

Social stratification

Meaning, definitions,
characteristics and functions of
social stratification

- In all societies people differ from each other on the basis of their **age, sex and personal characteristics**. Human society is not homogeneous but heterogeneous. Apart from the natural differences, human beings are also **differentiated according to socially approved criteria**.
-
- So socially differentiated men are treated as socially unequal from the point of view of enjoyment of social rewards like **status, power, income** etc. That may be called social inequality.
- **The term social inequality simply refers to the existence of socially created inequalities.**

Meanings:

- Social stratification is a particular form of social inequality. All societies arrange their members in terms of superiority, inferiority and equality.
- Stratification is a process of interaction or differentiation whereby some people come to rank higher than others.
- when individuals and groups are ranked, according to some commonly accepted basis of valuation in a hierarchy of status levels based upon the inequality of social positions, social stratification occurs.
- Social stratification means division of society into different strata or layers. It involves a hierarchy of social groups. Members of a particular layer have a common identity. They have a similar life style.

Definitions:

- **1. Ogburn and Nimkoff:**
- ‘The process by which individuals and groups are ranked in more or less enduring hierarchy of status is known as stratification’
- **2. Lundberg:**
- “A stratified society is one marked by inequality, by differences among people that are evaluated by them as being “lower” and “higher”.
- **3. Gisbert:**
- “Social stratification is the division of society into permanent groups of categories linked with each other by the relationship of superiority and subordinations”.

- **4. Williams:**
- Social Stratification refers to “The ranking of individuals on a scale of superiority-inferiority-equality, according to some commonly accepted basis of valuation.
- **5. Raymond W. Murray:**
- Social stratification is horizontal division of society into “higher” and “lower” social units.”
- **6. Melvin M Tumin:**
- “Social stratification refers to “arrangement of any social group or society into hierarchy of positions that are unequal with regard to power, property, social evaluation and psychic gratification”.

Characteristics of Stratification:

- 1. It is Social:
- Stratification is social in the sense that it does not represent inequality which are biologically based. It is true that factors such as strength, intelligence, age, sex can often serve as the basis on which status are distinguished.
- But such differences by themselves are not sufficient to explain why some statuses receive more power, property and prestige than others.

- **2. It is Ancient:**

- The stratification system is very old. Stratification was present even in the small wandering bands. Age and sex wear the main criteria of stratification.
- Difference between the rich and poor, powerful and humble, freemen and slaves was there in almost all the ancient civilisation.
- Ever since the time of Plato and Kautilya social philosopher have been deeply concerned with economic, social, political inequalities.

- **3. It is Universal:**
- Social stratification is universal. Difference between rich and poor, the 'haves' or 'have notes' is evident everywhere.
- Even in the non-literate societies stratification is very much present.

- **4. It is in diverse Forms:**
- Social stratification has never been uniform in all societies. The ancient Roman society was stratified into two strata: the Patricians and the Plebians .
- The Aryan society was divided into four Varnas: the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Sudras, the ancient Greek society into freemen and slaves, the ancient Chinese society into mandarins, merchants, Farmer and soldiers.
- Class and estate seem to be the general forms of stratification found in the modern world.

- **5. It is Consequential:**
- The stratification system has its own consequences.
- The most important, most desired and often the scarcest things in human life are distributed unequally because of stratification.
- The system leads to two kind of consequences: (i) Life chances and (ii) Life style.

- Life chances refer to such things as infant mortality, longevity, physical and mental illness, marital conflict, separation and divorce.
- Life styles include the mode of housing, residential area, education, means of recreation, relation between parent and children, modes of conveyance and so on.

Social Inequality and Social Stratification:

- Inequality is found in all societies irrespective of time or place.
- Personal characteristics such as beauty, skill, physical strength and personality may all play a role in the perpetuation of inequality.
- However, there are also patterns of inequality associated with the social positions people occupy.
- **We can say that there are two types of inequality:**
 - 1. Natural and
 - 2. Man Made

- So far as the natural inequality is concerned with reference to age, sex, height, weight etc. the man made inequality may be horizontal or vertical e.g. different occupational groups perform different activities but when these groups become social groups in the sense that they are placed hierarchically and they have interaction within the group and at the inter-strata level, then such type of inequality is called social inequality.

- The term social inequality refers to the socially created inequalities. Stratification is a particular form of social inequality.
- It refers to the presence of social groups which are ranked one above the other in terms of the power, prestige and wealth their members possess.
- Those who belong to a particular group or stratum will have some awareness of common interest and common identity.

Functions of Social Stratification:

- I. For the Individual:
- **1. Competition:**
- Individuals based on their attributes compete with each other and only those individuals who have better attributes get greater recognition.
- This may be in the field of sports, education, occupation etc.

- **2. Recognition of Talent:**
- The persons with more training skills, experience and education are given better positions.
- The deserving individuals are not treated at par with deserving candidates. Such a system helps people to acquire better talents.

- **. Motivation:**
- The system of stratification motivates the individuals to work hard so that they can improve upon their social status.
- It is more true in case of those societies in which statuses are achieved.

- **4. Job Satisfaction:**

- As the jobs are given to the individuals according to their skills and education, the workers get job satisfaction.
- In case, a person with higher qualification is not allowed to move higher in the social ladder, he feels dissatisfied with his job.

- **5. Mobility:**
- The system of achieved status also provides an opportunity for upward and downward mobility. Those persons who work hard and are intelligent move up in the social ladder.
- On the other hand, those who fail to come up to the expectations move downward.
- Hence, the possibility of change in the position keeps the people always alert and makes them work hard.

II. Functions for the Society

- **1. Ascriptive Form of Stratification:**
- Under the caste system, the status of the individual is fixed at birth and different castes are hierarchically arranged.
- However, even within the caste system those members who perform their caste roles effectively and efficiently occupy higher' status.