and,

Ortner identified gender and kinship as the basis of social inequality whereby recognising how women's access to property and decision making etc. are subsumed within larger ideological, material and political contexts of kinship structures.

Ortner and Whitehead (1981) proposed a model of prestige structures which is defined as the set of prestige positions or level that result from a particular line of social evaluation, the mechanisms by which individuals arrive at a given level or positions, and the overall conditions of reproduction of the system of statuses (ibid..13).

Gender, they argued, is one such prestige structure, and in every human society, man and woman compose two differentially valued terms of a value set, men being men, higher (ibid..16). They suggested that male prestige is linked to 'public roles', such as chief or a Brahman, while female prestige is defined in relation to men, in such roles as wife, sister and mother, in other words female structures are encompassed within the male structures. Conceptualising gender as one of the prestige structures pushed the gendered analysis of social stratification across societies.

Anthropological literature suggests that women's work outside of household and in subsistence economy indicates as well as reinforce generally egalitarian relations between women and men. Women's in Vanatinai have access to power both through their control of the economic capital of land and through their accumulation of symbolic capital in exchange and mortuary ritual. But among horticulturists in highland New Guinea, women raise staple crops but men raise prestige crops that are the focus of social exchange.

Box 27.2: Division of Labour

This cultural valuation is the foundation for gender stratification that is then reinforced by gender ideologies of male superiority and a high degree of sexual antagonism between men and women. Meigs (1990) describes a "chauvinistic" ideology that is rooted in men's role as warriors. The division of work among Mundurucu, an Amazonian horticultural society, where men hunt, fish and fell the forest area for gardens while women plant, harvest and process manioc. Men work at Mudurucu has more assigned value. As Murphy and Murphy (1985) state "Male ascendancy does not wholly derive from masculine activities but is to a considerable degree prior to them". Male domination is traditionally symbolic. According to Martin and Voortries (1975) the decline in female participation in agriculture is that the female domestic workload tends to increase when root crops are replaced by cereal crop and when animal labour replaces manual labour.

Women's value is defined by their reproductive abilities rather than by their productive activities. Bride wealth is considered as compensation to the bride's parents or her kin for the productive and reproductive rights of the bride; dowry as a form of inheritance provides a bride with land and other wealth and helps her to attract a husband.

In traditional patriarchal Irish family (studied by Arensberg & Kimball (1940) work was divided by gender and age. The division of labour considered "natural" and power in the hands of men. Pastoral societies are also generally characterised by patriarchy and a dichotomisation of the sexes, both symbolically and socially segregation of the sexes and gender stratification

are fundamental attributes of many pastoral societies. Campbell (1964) who studied "Sarakatsoni of Greece" says that the life of pastoral 'Sarakatsoni' revolves around three things: sheep, children and honour gender ideology is embedded in these three valued items. The ultimate authority lies with the male despite the fact that female contributes equally in all aspects of life.

27.4 Status of Women

Generalisations are often made about the status of women according to different modes of adaptation but these studies show that great amount diversity persists. To understand gender stratification, the interlinkage of both ideology and participation in production must be understood. As Atkinson (1982: 248) states, "It is too facile to deny the significance of sexual stereotypes or to presume that women's influence in one context cancels out their degradation in another, just as we know that women's status is not a unitary phenomenon across cultures, we need to be reminded that the intra cultural picture is equally complex." Socialist feminist scholars, however, maintain that patriarchy precedes class inequality. They clearly show that new forms of subordination and gender asymmetry have superseded the old, leaving patriarchal control undisturbed. Industrial work privileged men who took control over the earnings and social power while leaving women as dependents.

Leela Dube, Eleanor Leacock and Shirley Ardener (ibid:xi) provide a cross-cultural perspective; focusing upon the insignificance and passivity of women and the primary of men in various societies. Leela Dube observes that making women invisible despite their obvious preference and effective visibility is the root cause of their low status in society.

Inequalities of gender can be explained by "gender regimes" which is a cluster of practices ideological and material, which in a given social context, acts to construct various images of masculinity and femininity and thereby to consolidate forms of gender inequality (Connell, 1994: 29-40). According to Kabeer (1995:37) 'biology is gendered as well as sexed'. Male and female are translated as man and woman based on mutually exclusive traits of masculinity and femininity.

Women are attached to a two-fold stratification i.e. in relation to men and in relation to other women. Gender structures different spheres of male-female inequality.

Many egalitarian societies in the contemporary world are characterised by a division of labour whereby men hunt and women gather. Friedl (1975:78) outlines four reasons for this division i.e. the variability in the supply of game, the different skills required for hunting and gathering the incompatibility between carrying burdens and hunting and the small size of semi nomadic foraging population. Despite the common assumption that men hunt and women gather, there is no sharp division of labour. The Tiwi, Australian aborigines who live on Melville Island off the coast of Northern Australia both men and women hunt and gather. Women are considered economic assets and a source of wealth and prestige for men. Women acquire social status and can be politically influential. Goodale (1971) suggests that Tiwi culture emphasises the equality of men and women in society. Among the Agta Negritos of North Eastern Luzon, the Philippines women enjoy greater social and economic equality with their men compared to Tiwi of Australia. They

make significant contribution to the daily food supply and also control the distribution of the food they acquire, sharing them with their families and trading them in the broader community. This challenges the widely held notion that in foraging societies pregnancy and child care are incompatible with hunting. They have developed methods of contraception and abortion to aid them in spacing their children.

In horticultural societies, in which cultivation and farming is required by the use of hand-tool technology women play important roles in production. Lepowsky points to gender egalitarianism among the horticultural and matrilineal people of the pacific island of Vanatani. He says that the prominent position of women in Vanatinai exchange and other activities.

27.5 The Indian Context

According to Kalpana Bardhan (1986;94) "Although the family is the salient units of analysis for stratification studies, whether based on class or caste analysis, it is not quite sufficient situated within the broader framework, the division by sex and the status of women affect its properties of stability and dynamics".

Reflection and Action 27.2

Write briefly on patriarchy, economy, and class structure. Put down the main points in your notebook.

In Indian society, besides family as a basic unit of stratification the role of kinship, family and everyday relations, the role of male head of the family, status equality between men and women are some of the questions, which needs examination. Michael Mann (1986:40-56) discusses patriarchy, economy and class structure. According to Mann compartmentalisation of women persists despite involvement of women in politics, development programmes and processes and feminism. Indian society has been divided into *purushjati* and *stree jati*. To conceptualise women and write about them, Nita Kumar (1994:4) suggests four ways to deal i.e. by making women the object of human 'gaze' by seeing women as actors and subjects by giving them the prerogative of males, by focussing on the patriarchal, ideological discursive within which women exist and which seemingly control them without a chance to get out of them, by looking at the hidden, subversive ways in which women exercise their agency. She raises some questions like desirability of having women as subjects and to replacing of the masculine, rational, free subject into a feminine one.

According to Monisha Behal's (1984) work in Mainpuri district in west Uttar Pradesh, women's lives in the village are full of gloom and sadness because of work overload, bad health, drudgery and poverty. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita (1984) pose the women's question by highlighting the incompatibility of Indian constitutional Law, violence, aggression and crimes against women. Mahatma Gandhi viewed that women has infinite capacity for sufferings because she is the mother of man has also been critically examined. Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi (1986) studied the Indian women in the context of interconnections between gender, caste and class. They explained that the patriarchal upper castes tightened both caste and gender division as they consolidated their economic supremacy and defended challenges to that supremacy.

Box 27.3: Women and Dalits

Status asymmetry of genders is part of the larger social structure which is reinforced through caste and family values. Gender and caste are important aspects of class exploitation. Women in the Indian society are stratified along caste, class, religious and ethnic boundaries thus no generalisations on the status become possible. Women are stratified. Women from Dalit sections, suffer from triple oppression – caste, class, gender.

Divided by economic inequality and the ideology of hierarchy Indian women hardly share interests. It has been found that work is prime mover of women's status because there is a correspondence between economic stratification, social hierarchy and differentiation of female work pattern and employment modes. Caste oppression, class exploitation and gender inequities are more stable and durable as they are practiced within the family.

Women's movements in India have mainly focused on those issues which seem to cut across boundaries such as violence against women, work related inequalities, access to education and employment, health, social recognition of work of house wives and remuneration for their work, political repression and under representation, price rise etc.

Raising issues of exploitation and oppression in different spheres of life i.e. family, marriage, economy, religion and politics, feminists seem to cover a large vista of gender concerns in diverse Indian contexts.

In all kinds of writings it has been admitted that patriarchy, stratification system and status of women are closely inter-related and any kind of positive change in the status of women would be an attack on patriarchy and stratification system. Through a symbolic analysis unequal practices have been seen express deep seated cultural valuations of what it is to be a masculine and feminine. Leela Dube (op. cit.) discusses the relationship between man and women by using metaphoric concepts of 'seed' and the earth in various patrilineal cultures as justification of gender asymmetry.

Women in literary writings have been projected in a conservative form. In the last three decades large spate of writings on various aspects of gender inequality challenge the invisibility of women in economy, denial of unemployment, decision making and violence and crime against women as male privileges.

The abolition of landlordism and the breakdown of its socio- cultural milieu have affected women in a positive manner. Mencher and Saradmoni (1983:A -167) find that female income is essential for below poverty line houses. Most of the women are engaged in three types of work: (a) participation in the traditionally defined labour force (b) domestic work plus activities like alone. Even these women are victimized because of their sex and poor economic back-ground.

Karuna Ahmad finds (1979 : 1435 - 40) five trends in women's employment: (a) clustering of women in a few occupations (b) clustering either in low status occupation or in the lower rungs of the prestigious profession, (c) women receive lower salaries than men, (d) high proportion of highly educated and professionally trained unemployed women.

Studies suggest that women's professional locations reflect their position in society in terms of caste and class backgrounds and educational achievements. Perceptions regarding status among women are shaped by modern education than the traditional values regarding marriage and family.

Agnihotri (1996) and Agarwal (1984) gave preference for Marxist approach in analysing women. Agarwal proposes that a number of questions which would have a bearing on gender relations will get obfuscated in the organisation of production and relations of production. But despite the metaphor of reforms and individuation of women, emphasis on chastity, patriarchy, division of Labour, sacredness of Marriage seclusion with the household has persisted

27.6 Caste and Gender

The three basic characteristics of caste are:

- i) Exclusion or separation i.e. rules governing marriage and contact, which maintains distinctions of caste.
- ii) Hierarchy i.e. the principle of order and rank according to status.
- iii) Interdependence i.e. the division of labour which is closely tied to hierarchy and separation.

These three analytically separable principles of the caste system operate through units based on kinship. Women's lives are largely lived within familial parameters. The centrality of the family and household remains very important in their lives (Dube, 1996: 1- 27).

Women's work contributes substantially to the occupational continuity of a caste group. significant continuities in the link between caste and occupation can be seen with respect to Brahmin is still acting as a Purohit (priest) for upper and middle level castes. Among artisan castes of goldsmiths, blacksmiths, potters and weavers, many are still using their traditional profession for their living and women are helping them directly or indirectly at all levels of work. Basket weaving is a joint activity of men and women. In rural areas and small towns it is common for women from households of petty traders and shopkeepers to grind spices and prepare fries, fritters and preserve for sale in the family shop. It is a fact that occupational continuity of a particular caste depends largely on women (ibid).

Jajmani relations, short-term contractual affiliation between artisans and service castes and land owners, cultivators and traders, and relations of exchange among occupational castes, a feature of many rural and semi-urban areas, function at the level of family. Both men and women render services and receive remuneration in case and kind for their work. We can see in every region of India there are specific 'Untouchable' castes whose women work as midwives: these women, along with the men of their caste, share the essential task of removing pollution of upper and clean castes. The bond or contract which ties labourers to their masters is understood to include the services of both the husband and the wife (ibid).

The necessity of continuing with occupational work is an important basis for marrying within the caste. Women's contribution to occupational continuity is carried out within patrilineal limits and under the impositions and controls of caste. A woman's education may also be restricted keeping the work demands and marriage market in mind.

In difficult times of the family, Scheduled Caste women generally do works of scavenging but not the men. It is held that since women are used to doing domestic work for their own household, can do similar kind of work for others. The men feel that it is below their dignity to do such works or jobs. Among migrant families, women are often the principle supporter of the family. But the controls are retained at this time also. Social and ritual matters are discussed and decided upon by the males of the caste with in the neighborhood (ibid).

Food and Rituals: Food constitutes a critical element in the ritual idiom of purity and pollution. The concern of purity and pollution centering on food begin at home. The prescriptions and prohibitions regarding food for women are governed by principles of kinship, marriage and sexuality. Women play key role in maintaining the sanctity and purity of home. Notions of safety relating to both purity/pollution and the 'evil eye' entail a variety of restriction and constraints on women in the tasks of processing, preserving, cooking and distributing food. In situation away from home and their locality men tend to be more relaxed about rules of commensality, in a similar context women are both chaperoned and watched over carefully and are expected to follow rules more strictly (ibid).

There is a pervasive notion that women never attain the level of purity of men of their own caste. It is well known that traditionally women of twice-born castes have been equated with *Shudras* who could not be initiated into the learning of the *Vedas* (ibid).

Marriage and sexual relations constitute a central arena in which caste impinges on women's lives. The cultural apprehension of the vulnerability of women and the emphasis on their purity and restrained behaviour which emphasises on limited interaction with opposite sex, are important components of management of female sexuality in a caste society. The strong patriliney in North India institutionalizes control of sexuality and fertility of women. In the case of an unattached woman, pregnancy is a disaster because in partrilineal society the issues of caste boundaries and her own purity are involved.

Growing up of a female child is marked by severe controls, idealization of familial roles, and emphasis on female modesty and strong value attached to virginity of female. Women are expected to retain the purity of caste at all life stages.

The pre-pubertal phase is looked upon as intrinsic purity stage and it is celebrated in a number of ways, like worshipping and feeding virgin girls on 8th day of Navaratri. This calls for restrained behaviour on their part and emphasises the need for protection and vigilance. In Indian society, restrained and controlled sexuality is a pre-requisite for socially sanctioned motherhood (Dube ibid). Even in urban areas middleclass women working in the public work sphere experience pressures to confirm to the image of 'good woman' and face sexual harassment.

The principles of sexual asymmetry underlie the relationship between caste endogamy and dowry, the different fates of men and women in inter-caste unions and the sexual abuse of women. Sexual mores and restrictions are less severe in case of 'lower caste' women. Men have mechanism by taking purifactory bath and the ritual expiation of the offence to escape pollution

which occurs through sexual intercourse with a low caste woman, but the same is not accepted in case of 'upper caste' female, she is banished, declared dead to the family. Inter-caste marriages especially in rural India are still not tolerated and many cases of killing the couples have been reported in the recent past. Sexual violence against lower caste and tribal women is not an uncommon feature here.

M.N. Srinivas (1976: 90) has pointed out that in contemporary caste society cognate jatis tend to get telescoped to form a single entity for purposes of marriage caste both imposes constraints and creates the dominant ethos which underlie the practice of dowry within Hindu society. The increasing social and economic differentiation has increased the demand and expectation on the part of the groom's family.

27.7 Tribe, Gender, Stratification and Change

For long it was assumed that tribal societies were not stratified along caste and class in the Indian context and the gender relations were seen to be near egalitarian. Tribal Women's status was also seen to be much higher than the caste women since concepts of purity and pollution did not apply to them and women enjoyed considerable autonomy in sexual and marriage affairs. Despite women's major contribution to tribal economy, they were excluded from inheritance of property and political decision making. Recent literature suggest that tribal societies are changing at a fast pace. Colonialism, coexistence with caste groups, missionaries, industrialisation, education, political democratisation etc have influenced them to a great extent. Gender asymmetry which always existed in these groups has multiplied and become more complex due to import of outside influences and growing stratification based on wealth and power (Mehrotra, 2004). Gendering of politics and the state are other major areas of concern. Women's right to vote and the constitutional provisions for gender equality could not ensure women's active participation in the political realm and statutory bodies. Their exclusion from public decision making bodies is near complete. Gender inequality is inbuilt into state's seemingly progressive policies as highlighted by Swaminathan (1987,cf. Sharma,1997). She picks up Minimum Wages Act and the Equal Remuneration Act as well as policies for women's education and the Hindu Law of Succession. Women's movements in India have created a great deal of awareness and gender issues have come to the centre stage. Women's organisations raising questions of gender inequality and empowerment have been operational at both grassroots and other levels of Indian society, employing local strategies in resisting social and economic oppression (Mehrotra, 2002). National and international agencies have created spaces through NGO action in rural and tribal areas for economic as well social development. The much debated and practiced phrase women's empowerment has become the buzz word and a quiet revolution is taking place at grassroots level through women's active participation in development process. Agarwal (1994), however, notes that effective rights in land alone can empower women. Women's struggles are about bringing social transformation and emancipation from cultural bondage which keeps the stratification stable.

27.8 Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that a gender informs and organises social stratification as one of the organising principles like race, class, caste or status. Gender in interface with race and class determines the structure

of western society, whereas caste and gender enter into class laying down the structure of action for its members in the Indian context. The understanding of status implications in social life and everyday routine of men and women are symbolically represented in ideological and material aspects of society.

The question of gender and stratification is not to be understood in terms of inequality between men and women and in terms of subordination of women alone. Recent researches on masculinity also suggest maleness to be the symbolic construct as the femaleness is, reflecting that how gender as a cultural construct expresses the relational dimension rather than the individual attributes across societies and cultures.

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Unit 28

Theories of Origin of Caste System

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- 28.2 Definition of Caste
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- 28.6 Conclusion
- 28.7 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After you have read this unit you will be able to

- give a definition of caste
- outline theories of caste as an institution
- describe the caste system over the ages

28.1 Introduction

It is perhaps true that the most frequently mentioned peculiarity of the traditional Hindu Society is the institution of caste, or as it more frequently called, the caste system.

The origin of caste is a subject, which has given rise to a great deal of speculation. The Indian caste system which is an age-old institution, even to it, there is no unanimity with regards to its origin. The caste structure is so complex that in spite of large number of researches done by social scientists no valid explanation with regard to its origin could come out.

This unit seeks to have a look at the various theories of origin of caste system; various definitions given by scholars and also the issue that how the caste system has sustained itself through ages; what all forces were responsible for its sustainability.

28.2 Definition of Caste

The word is derived from the Latin word 'Custus', which means 'pure'. The Portuguese word 'Casta' which means race, lineage or pure stock. But 'Caste' was not used in its Indian sense till the seventeenth century. The Indian use is the leading one now, and it has influenced all other uses. As the Indian idea of caste was but vaguely understood, this word was loosely applied to the hereditary classes of Europe resembling the caste of India, who keep themselves socially distinct. The Portuguese used this word to denote the Indian institution, as they thought such a system was intended to keep purity of blood.

On one hand the learner is used to describe in the broadest sense the total system of social stratification, peculiar to India, on the other hand, it is used to denote four more or less distinct aspects of this total system. i.e. varna, jati and gotra.

Careless use of the English word 'caste' has been the source of considerable confusion. Manu distinctly says that there are only four varnas, Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra & there is no fifth varna, while he admits of over fifty jatis. Varna, according to Manu are four divisions into which the castes are grouped. But later scholars point out that even Manu confuses jati with varna. The confusion is due to the fact that the Brahmin can be called both a varna and jati.

According to Risley, "a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor; human or divine, professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give opinions as forming a singly homogenous community. The name generally denotes or is associated with a specific occupation. A caste is almost invariably endogamous in the sense that a member of the large circle denoted by the common name may not marry outside that circle, but within the circle there are usually a number of smaller circles each of which is also endogamous". Ketkar defines a caste as a social group having two characteristics:

- 1) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born.
- 2) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group. Each one of such groups has a special name by which it is called. Several of such small aggregates are grouped together under a common name, while these larger groups are but subdivisions of groups still larger which have independent names.

Box 28.1: Views on Caste System

Gait says that caste is an endogamous group or a collection of such groups bearing a common name who by reason of traditional occupation and reputed origin, are generally regarded, by those of their countrymen who are competent to give an opinion, as forming a single homogenous community, the constituent parts of which are nearly related to each other than they are to any other section of society.

Béteille has defined caste, 'as a small and named group of persons characterised by endogamy, hereditary membership and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system'.

M. Senart defines caste 'as a close corporation, in theory at any rate rigorously hereditary; equipped with a certain traditional and independent organisation including a chief and a council, meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining together at certain festivals; bound together by common occupations, which relate more particularly to marriage and to food and to questions of ceremonial pollution, and ruling its members by the exercise of jurisdiction the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the community more felt by the sanction of certain penalties and above all by final irrevocable exclusion from the group.

Nesfield defines a caste as 'a class of the community which disowns any connection with any other class and can neither intermarry nor eat or drink with any but persons of their own community.'

Majumdar & Madan define caste thus: "If a number of people constitute a group not because of physical togetherness but because they have some common interests and common ways to doing things, as a consequence of which stratification of society into higher and lower group emerges, then there groups may be called as status groups. If a status group is open to entry, that is, if anybody can become its member by fulfilling certain pre-requisite conditions, like obtaining a degree, or paying an admission fee, or earning a particular income, then the status group may be called a class. If the recruitment is not free, that is, if a status group is not open to anybody, but only those are its members who have certain ascribed, attributes, which cannot be acquired by other, then it is called a caste."

Bougle, the French writer, concludes that the caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics:

- 1) separation in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food);
- 2) division of labour, each group having, in theory or by tradition, a profession from which their members can depart only with certain limits;
- 3) and finally hierarchy, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another.

This definition indicates the main characteristics of the system.

Like the numerous definitions given by various scholars since decades there are numerous theories of origin of caste system.

28.3 Theories of Origin of Caste System

As is evident from the various definitions given above, caste in India is a social institution, deriving sanction from and intimately interwoven with the Hindu religion. Membership of a caste is compulsory and not a matter of choice. A person is born into it.

It is practically impossible for individuals to change their caste. Each caste boasts of a peculiar tradition of culture and tries to preserve it tenaciously. The customs by which it lives are generally different in some respects from those of any other castes and are sometimes in marked contrast to those of any other caste. The caste system provides the individual member of caste with rules which must be observed by him in the matters of food, marriage, divorce, birth, initiation and death.

Caste sanctions and strictures still govern all social, religious and economic activities.

Reflection and Action 28.1

What do you think are the most important aspects of caste. Read the entire unit before writing the answer in your notebook.

It is obvious that such a system of social stratification divides the society into thousands of small, hereditary and endogamous groups, each cluster of groups having its own distinctive sets of customs and practices, which together form a hierarchy, each such group of caste is associated with one or more

traditional occupations and is related to the other by means of an elaborate division of labour.

The caste system on which the traditional order of the Hindu society is based is believed to have been of immemorial antiquity. The complex nature of the caste structure is evident from the fact that, even after a century and a half of painstaking and meticulous research in the history and function of the social system, we do not possess any conclusive explanation of the circumstances that might have contributed to the formation and development of this unique system in India. As commented by D.N. Majumdar, there are today as many theories regarding the origin of the caste system as there are writers on the subject.

Census of India done in 1931 made references of the following five theories with regards to the origin of caste. Hence, to simplify our endeavor we too would follow the same reference.

a) The Divine Origin:

It may be pointed out that most of the religious authorities, Shashtra's and puranas have advocated the divine origin of the caste system. So, the general feeling among the Hindus is that it has been established by the order of God or at least by his wishes, and so it should be religiously followed. As per the 'Purusha Sukta' in Rig Veda, the people belong to four main castes (varnas) constituting the four body parts of the purush (the creator). The Brahmin was his (purusha's) mouth, the Rajanya (kshatriya) was his arms, the Vaisya was his thigh; and the shudra sprang from his feet.

This view has also been expressed in most of Dharma-Shastras, smritis and Puranas. Manu, whose pronouncement is vided as an authority, also supported this view. He further asserted that different castes arose as a series of crosses first between the four varnas and then between their descendants and also by degradation due to non observance of sacred rites. Besides, the book of Manu also contains reference to caste by the ten primeval rishis i.e. Marichi, Atri, Angiras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, Prachetas, Vaisistha, Bhrigu and Narda. In the Mahabharata, divergent views have been expressed. In Shantiparva, Bhrigu has asserted that the world was created by Brahma and later on separated into castes in consequence of work. But in the Mahabharata it is stated that the Lord Krishna created Brahmins from his mouth, Kshatriyas from his arms, Vaisyas from his thighs and Shudras from his feet. In the Bhagwad Gita it is stated that the four fold division of castes was created by god according to appointment of qualities and duties.

b) Karma and Transmigration:

Then there is the theory of karma and transmigration of soul which seeks to justify the caste system. The various conditions of men, the highest, the middling, and the lowest are caused by karma. One's status in life is determined by one's action (karma) in past incarnations. Whatever a man enjoys or suffers is a result of his own actions. His bad actions would bear bitter fruit, whether they were done overtly or covertly. In consequence of many sinful acts committed by one's body, voice or mind, that individual in the next birth would become a bird, or a beast, or be born as a low caste person respectively.

Those who perform good karma pass into superior existence, and those who

lead an ideal life obtain nirvana from birth and death. Such being the idea of retribution and justice, not only one is dissuaded from bad life but he is also persuaded into a meritorious life by promise of absolution, of heaven, of expiration of sins of himself and also his ancestors. Thus even the most wretched man with his, most degrading occupation remains satisfied with the belief that the miseries of his present life, are the result of his sins in his previous life, and if he submissively performs his caste duties in this life he will be born in a higher caste in the next life.

Box 28.2: Formation of Castes

According to the Racial theory propounded by Herbert Risley (1915) in his book 'The People of India' racial differences and endogamous marriages lead to the origin of the caste system. According to him, caste system developed after emigration of IndoAryans from Persia where the society was divided into four classes—priests, warriors, cultivators and artisans and this they maintained even after coming here. They differed from the non-Aryans in culture and racial traits. So in order to maintain their superior status they started practicing hyper gamy and imposed restriction on 'Pratiloma' marriages.

Risley (1915) described six processes by which the castes might have formed. They are enrolment of tribes of aboriginal in the range of Hinduisim either under their own tribal designation or under a new caste name, occupation as the chief factor in the evolution of caste, change in original occupation leading to subdivision of the caste which ultimately developed into separate caste, development of new caste due to neglect of established ceremonial practices, tendency of certain groups to preserve by gone traditions more rigidly, and the sectarian type who started life as religious sects.

Kroeber (1930) supports racial factor but he also regards religious, cultural and occupational factors as significant.

Ghurye (1932) has described the caste system as Brahminical system and believes that the conquered non-Aryan race becomes the shudras who were debarred from religious and social activity of the Aryans.

Majumdar (1957) believes that clash of culture and contact of races led to social groupings. He also believes that three superior classes assigned particular occupation for their members and to maintain their superior status, debarred other people from practicing such occupations. This led to hierarchical caste system.

Thus it appears that the racial factor has been accepted by most of the scholars but still it cannot be taken as the only factor in the development of the caste system.

European writers on the subject of caste origins knew about the racial difference between castes, high and low, and consciously and unconsciously linked their findings to race. Weale wrote that the whole history of India, from the earliest times, had been one long story of colour prejudice and that more cruelty had probably been displayed there than in the rest of the world, believed that the Aryans races who were 'white' simply devised the iron system of caste to prevent the under mixing of a dominant race with a 'black' inferior race.

W.J.Thomas finds marked physical contracts in the population, correlated with superior and inferior cultures and this according to him is the basis of caste distinctions.

Dudley Buxton thinks that caste is still of assistance in dividing up the complex races of the Indian peninsula.

Gillin thinks that it is possible that caste in India originated in the racial differentiations between various populations,

MacIver also leans towards the theory of the racial origin of caste structures. He says that caste perhaps arose but of the superimposition of one endogamous community on another, religion and pride of race which such a superimposition must have engendered.

The colour questions in the formation of caste has also been considered. The colour question at the root of the varna system is apparent from the word verna, which means colour.

The class, which retained utmost purity of colour by avoiding intermixture normally, gained precedence in the social scale. The status also depends upon the extent of isolation maintained by the social groups. The Brahmins were white, the Kshatriyas red; the Vaisyas were yellowish and the Shudras were black as described in the Mahabharata. The three higher varnas have tried to maintain their claims to superior status by keeping to themselves the important professions.

Karve, however does not accept the view that the original meaning of varna was 'colour'. She argues that in the early scanned literature and in grammatical works varna meant 'class'. Karve continues that 'at a later time the word varne to mean 'colour' and the fourfold division of the ancients was then taken to be based on physical feature, namely colour.'

The social factor in the formation of the caste structure, in a sense, admitted by most of the scholars and yet the development of the caste system cannot be explained wholly on the basis of race.

c) Occupational Theory:

Occupational theory propounded by Nesfield (1885) advocates occupation as the lone factor for the development of this system. According to him, before this system priesthood was not the exclusive monopoly of Brahmins. But later on when hymns and rituals became more complex, a section of people got themselves specialized and became the Brahmins. Due to importance of sacrifices such people came to be more respected. Later they made this occupation hereditary. After this other sections of people also organised themselves for securing privileges. They did this in self-defense and also in imitation of group of people whom they held in high esteem.

Box 28.3: Ranking and Caste

Different occupations grouped together men from different tribes into castes, which then borrowed the principles of endogamy and prohibition of commensality from the customs of the old tribes and thereby solidified themselves into isolated units. The ranking of any caste as high or low depended upon whether the industry represented by the caste belonged to an advanced or backward stage of culture and thus the natural history of

human industries afforded the chief clue to the gradation as well as the formation of the Indian castes. Thus the castes following the most primitive occupations like hunting, fishing, basket making etc were regarded as the lowest, the metal workers, agriculturalists and readers were higher in rank, while the highest caste was of those who were priests and teachers.

Slater in his book, 'Dravidian Elements in Indian Culture' emphasises the fact that caste is actually stronger in southern than in northern India and suggests that caste arose in India before the Aryan invasion as a result of occupations becoming hereditary and marriages being arranged by parents within the society of the common craft because sexual maturity developed early and trade secrets were thus preserved. As a result of magic and religious ceremonies also, exclusive occupational groups were built up, marriage outside which became prejudicial and contrary to practice. The Aryan invasion had the effect of strengthening a tendency to associate difference of colour and of strengthening also a tendency for castes to be placed in a scale of social precedence. He also maintains the existence in the pre-Aryan society of Indian of an order of priest magicians.

Denzil Ibbetson explains caste as arising from a combination of tribal origins, functional guilds and a 'levitical religion' and lays great stress on the tribe the turning point in the career of a tribe comes when it abandons its wild and romantic life and adopts a particular occupation as its principal method of economic subsistence. This is the guild stage in caste history, and is common at some period or other of economic progress to all peoples in the world. The formation of guilds of occupational groups naturally led to recognition of skills and importance of the various guilds. In medieval times, the guilds vied with one another for predominance in accordance with their economic status exercising various degrees of pressure on the social life of the country. The exaltation of the priestly guild was soon followed by the priests insisting on the hereditary nature of their occupational status, and this led to the formation of endogamous units, as more and more of the guilds wanted to conserve the social status and privileges they enjoyed and to secure these permanently for the members of the guild. Later various other guilds followed suit and a hierarchical organisation established itself.

Chappel and Coon trace the origin of castes to the absorption of aboriginal types, and they also explain the formation of new castes with reference to the emergence of new occupations.

d) Tribes and Religious Theory:

From very early times, there has been a gradual and silent change from tribes to caste. This change has taken place in a number of ways, and it is believed that most of the lower or exterior castes of today were formerly tribes.

Risley has mentioned four processes by which the transformation of tribes into castes is effected. The processes are:

- 1) The leading men of an aboriginal tribe, having somehow got on in the world became independent landed proprietors, managed to enroll themselves in one of the more distinguished castes.
- 2) A number of aborigines embrace the tenets of Hindu religious sect and becoming Vaishnavas and giving up their tribal name.
- 3) A whole tribe of aborigines, or a section of tribe enrolling themselves in

the ranks of Hinduism, under the style of a new caste which, though claiming an origin of remote antiquity is really distinguishable by its name from any of the standard and recognised.

- 4) A whole tribe of aborigines, or a section thereof, become gradually converted to Hinduism without abandoning their tribal designation. Risley mentions the case of the Bhumij of Western Bengal, a pure Dravidian race, who lost their original language and now speak only Bengali. They worship Hindu gods in addition to their own (the tendency being to relegate the tribal gods to the women), and the more advanced among them employ Brahmins as family priests. They still retain a set of floristic exogamous subdivision closely resembling those of the Mundas and the Santhals, but they are beginning to forget the totems and the names themselves will probably soon be abandoned in favour of aristocratic designations. The tribe will then have become a caste and will go on giving up its customs that are likely to betray its true descent.

To these four process, Majumdar has added a fifth in which an individual member of an aboriginal or semi-aboriginal tribe adopts the surname and gotra of a particular caste, manages to enroll himself as a member of that particular caste and gradually intermarries with the members of that caste. His wealth and influence attract members of the caste he aspires to belong and thus in the long run he may establish himself as a permanent member of that caste. Cultural contact with Hindu castes leads to the adoption by the tribes of Hindu beliefs, rituals, customs and to participation in Hindu festivals and attendance at Hindu temple.

The process of gradual evolution from the aborigines to a higher class Hindu is a main feature of social evolution in India which government offices have noticed and commented upon it.

Bhuiyas present an excellent example of how from the aboriginal state, caste or group differences and distinctions arose gradually as men disclaimed earlier association and claimed new importance to themselves both divine and social. Similarly, there is a great parallel between the Munda social organisation and the Hindu organisation of 'gotra' and 'varna'. The Mundas are now found in certain parts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, where they are known under three different names, the Mundas, Santhals and Hos.

The Santhals are divided into 12 main septs of which the trace of one sept only could not found. Most probably the lost sept has become completely brahminised or Kshatriyaised and their descendents are not likely to give out their secrets.

e) Family and Marriage:

This explanation given by Senart (1930) holds that the principle of exogamy is the main basis of Indian caste system. In his opinion caste is the normal development of ancient Aryan institution which assumed a peculiar form because of peculiar conditions in India like prohibition of marriage within one's gotra, pollution by touch with lower classes, prohibition of inter-caste dining etc. He has presumed beginning of caste system in the form of varna division to the Indo Iranian period because of four-fold division of society in the Rig Vedic India.

Risley mentions that the invading Aryans displayed a marked antipathy to marriage with persons of alien black race and devised an elaborate system of taboo for the prevention of such union. But intermarriage could not altogether be prevented.

28.4 Caste System Through Ages

Rig Vedic society was basically tribal in character. According to Keith, the Vedic Indians were primarily pastoral, and this holds good for the Aryans known from the early parts of the Rig Veda. The Aryans encountered the urban population of Harappa society and ultimately conquered them in war. Social adjustment between the Aryans and survivors of Harappa society and other people naturally led to the rehabilitation of some of the surviving priests and chiefs into corresponding positions, possibly of inferior nature in the new Aryan society. Early literature throws hardly any light on the process of assimilation between the Aryan commoners and those of the survivors of earlier societies. It is likely that most of them were reduced to what came to be known as the fourth varna in the Aryan society. In essence, the Rig Vedic Aryan society and perhaps the society described in the Atharva Veda, was characterised by the absence of sharp class diversions among its members, a feature, which is usually found in early societies. The Shudras appear as a social class only towards the end of the period of the Atharva Veda.

The Aryans, white skinned, good featured, making sacrifices and worshipping gods like Agni, Indra, Varun etc were distinguishable ethnically and culturally from the Dasyus, who were black skinned (*krishanthvach*), flat nosed (*anas*), of unintelligible speech (*mridhravach*), not sacrificing (*ayajnan*), worshipping no god (*adevayu*) and following strange customs (*anyavrata*).

Reflection and Action 28.2

Provide an outline of the various theories of caste. Which one do you favour? Write your answer in your notebook.

Gradually the Daynrs, instead of being exterminated were taken as slaves. 'Das' became in the later literature synonymous with slave and the people were employed in menial jobs. It is most likely that Dasyus (slaves) and Shudras were originally the names of prominent tribes conquered and reduced to slavery by the Aryans. By the time the Purusha Sukta was composed the Dasa slaves of the Aryan conquerors had begun to be called Shudras. The idea of ceremonial impurity of the Shudras involving prohibition of physical and visual contact with him appeared towards the clos of the Vedic period (1000-600 B.C.) The first notice of such a marked degradation is found in the Satapatha Brahamana.

Around the 600 B.C.—300 B.C., the difference between the Vaisayas and Shudras was getting narrower day by day. The occupation of the two castes were practically interchangeable. The Vedic society now advanced from tribalism to feudalism. The proud higher castes — Brahmin and Kshatriya began to adopt a more exclusive policy towards them. The social position of Shudra underwent a change for the worse. Shudra ceased to have any place in the work of administration. The lawgivers emphasised the old fiction that the Shudra was born from the feet of the God and thus imposed on him numerous social disabilities in matters of company, food, marriage and education. The idea that food touched by the Shudra is denied and cannot be taken by a Brahmin is first expressed in the Dharmasutras (500B.C.-300

B.C.). Shudra could not take part in Vedic sacrifices and sacraments. He came to be excluded from the Vedic sacrifices to such an extent that in the performance of certain rites, even his presence and sight were avoided.

It has been said that the origin of untouchability may be traced back of pollution. Untouchability may be traced back to pollution. Untouchability has its origin in both hygiene and religion. Finally the idea of untouchability has been traced to the theoretical impurity of certain occupations.

Sharma thinks that one of the reasons for the origin of untouchability was the cultural lag of the aboriginal tribes, who were manly hunters and galherens, in contrast to the members of the Brahminical society, who possessed the knowledge of metals and agriculture and were developing urban life. Gradually, Brahmins and Kshatriyas withdrew more and more from the work of primary production and tended to be hereditary in their positions and functions. The Nishadas, Chandalas and Paulkasas, the earliest mention of them is found in Yajurved. Out of there chandalas and Nishadas were considered as untouchables in later Vedic Society. In Dharamsutras and Pali texts Chandalas are clearly depicted as untouchables and the Vedic texts kept the fifth caste altogether out from the four-fold division of society. During this time the Varna divided Brahminical society was undermined by the activities of heretical sects and the inclusion of foreign elements such as the Bactrian Greeks, Sakas, Pathans and Kusanas. Manu desperately tries to preserve Brahminical society, not only by ordaining rigorous measures against the Shudras, but also by inventing suitable geneologies for the incorporation of foreign elements into varna society. In order to assimilate numerous aboriginal tribes and foreign elements Manu made a far greater use of the fiction of Varnasamkara (intermixture of varnas) than was done by his predecessors. In the majority instances the mixed castes were lumped with the Shudra in respect of their hereditary duties gives a list of Jatis, many of whom have changed in name and some of them have ceased to exist. He distinguishes the following categories:

- a) four original varnas
- b) castes, which were supposed to be produced by mixtures with pure and mined castes
- c) castes which have lost their status on account of neglect of sacred rites
- d) castes due to the exclusion of persons from the community
- e) slaves and their descendants
- f) people excluded from the community of four Varnas an well as their descendants

Manu mentions the old mixed castes, who are said to have originated from the intermixture of the varnas and ascribes a similar origin to a long list of mixed castes resolve themselves into three types:

- a) castes produced from different pure castes;
- b) those produced by the mixture of pure castes an one side and mixed on the other;
- c) and those produced from parents of mixed origin on both sides.

Manu also advocated that higher castes should avoid all contact with the Chandalas and Svapakas. Chandalas and Svapakas should live outside the villages, their sole property consisted of dogs and donkeys; food vessels used by

them would be discarded forever. Manu goes further that if a Brahmin had contact with a Chandala or Antya, he would fall from his Brahminhood.

The advent of foreign people served to loosen the shackles of the varna system. The law books of the Gupta period retain the distinction between the Shudras and untouchables. During this period there seems to have been not only an increase in the number of untouchables but also some intensification in the practice of untouchability. Fahien (AD 399-414) informs that, when the Chandalas enter the gate of a city or a market place, they strike a piece of wood to give prior notice of their arrival so that men may know and avoid them.

After the death of Harsha (AD 647), Sind came under the occupation of the Arab in A.D. 712 and since then Muslims continued to come to India as travelers, traders and mercenaries. From the 11th century onwards, Muslim invasion with cold-blooded murders, forcible conversion, looting and devastation of the countryside, breaking up of Hindu idols and desecration of Hindu temples began in India on a large scale and the Indians experienced perpetual insecurity. For fear of their culture being submerged under the impact of new forces, the Hindus framed rigid rules against inter-marriage and inter-dining. The principle of hereditary came into prominence by 1000 A.D. Pratiloma and anuloma marriages were discouraged. The position of Shudras improved. There was improvement in their economic condition but intellectually they remained rather backward, because higher education was largely restricted to the elite— the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas.

With continuous Muslim invasions, there was considerable effect on the Hindu social system. In 16th century, there was further hardening of the caste system by early marriage to prevent religious conversions. The Portuguese occupation of some part of India in early 16th century gave rise to fresh conversions of Hindus into Roman Catholics. In medieval India, with resurgence of Hinduism by Sankracharya (788-820 A.D.) the Muslim and Christian convert freely got reconverted into Hinduism. Further Vaisnavaites and Saivaites devotees during this critical period, held the torch of Hinduism. Various Bhakti movements by Acharya Ramanuj, Madhavacharya, Vallavacharya, Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, Tulsi Das and Many other did help check Islamisation of India. Many converts came back to Hindu fold.

By the time British consolidated their position in India, the Hindu social system had accumulated many undesirable features. The various policies of the British rulers were geared mainly for the maintenance of law and order, for the collection of taxes, and for keeping an unrestricted market for British goods. Their centralised administration completely disrupted the old economy of the country. The old village economy which, for long, remained unaffected by the political conflicts and which had given so much strength to the caste system, became disrupted under British rule. The land policy created a new class of landlords and above million in to the ranks of tenants and agriculture labourers.

The caste divided Hindu society which ensured employment and protection to its various caste groups, could not effectively challenge the British policy. For the first time caste system faced a serious challenge from its foreign rules.

Western education and social reforms, brought abolition of untouchability. These movements had an aim of cleansing the Hindu social order of some of its undesirable features, narrowing down the caste distinctions, changing the attitude of high caste people towards the untouchables. Growth and town, establishment of industries in urban areas, introduction of railways, led to relaxation of caste prejudice new economic activities taken by the state gave birth to numerous non caste occupation. A process was set into motion, which began to attack the importance of caste as ritual cum-occupational division of society. The establishment of civil and criminal courts robbed the caste system and the caste panchayats of authority they once had even the members of particular castes.

But the same time the British policy was not for fostering unity and cohesion of the various section of people of India. Its policy was directed towards dividing and sub-dividing. People at whatever level possible be it religion, region, language or caste. Introduction of separate electorates or special recognition accorded to non-Brahmins castes in the south not only contributed to the disruption of whatever solidarity India once possessed and fostered jealousy between provinces, creeds, also hardened the caste distinctions.

Thus we see that the process of continuous adjustment and wider integration was always at work. It is clear from the above discussion that caste system becomes more and more rigid over centuries. The forces which led to origin of caste are also the forces, which led to sustainability of the caste system as such.

28.5 Caste: Not an Isolated Phenomenon

Social institutions that resemble caste in one respect or the other are not difficult to find elsewhere. The caste system has survived in a perfect form in India than elsewhere, but Hocart shows that the Indian caste system is not an isolated phenomenon as it is thought to be.

Comparable forms, still exist in Polynesia and Melanesia and that clear traces of them can be seen in ancient Greece, Rome and Modern Egypt.

Hutton finds analogous institutions, which resemble caste in one or other of its aspects in various parts of the world like Ceylon, Fiji, Egypt, Somali, Rnada and Urundi in modern Africa and Burma.

Ghurye traces elements of caste outside India like Egypt, Western Asia, China, Japan, America, Rome and Tribal Europe.

In ancient Persia there were the Atharvas (priests) Aathaesthas (warriors) Vastriya fshuyants (cultivators) and Huitis (patricians). The only important difference lay with regard to fourth class, which was the artisans class in Persia, and the servile or Shudra class in India.

In Western Roman Empire, there were occupational hereditary groups as created by the theodisian code. Such groups would have been created only if there were elements of social segregation in the society.

In Sweden, in the 17th century, marriages outside the class were punished. According to the German law the marriage of a man belonging to the high mobility with a woman is not entitled to the rank of her husband nor is the

full right of inheritance possessed by her and her children. The upper caste Muslims namely the Sheikhs, Saiyads, and the Pathans are intensely cautious of their lineage and avoid weaving marital relations with the low caste muslims like Ansaris and Julahas.

28.6 Conclusion

We have come to realise that the major theory of the origin of caste is rooted in the hindu myths and legends. The religious texts accord divine origin to the caste system in India. Interestingly, it is believed that birth in a high caste is, in fact, a reward of good deeds performed in the previous birth. Most people belonging to upper castes seek to arrange marriages within their own caste so as to maintain their superiority.

28.7 Further Reading

Srinivas M.N. 1962 *Caste in Modern India and other Essays*, London, Asia Publishing House

Lerner, Daniel 1958, *The Passing Away of Traditional Society*. Free Press of Glencoe

