Unit 25

Concepts of Difference and Inequality

Contents

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 of 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 asses 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. Form Marxian standpoint, economic power governs political power. The ruling class derives its power form 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 form unequal life chances in a market situation and the latter form 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, mist differentiate persons in terms of both prestige or esteem, and mist 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 question 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 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 restrain 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, continuous to remain relevant in society and in sociological writings too.

25.8 Further Reading

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