Module 3  Social Structure and Social Change

Lecture 16  Systems of Stratification

Historically, societies have exhibited a variety of stratification systems. A stratification system is the overlapping manner in which societal members are ranked into classes, status groups and hierarchies of power. To distinguish among them, social scientists use models, abstract conceptions that they place on a particular continuum. At one extreme of the continuum is the closed, or caste, stratification system. The middle is represented by the estate system. At the other extreme is the open, or class, system.

The Closed Society: Caste

Whether a society has an open or a closed stratification system is determined by the way its members obtain wealth, prestige and privilege. In a closed, or caste, stratification system, class, status and power are ascribed, that is, determined strictly on the basis of family inheritance rather than individual effort or merit. In a closed society, the individual is born into a specific social stratum, called a caste, and has no opportunity to move in or out of it.

Classical India offers a glaring example of a closed society. The case system that languished in India for centuries was distinguished by the fact that people were divided into a number of castes, representing areas of service to society and ranked in order of their so-called importance to it. Some ranking also resulted from struggles for power or conquest by other groups. Religion and tradition forbade members of one caste to intermarry or interact in any way with members of other castes. Each caste was restricted in occupation and the status of each individual was ascribed, so that a person inherited a specific social position and was unable to change it regardless of effort or achievement. Only a limited number of people, particularly if they exhibited extraordinary military prowess, were able to attain a higher caste, although disobeying certain norms could plunge a person into a lower one. The caste system has been legally abolished in modern India, which has been deeply influenced by Western democratic thought, but many Indians, in rural areas to a larger extent and urban areas to some extent, still follow some elements of the caste system that for so long had been justified by religion and traditional mores.

The Estate System

The estate system was the economic and social system of feudal Europe and, in different forms, has characterized a number of nations in Asia. As in the caste system, in the estate system of stratification, social positions were also ranked according to their functions; however, in theory, all the estates were considered equal in importance. The three main estates were: (i) the nobility, (ii) the church (religion) and (iii) the peasants, and within each estate there was a stratified hierarchy of positions.

Supported by religion and tradition, the estate system permitted quite a bit more mobility among social strata than did the caste system. Because only eldest sons could inherit the title and possessions of a noble family, the remaining sons had to enter either the military or the clergy. Occasionally, serfs who had distinguished themselves were freed and given land, and some peasants were allowed to enter the lower ranks of the priesthood. The remnants of the
estate system are still visible in some modern societies that retain a landed gentry and inherited titles of nobility.

**The Open Society: Class System**

Modern industrial and postindustrial societies mostly nearly approximate the model of an open society. Open, or class, societies have a few common characteristics:

(a) Classes exist but are not institutionalized as in the caste or estate systems;
(b) Class lines are not very clear, so people do not display excessive class consciousness, but inequality stemming from class divisions is apparent;
(c) Status is usually achieved, but there is evidence to indicate that status tends to be ascribed to the lowest and the highest social classes; and
(d) Social mobility is possible and occurs frequently.

Open, or class, systems work best in industrial societies that have market economics, because these offer more opportunities for achieving wealth and status than do societies with centralized economies. In government-controlled economies, people may not have the opportunity to choose their jobs and maximize advantages.

Social mobility – essentially, changing class membership – is possible and encouraged in open systems; however, it is not evenly distributed in the society. Limitations based on racial, ethnic, regional, educational and even religious factors restrict mobility. However, the individual is still permitted much more leeway for social as well as physical movement than in closed systems.

As we have already discussed, class systems in all societies have certain characteristics in common. The rise of social classes is often accompanied by the development of central political institutions, foremost among which is the state. Further, the more surplus a society produces, the more stratified it is and the more complex its class system is. Even if in technologically advanced societies the large surplus that is produced filters down to almost all social classes and starvation-level poverty exists to only a very small extent, class inequalities remain flagrant. Finally, power and wealth appear to be the most important elements of class systems, with prestige playing a less important role.

In contemporary industrial societies, power and wealth are closely interconnected. In other words, the wealthy are more likely to come to power, and the powerful are likely to become wealthy. Societies that have a long tradition of feudal-like stratification, although they have become open in the industrial era, retain strong class boundaries.

**Determining Social Class: Occupational Prestige and Socioeconomic Status**

There is no agreement amongst social scientists as to not only the number of classes in existence but also the standards that determine who belongs to which class. The categories used by researchers to pigeonhole people into social classes are arbitrary and artificial.

Historically, a number of approaches have been used to determine social class. Today, however, most researchers use one of two. In the **occupational prestige approach**, researchers ask people which occupations and sources of income are the most prestigious. This approach depends on a large sample, usually on a national scale. Occupation determines
the amount of money that is earned, which in turn determines, in many cases, the amount of power wielded and the prestige held. But money alone does not determine social class. Some occupations are rated very high even though the monetary rewards are relatively low and vice-versa.

A more common methodological device is based on an index that combines a number of dimensions relevant to stratification. One such index measures **socioeconomic status**. Such an index shows at a glance the position of individuals in the social and economic pecking order. The development of such an index is possible despite instances of status inconsistency because of the related nature of the dimensions of stratification.

**Gender and Social Stratification**

Gender is one of the most profound examples of stratification. Even before class as a marker of social stratification began gender inequalities existed. An individual’s gender, like that of his/her class, caste and others determine his/her life chances and opportunities. Individuals belonging to the feminine gender have unequal access to resources and institutions which determines their status in the society as compared to that of masculine gender. Gendered stratification is maintained in a patriarchal society through the process of gender socialization. This process socializes men and women to occupy dominant and subordinate positions respectively. As in other stratification system some of the main agents of gender socialization are family, religion, education, and peer group. However, it is to be taken note that in everyday life it is the intersection of several markers of stratification that operates to determine the status of an individual and not just class, caste, gender or others.

**Race and Ethnicity and Social Stratification**

Albert Einstein once stated in a profound manner: ‘Racial superiority is a myth.’ The social construction of race and ethnicity refers to a process by which people come to define a group as a race and ethnicity based in part on physical characteristics but mostly on historical, cultural, religious, regional and socioeconomic factors. Social stratification based on race and ethnicity encourages inequality in an institutional manner. It encourages institutional discrimination, affects gender, racial and ethnic groups and other communities on the margins. It is characterized by denial of opportunities and equal rights to individuals or groups that result from the normal operations of a society.

All these forms of stratification occur at the same time, with varying intensity at different places. It is important to understand to what extent and in what ways various forms of stratification affect discrimination against minority groups and/or women in the labour market. Stratification also occurs across spaces – cross-national stratification of rich and poor countries.

Social scientists often tend to not only interpret social differentiation and social stratification but also strive to remove such malaise of society. Further, they also strive to bring about **social change** by dismantling social differentiation and social stratification. In the next lecture, we shall discuss social change and the factors influencing it.
Reference


Questions

1. What is meant by stratification system?

2. ‘Caste is a closed society’. Elucidate.

3. Explain the estate system of social stratification.

4. ‘Class system is an open society’. Elucidate.

5. How do occupational prestige and socioeconomic status determine social class?

6. How does gender play a role in the process of social stratification?

7. How is inequality penetrated into the society based on race and ethnicity?