Social stratification refers to a society’s classification gradation or categorization of its people into social hierarchy based on criteria of factors like wealth, income, race, education, and power. It is a process of allocation of different statuses or positions determined by class, caste, kinship, gender, age, occupation, income and many other social attributes. Social stratification refers to a system by which a society ranks categories of people in a hierarchy. It is universally observed that some groups in society have greater status, power, and wealth than other groups, and these differences lead to social stratification. Social differentiation is different from social stratification in the sense social differentiation involves the formation of horizontal social divisions whereas social stratification involves vertical (hierarchical) ranking of social strata. The other term stratification refers to a process by which individuals and groups are ranked in a more or less enduring hierarchy of status. It refers to the division of a population into strata, one on the top of another, on the basis of certain characteristics like inborn qualities, material possessions and performance.

In one word, 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.

Social stratification is an inherent character of all societies. It is historical as we find it in all societies, ancient and modern; and it is universal as it exists in simple or complex societies. The social differentiation on the basis of high and low is the historical heritage of all societies.

As Sorokin pointed out, “Unstratified society with | real equality of its members is a myth which has never been realized in the history of mankind”. In simpler communities we may not find any class strata apart from the distinction between members of the groups and strangers, distinction based on age, sex kinship.

But in the primitive world chieftainship, individual prowess and clan or family property introduce an incipient stratification. However, modern stratification fundamentally differs from stratification in the primitive societies.

Among the primitive people class distinctions are rarely found. In the modern industrial age estates pass into social classes. Hereditary ranks are abolished but distinctions of status remain and there are great differences in economic power and social opportunities.

Every know society, past and present, thus differentiates its members in terms of roles they play in the group. These roles are determined by the formal positions or statuses in which a society places its members. Hence, social stratification can be referred to as division of society into strata or layers that are superimposed one above the other.
These social strata and layers, divisions and subdivisions have over the time been accepted on the basis of sex and age, status and role, qualification and inefficiency, life chances and economic cum political ascription and monopolization, ritual and ceremony and on numerous other basis. It is of varied nature. It is no less based on the considerations of superiority and inferiority, authority and subordination, profession and vocation.

Social stratification has remained despite the revolutionary ideas and radicalism, equality and democracy, socialism and communism. Classless society is just an ideal. The stratification has something to do; it appears with the very mental makeup of man.

The origin of the social stratification cannot be explained in terms of history. The existence or nonexistent of the stratification in early society cannot be pin pointed. The differentiation between classes existed as early as the Indus Valley society. They, it appears, had the priestly and other classes.

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”.

7. Bernard Barber, “Social stratification in its most general sense, is a sociological concept that refers to the fact that both individuals and groups of individuals are conceived of as constituting higher or lower differentiated strata or classes in terms of some specific or generalized characteristic or set of characteristics.”
**Origin of Stratification:**

Regarding the origin of stratification many views have been given.

(i) **According to Davis,** social stratification has come into being due to the functional necessity of the social system.

(ii) **Professor Sorokin** attributed social stratification mainly to inherited difference in environmental conditions.

(iii) **According to Karl Marx,** social factors are responsible for the emergence of different social strata, i.e. social stratification.

(iv) **Gumplowicz** and other contended that the origin of social stratification is to be found in the conquest of one group by another.

(v) **According to Spengler,** social stratification is founded upon scarcity which is created whenever society differentiates positive in terms of functions and powers.

**Characteristics of Social Stratification:**

On the basis of the analysis of the different definitions given by eminent scholars, social stratification may have the following characteristics.

(a) **Social stratification is universal:**

   There is no society on this world which is free from stratification. Modern stratification differs from stratification of primitive societies. It is a worldwide phenomenon. According to Sorokin “all permanently organized groups are stratified.”

(b) **Stratification is social:**

   It is true that biological qualities do not determine one’s superiority and inferiority. Factors like age, sex, intelligence as well as strength often contribute as the basis on which statues are distinguished. But one’s education, property, power, experience, character, personality etc. are found to be more important than biological qualities. Hence, stratification is social by nature.

(c) **It is ancient:**

   Stratification system is very old. It was present even in the small wondering bonds. In almost all the ancient civilizations, the differences between the rich and poor, humble and powerful existed. During the period of Plato and Kautilya even emphasis was given to political, social and economic inequalities.
(d) It is in diverse forms:

The forms of stratification is not uniform in all the societies. In the modern world class, caste and estate are the general forms of stratification. In India a special type of stratification in the form of caste is found. The ancient Aryas were divided into four varnas: the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. The ancient Greeks were divided into freemen and slaves and the ancient Romans were divided into the particians and the plebians. So every society, past or present, big or small is characterized by diverse forms of social stratification.

(e) Social stratification is Consequential:

Social stratification has two important consequences one is “life chances” and the other one is “life style”. A class system not only affects the “life- chances” of the individuals but also their “life style”. The members of a class have similar social chances but the social chances vary in every society. It includes chances of survival and of good physical and mental health, opportunities for education, chances of obtaining justice, marital conflict, separation and divorce etc. Life style denotes a style of life which is distinctive of a particular social status. Life-styles include such matters like the residential areas in every community which have gradations of prestige-ranking, mode of housing, means of recreation, the kinds of dress, the kinds of books, TV shows to which one is exposed and so on. Life-style may be viewed as a sub-culture in which one stratum differs from another within the frame work of a commonly shared over-all culture.

(f) Inequality or Higher-lower positions:

Social Stratification involves division of society into several layers which stand hierarchically placed in social relations. While some positions or levels carry more rewards, more privileges, more respect, and these are considered to be higher levels; others enjoy lower positions and status. In this way stratification acts as a source of social inequality which is, however, deemed to be natural and essential for orderly, systematic and healthy social life.

(g) Social Stratification is a Source of Competition:

Stratification leads to the emergence of several levels in society. The persons belonging to higher levels are conscious of their higher positions and they try to maintain and improve these. The persons belonging to lower levels always try to secure higher positions. This gives rise to social competition which acts as a means of social progress. However, when this competition becomes unhealthy and very big, it leads to the birth of social conflict, struggles, jealousies and rivalries.

(h) Every Status has a Particular Prestige Associated with it:

Every social position and status is associated with a particular prestige. However, this difference has to logical. It is not to be based on evil practices like casteism, religious superstitions and rituals. In ancient India, the class of Brahmins used to enjoy a superior
position by birth and because of the supreme importance given to religious ceremonies. However, with the passage of time, the faith in the superior position of Brahmins got greatly diluted. Now persons belonging to other classes have also secured higher positions in society. Every social class in now entitled to a life of dignity and respect. The difference can be of degree but not organic and irrational.

(i) Stratification Involves a Stable, Enduring and Hierarchical Division of Society:

Stratification leads to a very stable, enduring hierarchical and quite permanent division in society. Division between the two classes of rich and poor has been continuously present in every society. In India, caste based social stratification has been so strong that it even continues to survive today. Caste based stratification has been very rigid and permanent and a person belonging to one caste can never join another caste.

(j) Different Statuses are Inter-dependent:

Social stratification involves the division of society into several classes and statuses. Each status or class enjoys a particular position in the social hierarchy. However, all the statuses are related and inter-dependent. Changes in social stratification always lead to changes in statuses of persons belonging to various classes.

(k) Stratification is based on Social Values:

In every society, the system of social stratification is based upon social values and traditions. In India, caste has been the main basis of social stratification. However, in western societies class has been the basis of social stratification. The class-structure in every society is in turn based upon the prevailing social values.

(l) Social Stratification Restricts Interactions:

In every society, the people stratified into different levels or classes are involved in interactions. However, the inter-class or inter-level interactions are always limited and defined by social norms.

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