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BLOCK 2
THEORIES OF STRATIFICATION

THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

UNIT 3 MARX IAN THEORY

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall discuss the view of the founding father of sociology, namely, Karl Marx. He had made tremendous contributions for sociological thought. We will of course concentrate on only one aspect of his contribution - social stratification. After reading this unit you will understand:

- how classes emerge in society;
- the basis of class formation; and
- role of classes in social stratification; and

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx (1818-1881) is regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of all times. His views have influenced people classes and nations. His main contribution to understanding society and social processes was through his theory of historical materialism. This presented a radical alternative to the traditional views. Marx tried to understand social development in terms of class conflict. Social stratification was central in his analysis. On the one hand he saw it as a divisive rather than an integrative structure and on the other hand he saw it as inevitable for social development.

In this unit we shall discuss the view of Marx. We will then discuss the significance in analysing class in understanding stratification systems.

3.2 MARX ON STRATIFICATION

Marx used Historical Materialism as the theory to understand social change. For him the first premise of history was the existence of living human beings. The physical organization of human society and the relations human beings have with nature are important indications of development. All living things depend on nature for survival. Plants need soil and water, cows need grass and tigers need to hunt other animals for survival. Human beings also depend on nature for survival. However the basic difference between human beings and other living things is that they can transform nature for their survival while other living things adapt to nature. A cow eats grass but it cannot grow grass. Human beings exploit nature but they have the power to transform it as well. This means that human beings are able to produce their own means of subsistence. This is the basic difference between human and other living things. Marx therefore noted in his work, *German Ideology*, that “Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or by anything one likes. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is determined by their physical condition. In producing their actual means of subsistence men indirectly produce their actual material life”.

It was through production that human beings developed. Primitive human beings were totally dependent on nature as they subsisted through hunting or food gathering. These societies produced the minimum needs for survival. As human beings gradually started transforming nature society was able to produce more for existence of the people.

3.2.1 Division of Labour

Through the development of technology, human beings were able to improve agriculture and could form settled communities. As production grew, the community produced more than its requirements. There was surplus. It was now possible to support people who were not directly involved in the production of food. In earlier societies all people performed similar activities which were needed for survival, namely, food, clothing and shelter. Once there was surplus it was possible for people to diversify their activities. Hence some produced food, which was sufficient to feed all, while others were engaged in other activities. This is called the division of labour.

This system resulted in some people gaining control over the mean of production by excluding others. Thus property, which was held by all, came under die control of only some members giving rise to the notion of private property. Hence now the interests of all people were no longer common. There were differences in interests. Thus the interests of individuals became different from the interests of the community. Marx stated that “Division of Labour and private property are identical expressions”. It implied the contradictions between individual and communal interest.

These differences which occur in human society which are due to the existence of private property lead to the formation of classes which form the basis of social stratification. In all stratified societies, there are two major groups: a ruling class and a subject class. The ruling class exploits the subject class. As a result there is

basic conflict of interest between the two classes. Marx further stated in his work, *Contributions of the Critique of Political Economy*, that the various institutions of society such as the legal and political systems, religion etc. are instruments of ruling class domination and serve to further its interests. Let us now examine the term 'class'.

3.2.2 Meaning of Class

Marx used the term 'class' to refer to the two main strata in all stratification systems. As mentioned earlier, there are two major social groups in all stratified societies: a ruling class and a subject class. The ruling class derives its power through its control over the means of production. It is thus able to appropriate the labour of another class. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx describes class in this way: "Insofar as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class."

Activity 1

Discuss with people you know what is meant by class. Note down the various interpretations you get. Do some of them tally with Marx's conception of class?

From Marx's perspective, systems of stratification derive from the relationships of social groups to the forces of production. Marx used the term class to refer to the main strata in all stratification systems. His definition of class has specific features. Class comprises two major groups, one of which controls the means of production is able to appropriate the labour of the other class due to the specific position it occupies in the social economy. Hence a class is a social group whose members share the same relationship to the forces of production. This in fact distinguishes one class from the other.

Another aspect of classes, which is seen from Marx's description given above, is that they are in opposition to each other. At the same time there is a relationship of dependence between classes. If one class can appropriate the labour of another class because of its control over the means of production, it means that the two classes are dependent on each other but they are also opposed to each other. The dialectics of class therefore is a result of this combination of dependence and opposition. The relationship between classes is a dynamic relationship which results in social change. This is why classes are central to Marx's approach to social transformation. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx wrote, "Hitherto, the history of all societies is the history of class struggle." In other words, changes in the history of mankind are caused by the conflict of classes. Classes conflict is hence the engine for social change.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Write down Marx's ideas on the division of labour. Use about five lines for Your answer.

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- 2) Describe what is the meaning of class according to Marx. Use about five lines for your answer.

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3.2.3 Growth of Class

Development of society is through the process of class conflict. The domination of one class over the other leads to class conflict. Alongside the production process also develops due to changes in technology, resulting in its improvement. This leads to changes in the class structure as classes become obsolete with increase in production techniques. New classes are then formed, replacing the old classes. This leads to further class conflict. Marx believed that Western societies had: developed through four main stages, primitive communism, ancient society, feudal society and capitalist society. Primitive communism is represented by societies of pre-history. Those societies, which are dependent on hunting and food gathering and which, have no division of labour. From then onwards, all societies are divided into two major classes: masters and slaves in ancient society, land lords and serfs (tenants) in feudal society and capitalist and wage labour in capitalist society. During each historical epoch, the labour power required for production was supplied by the subject class, that is by slaves, serfs and wage labourers respectively.

The polarization of classes into opposite groups is a result of class-consciousness. This is a separate but related phenomenon. It is not necessarily the result of class formation. Class-consciousness is linked with the process of polarization of classes. A class can exist without its being aware of its class interests.

Box 3.01

When people in a particular group, the membership of which is determined by the production relations into which they are born or enter into voluntarily, become aware of their existence as a distinctive class they are said to be conscious of their class. For instance, workers are constantly organizing wage struggles in their own interests. These interests are the outcome of the economic relations of capitalist society. They exist objectively, in the sense that they have not been invented by any theoretician, political party, trade union or any such external force. But the existence of these objective conditions is not enough. The workers must be aware of these conditions.

In the extract from *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx has referred to the importance of class formation when he noted that only when a class is aware of its opposition to another class it is conscious of its being. In another place, in his major contribution, *Capital*, he comments that workers left on their own may not be aware of their class interests as being opposed to those of the other (capitalist) class. He noted that the advance of capitalist production develops a working class, which by education, tradition, habit looks upon the conditions

of production as self-evident laws of nature. In the ordinary run of things the labourer can be left to the natural laws of production as self-evident laws of nature. In the ordinary run of things the labourer can be left to the natural laws of production.

This static nature of class relations changes into a dynamic one with the development of class-consciousness. Without class-consciousness the working is merely in relation to capital. It is a class in itself. In his work *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx observes that the working class which exists in this manner is only a mass of individuals and is a mere class in itself. When it unites in its struggle against capital it “forms itself into a class for itself. The interests it defends becomes class interests.”

Hence in the Marxist framework we find that class is a dynamic unit. It may be subject to change with the advancement of technology, but the basis for its formulation remains the same. Class forms the basis of the stratification system in any society. Classes are related to the production process of each society. Changes in the class structure occur when there are changes in the production process. Thus the system of stratification in a society is dependent on the relations of production.

3.3 MODE OF PRODUCTION

The mode of production of each epoch determines the social, political and religious feature of society at that particular state in history, as well as the nature of class relations. Classes in society arise from a particular mode of production. For example, in capitalist mode of production, high level technology and capital comprise the means of production. This creates a system where in one section own the means of Production and others do not. This gets bifurcated into two classes, namely the Capitalist and the workers.

Box3.02

Classes polarise because they stand in relation of antagonism to each other and class identities are strengthened because of common interests and common eco-nomic status in the system of production. Within this system are present inherent contradictions which lead to class-class struggle, a new society evolves, with new mode of production and subsequently, a new class reflecting it.

3.4 CLASS STRUGGLE

Class struggle is a recurring feature according to Marx in all societies. This struggle, he says is inevitable because the ruling class in every society sows the seeds of its own destruction, sooner or later. Oppression - economic, political and ideological is a feature of this class-struggle. Exploitation leads to rise of opposed class. Thus, they feel alienated from a system which they help in treating, without labour, for instance, capitalism can never subsist. Yet, the workers are alienated. A consciousness develops around which working class is formed and when they clash, with the oppressions they overthrow the system leading to a new stage of social formation and the abolition of private means of ownership, as a consequence of which class-lessness emerges.

From the above, it becomes clear that only when class consciousness evolve and the class organises itself towards the pursuit of its own does a “class exists in the Marxian sense”. So, from a class in itself, it becomes a class for itself.

Thus, for Marx, the essential feature of social inequality is Power - the economic power. Society is divided into those who have it and those who do not, i.e., the oppressors and the oppressed. Marx’s economic interpretation is an explanation of what accounts for this inequality in power. Those who own the means of production have the power to rule and oppress those who do not own it. Class controls the prevailing ideas in a given society.

3.5 CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

Marx specified a number of variables for the formation of class-class consciousness:

- i) Conflicts over the distribution of economic rewards between the classes.
- ii) Easy communication between the individual in the same class position so that ideal and programmes are readily disseminated.
- iii) Growth of class - Consciousness in the sense that the members of the class have a feeling of solidarity and understanding of their historical role.
- iv) Profound dissatisfaction of the Lower Class over its inability to control the economic structure of which it feels itself to be the exploited victim.
- v) Established of a political organisation resulting from the economic structure, the historical situation and maturation of class-consciousness.

The ideas of the ruling class in every epoch determine the ruling ideas, i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular period presupposes the existence of a revolutionary class. Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself. Thus, he sees classes, as distinct sub-divisions whose interests often diverge. From the Marxian perspective, we can conclude that the relationship between the major social classes is one of mutual dependence and conflict.

3.6 CAPITALIST INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY

Thus, Marx in capitalist industrial society, identifies two main classes. The capitalist who pays the wage (Bourgeoisie) and the workers, who receives the wages (Proletariat). Marx predicted that as capitalism develops these two classes become more and more homogeneous, but as compared to him Dahrendorf argues that classes will become more and more heterogeneous, i.e., dissimilar and the working class get divided into three distinct levels -Unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled manual, workers with divergence interests.

Unlike Marx, who talked about two classes, Weber talks about the middle class also. According to him, as capitalism develops the middle class expands. In the 19th century, Marxist predicted that a stage will come in capitalist development when the middle class would sink into the Proletariat (Pauperisation). But during 1950’s and 1960’s, a number of Sociologists suggested that just the opposite was happening.

They said a process of embourgeoisement was occurring whereby increasing number of manual workers were entering the middle class. According to them, the classes in Industrial society was acquiring the Pentagon shape where the mass of population was middle class rather than working class. According to Clark Kerr, this was the requirement of the advanced industrialism which requires a highly educated, trained and skilled workforce.

These were placed according to their value of skill in the market. Those whose skills were scarce on the market commanded high salaries and constituted a separate class. Weber rejects the polarisation of two classes and talks of Middle class of white-collar or skilled workers. Middle class expands as capitalism develops. He argues that modern nation state requires a “rational bureaucratic set-up” which requires clerks and managers.

Box3.03

Unlike Marx, Weber argues that those who belong to the same class need not necessarily produce a communal action or develop a class consciousness. They might behave in a similar way and have same attitude like similar voting behaviour or drinking habits. Weber rejects the inevitability of class revolution. They need not necessarily be a revolution. Class-consciousness may be there but it would be of different nature. For example, Caste groups in India.

Those who belong to lower class may try for reforms. For this purpose, they come together to demand but never have drastic revolution to change the system. Another example, in industrial strikes, there may be lock-outs but revolution to change the system may not be there.

According to Weber, for workers to change the entire system, is not possible. For, to attack

any system an ideological formula is essential. An intellectual class is essential, i.e., elite

group, uneducated people cannot bring about a revolution without an ideological set-up,

therefore, to do so.

3.7 CRITICISM OF MARX'S VIEWS

Marx's theories have subjected to much criticism. Thus:

- i) His pre-occupation with class led him to neglect other social relationships as well as the influence of nationalism and of conflict between nations in history. He also neglected the growing sense of national community in European nations that brought about new moral and social conceptions with emphasise common human interests.
- ii) Marx is also criticised on the grounds of his conception of class division. Evidence shows that 20th Century capitalism has created condition where the working class can no longer be regarded as totally alienated. Man's condition has improved along with the general standard of living and the expansion of social services and security of employment.

- iii) Also the growth of a new middle class contradicts the theory of Polarisation of classes. This new class comprising of workers, supervisors, managers etc. introduces an important element of stratification namely social prestige based on occupation, consumption and styles of Lillie.
- iv) Rapid rates of mobility present the persistence of class in Marxian sense, as a result, status group become more important.
- v) The working class remains highly differentiated in terms of skill occupation. Therefore, classes are not homogenous. The expansion of the middle class and the general improvement in the standard of living has led to embuogeoism of the working class.

3.8 LET US SUM UP

In the above unit we have discussed the view the founder of sociology, Karl Marx, on social stratification. He has view that has shaped and influenced human development.

Karl Marx's views were based his theory of historical materialism. He viewed social stratification from the historical perspective. The changes in stratification in human society were based on the changing nature of production. Classes formed the basis of the system of stratification. As the production relations changed the nature of stratification also changed. New classes were formed replacing the old ones. This also resulted in new relations between classes. Hence for Marx classes and stratification were similar. Marx stressed on the role of class-consciousness as an important instrument for realizing class objectives.

3.9 KEY WORDS

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|----------------------------|---|---|
| Class | : | According to Marx, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other due to their ownership or control over the means of production or lack of the same. |
| Class | : | According to Marx, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other due to their ownership or control over the means of production or lack of the same. According to Weber, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other through their ownership or control of production and who share similar life chances. |
| Class-consciousness | : | A class that is conscious of its distinguished position in the social hierarchy. |
| Status | : | Effective claim to social esteem. Weber tried to show that status cuts across class barriers. |

3.10 FURTHER READINGS

T.B. Bottomore and M. Rubel (eds.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writing in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, Penguin Books, 1963.

H.H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (eds.), *From Marx Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948.

3.11 SPECIMEN ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) As technology developed production also improved. Surplus could be produced, and this led to classification of activities, or division of labour. This also led to some people controlling means of production, hence to private property. Thus Marx pointed out that the interests of people became different from those of the community, and class came into existence.
- 2) For Marx Class devoted the two main strata found in stratification systems. There is a ruling class and a subject class. The means of production are controlled by the ruling class and this is how it appropriate the labour of the working class. Finally these classes are opposed or antagonistic to one another.



UNIT 4 WEBERIAN THEORY

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Weber on Stratification
 - 4.2.1 Classes and Life Chances
 - 4.2.2 Status
 - 4.2.3 Power
- 4.3 Similarities and Differences between Marx and Weber
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Keywords
- 4.6 Further Readings
- 4.7 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall discuss the view of the founding father of sociology, namely, Max Weber. He has made tremendous contributions for sociological thought. We will of course concentrate on only one aspect of their contribution - social stratification. After reading this unit you will understand:

- how classes emerge in society;
- the basis of class formation;
- role of classes in social stratification; and
- Similarities and differences between Marx and Weber on Classes.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Marx Weber (1864-1920) was another outstanding thinker. Like Marx he recognized the economic aspects of stratification but he differed with Marx on several of his basic propositions. While Marx focussed his attention on the toiling classes and looked at social development from their point of view, Weber stressed on the role of the propertied classes in social development. Thus Weber is often referred as the Bourgeois Marx. In this unit we shall discuss separately the views of Marx and Weber on stratification and then compare them. We will then discuss the significance in analysing class in understanding stratification systems.

4.2 WEBER ON STRATIFICATION

Marx Weber as mentioned in the beginning is regarded as one of the founding fathers of Sociology. He is also the originator of the most powerful alternative to the Marxist theory of society. We shall discuss his views on class and other forms of social stratification in this section.

Like Marx, Weber also believed that class was a basic form of stratification in society. He defined the term 'class' according to the Marxist criterion, namely, in relation to ownership of property. Property and lack of property, according to

him, were the basic categories of all class situations. He went on to distinguish between types of property-ownership and non-ownership of goods and services. Those who owned property offered goods while those not owning had only their labour power or skills to offer. Thus a factory owner can offer goods which were produced in the factory. His workers, on the other hand, can offer only their labour power in exchange of wages.

4.2.1 Class and Life – Chances

Another aspect of class that Weber stressed on was 'life-chances'. This term related to the opportunities an individual got during the various stages of his or her life. An individual born in a worker's family receives a particular type of education, which in turn equips him or her for specific jobs. The education will not be as expensive or as intense as the education of a child in an upper class family. The employment opportunities for both are different. Their different family backgrounds also make them part of different classes. The same pattern can be seen in social interaction and marriage. A person from a working class background will interact mostly with other members of his or her class whereas a person from the upper-middle class will have acquaintances mainly from his class. Thus Weber found that life-chances was an important aspect of class formation.

Box 4.01

While discussing life-chances Weber's emphasis was on the group or the community and not on the individual. He insisted that while determining class, we have to look at the life-chances of the collective and not of individuals within the collective. This is a very important aspect of class as a collective. It is possible that the life-chances of an individual may be different. For example the child of a-worker may be able to surpass his or her class barrier. He/ she may get a better education and get employment that is different from the opportunities available for his/her peers.

The son of an industrialist may become a worker because of his abilities or other circumstances. But these, Weber pointed out, were exceptions and not the rule. He pointed out that what was more important was the fact that the life-chances of members of a class were similar. This is what gave permanence to that class as the next generation too joined the same class. Therefore the definition of life-chances, according to Weber, is sharing of economic and cultural goods which are available differently for different groups.

The life-chances of an individual were largely determined by the market situation. The son of a worker became a worker because this was the best occupation available to him given his background. The market situation becomes more important for the propertyless as they have to depend mainly on the production of services as they possess only their skills. They cannot market anything else for their existence. The property owners on the other hand can depend on the income they get from their productive property.

Hence for Weber class had two basic aspects. Firstly it was an objective category. It was determined by the control or lack of control over productive property of the members. Secondly, all members of a particular class had similar life-chances, which in turn distinguished these members from others. The life-chances of

individuals depended on their market situation in the case of those not owning productive property and on the ownership of productivity for those owning these.

Based on his definition, Weber identified four classes in capitalist society. These were: (a) Upper class that comprised those owning or controlling productive private property. This class was similar to the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) in Marx's analysis, (b) White-collar workers. This class included all those who were engaged in mental labour -managers, administrators, professionals, etc. (c) Petty bourgeoisie. These were the self-employed and they included shopkeepers, doctors lawyers, etc. (d) Manual workers. These people sold their physical labour in exchange for wages. The working class was included in this class. Weber thus divided society into four classes as opposed to Marx's two-class model. Hence though Weber found the basis of class formation was similar to that of Marx he differed with Marx on the types of classes in society.

4.2.2 Status

Like Marx, Weber also distinguished between class and class-consciousness. As discussed above, for Marx, class-consciousness was an important aspect of class. A class could articulate its interests if it was conscious of its existence as a special group. Weber too talked of class-consciousness but he did not think it as necessary for the existence of a class. Instead he looked for an alternative to class-consciousness and he found it in status. Weber noted that whereas an individual's class situation need not lead to his becoming class conscious, he was always conscious of his status.

Activity 1

Discuss with other students in the study centre what is meant by status. Do their conceptions fit in with Weber's view on status? Note down your findings.

According to Weber, classes were formed on the basis of economic relations. Status groups, he noted, were normally 'communities'. He defined status as a position in society determined by social estimation of 'honour'. There were links between class and status but in many cases they were in opposition to each other. Class was associated with production of goods and services or in acquisition of the same. Status was determined by consumption. Thus status was associated with a life style where there were restrictions on social intercourse. Weber noted that the most rigid and well-defined status boundaries could be found in India's caste system. A Brahman may belong to the working class because it was the means of his livelihood, however he would always consider himself superior to a person from a lower caste even though the class situation of both may be the same. At the same time that Brahman worker may have greater interaction with other Brahmans belonging to classes higher than his. In our society we can see that inter-caste marriage is not tolerated even when both families are from the same class but they occupy different statuses in the caste hierarchy.

There in a stratified society, Weber found that property differences generated classes whereas prestige differences generated status grouping. There were the two main bases of social stratification.

4.2.3 Power

The third organizing principle of social stratification is power. Unlike status and wealth which can be clearly linked with group characteristics of ranking in societies, the principle of power is a relatively diffused attribute because it is not exclusive in character. It is always possible that a group with higher status in society or that which enjoys greater wealth, also exercises more power in society. Nevertheless, one could make a distinction between say, principle of privileges where as the latter tends to be based on the group's ability to use coercive means for other group's conformity with actions, values and beliefs determined by it. The concept of power as Max Weber has discussed in his treatment of social stratification rests on the fact that it endows the persons or groups which have power to impose their will on other groups by legitimate use of coercive method. In this sense, state offers us a good example of an institution which has maximum power. It has sovereign authority to impose its will on citizens of the society. When legitimacy of exercise of power, is widely accepted by groups, in other words, when it is institutionalized in society, power becomes authority. Authority as a concept could be defined as legitimate power. Power as a principle also enters into the notion of social stratification when its functions or its social ramifications begin to be influenced by the political processes in society, and when state begins to take more active or direct role in influencing the principles of social stratification. A relevant example of this could be found in the policy of positive discrimination or reservation of jobs, political offices and entry into educational institutions in our country by the state in favour of castes and tribes now declared as 'scheduled' or as 'other backward classes'. Max Weber, in his treatment of power as an element in the formation of social stratification has rightly emphasised the significance of politics, political parties and their role in optimizing their access to power.

Activity 2

Discuss 'status' 'wealth' and 'power' with other students in the study centre. In which way are they related to one another? Put your findings down in your notebook.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Describe Weber's views on Classes and Life chances. Use about five lines for your answer.
- 2) Outline some of the similarities and differences between Weber and Marx so far as their views on social stratification is concerned. Use about ten lines for your answer.

4.3 SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MARX AND WEBER

From the above discussions we can see that there are some similarities between the two thinkers on stratification. There are major differences as well. For Marx the basis of stratification was class. The formation of class was objective in the sense that a class was not formed because a group of people got together and decided that they form a class. Its formation was because of the production relations that existed in a society. Therefore a person's position in the class

structure was based on his position in the production relations. If he happened to own or control capital and he employed others, he was a capitalist. Those who did not own or control property belonged to the opposing class of worker.

Opposition of classes was an important aspect of Marx's analysis. It was through this opposition that social and economic change took place. The capitalists invent new ways to counteract workers. This could be new technology resulting in better production techniques or new laws preventing workers from becoming more powerful. The workers too in their struggle become more united. They tend to drop their internal differences when they realise that their main opponent is another class. This leads to greater unity among them. Thus for Marx, class and class-consciousness do not mean mere categories in society. They are fundamental for social development.

At one level, Weber accepts Marx's view on class. However he does so not to support Marx but to show how his analysis has weaknesses. He stresses that society cannot be divided into only two main classes. There are more classes that emerge due to the market situation and the type of work done. He therefore finds that there are four main classes in society. This in effect confuses the class relations. Thus Weber feels that neither class nor class-consciousness can explain stratification completely. He thus lays greater stress on status, whereas Marx lays stress on class-consciousness. Weber tries to show that class-consciousness is not an important aspect of social stratification. For him status groups are the basis. He finds that classes are static whereas status stretches across classes.

While comparing the two we must keep in mind that Weber was an opponent on Marx's views. He tried to provide alternatives to Marx. In this sense the two cannot be compared because Weber's work was not complimentary to that of Marx (just as Davis' approach to stratification was complementary to that of Parsons as we shall show in the next unit). It was primarily developed to oppose Marx. Thus despite some similarities, their works are basically different.

4.4 LET US SUM UP

In the above unit we have discussed the view of the founder of sociology, Max Weber, on social stratification. He has view that has shaped and influenced human development.

Marx Weber stressed on the formation of classes. The basis of the class was similar to what Marx said but he also stressed that there were four classes instead of two. Weber's differences with Marx did not end there. He tried to show the inadequacy of class analysis as the main means of explaining social stratification. He asserted that status was more important than class. His contention was that people were not as class-conscious as they were status conscious. Hence he felt that status was a better measure of social stratification, even though class was an objective category.

4.5 KEY WORDS

Class : According to Marx, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other due to their ownership or control over the means of production or lack of the same.

- Class** : According to Marx, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other due to their ownership or control over the means of production or lack of the same. According to Weber, classes are groups of people who are distinguished from each other through their ownership or control of production and who share similar life chances.
- Class-consciousness** : A class that is conscious of its distinguished position in the social hierarchy.
- Status** : Effective claim to social esteem. Weber tried to show that status cuts across class barriers.

4.6 FURTHER READINGS

T.B. Bottomore and M. Rubel (eds.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writing in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, Penguin Books, 1963.

H.H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (eds.), *From Marx Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948.

4.7 SPECIMEN ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Weber defined class in relation to private property, but he distinguished between ownership of goods and ownership of skills. The factory owner could offer goods but his workers offer labour power in exchange of wages. Further life chances for Weber meant the opportunities an individual got during various stages of his life. Education and family background affect life chances. The emphasis however has to be on the group and these can improve or deteriorate the position. Finally life chances of a class were similar to which there were some exceptions.
- 2) There are both similarities and differences between Marx and Weber regarding their views on social stratification. Thus opposition of classes based on ownership of means of production was basic to Marx's thought. The class and class consciousness are basic to social development for Weber. Society can not be divided into only two classes, and he finds four classes in society. Weber lays greater stress on status whereas Marx emphasizes class consciousness. Thus despite the similarities that both scholars emphasized the importance of the class, their views were not really similar.

UNIT 5 FUNCTIONALIST THEORY

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Functionalist Theory of Stratification
- 5.3 Talcott Parsons' Approach
 - 5.3.1 Value Consensus and Stratification
- 5.4 Davis-Moore Theory
 - 5.4.1 Functions of Stratification
 - 5.4.2 Basic Propositions
- 5.5 Criticism of the Theory
- 5.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.7 Key Words
- 5.8 Further Readings
- 5.9 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the theory of social stratification put forward by two well-known American sociologists, Parsons and Davis. This theory is also known as the Functionalist Theory of Social Stratification. Though this theory has been widely accepted by sociologists for analysing social stratification, there have been some strong criticisms of this theory. We shall examine all these aspects of the theory. Hence, after reading this unit you will understand:

- the Background of this theory;
- what this theory states;
- the problems in explaining this theory;
- the criticism put forth by some well-known sociologists; and
- the importance of the theory in understanding society.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The functionalist theory tries to explain the reasons why a society is able to survive. The underlying belief of this theory is that all societies want stability and peace. The people in society do not want chaos and confusion because this will disrupt their day-to-day activities. Hence all societies want order and some form of discipline. These are the means of achieving stability in society.

The functionalists view society as some form of organism consisting of different parts. These parts are integrated to the whole and they work in co-operation with each other. The human body is a complex organism that comprises different parts of the body. Each of these parts is separate but they form an integrated whole. Similarly, in society there are different parts that perform different roles. If we look at the total picture of society we will see that all these parts perform roles which contribute to the stability of the entire society. In other words they

contribute to the integration of society. For example, we find that people have different types of occupations and people perform different types of activities. There are doctors, lawyers, teachers, students workers, industrialists, farmers, weavers etc. Though all these activities are different they are all needed for the functioning of the society. Therefore they can be viewed as separate parts which work together in order to integrate the society.

Hence we can see that the functionalist approach maintains that every component of the social structure performs specific functions which are necessary for maintaining stability in that society. These functions are necessary for the survival of that society. Hence the system of stratification in a society is also necessary for its integration and its stability.

5.2 FUNCTIONALIST THEORY OF STRATIFICATION

The functionalists accept the fact that all societies are stratified. In other words, all the functions carried out by the various members of society are functional for its survival but they are not equal in status. Some of the functions are superior to the others. They are ranked higher. The people who perform these functions are also regarded as superior to others, i.e. those below them. The functionalist theories of stratification attempt to explain how social inequalities occur and why they are necessary for society.

The functionalists presume that there are certain basic needs of the every society. These needs have to be met or else there will be instability in society. These needs are known as functional prerequisites. Secondly, though these functional prerequisites are important, they are ranked according to the importance that is granted to them in that society. For example, workers and managers are needed to run a factory. No factory can exist with only workers and no managers or only managers and no workers. Hence managers and workers are integral for running a factory. At the same time it will be wrong to assume that because both groups are necessary, both have equal status. This is not so. The managers enjoy higher status than the workers do. Hence integration does not mean equality. It means that all the different groups together contribute towards stability but they do so because they are stratified in a hierarchy. What is the basis of this hierarchy and, why do people accept it? These are the questions that the theorists try to explain. In the next section we shall examine the views of Talcott Parsons, the most eminent of the functionalists theorists.

5.3 TALCOTT PARSONS' APPROACH

The central point of the Parsons's analysis of social systems is the problem of order. He believed that all social systems came into existence because people within this system wanted order and stability. A social system, according to Parsons, existed when two or more people interacted with each other in a bounded situation and their actions influenced others. This means that a social system must first of all have a group of people. This group could comprise two individuals or even a country. Secondly these people exist within a common boundary. Thirdly, they interact with each other, either directly or indirectly. And lastly, their actions influence each other's behaviour.

One can notice this form of action in our every day life. In your daily life you interact with number of people. While doing so your behaviour is influenced by the person you interact with. For example, when you are speaking to your father or to an elder you behave in a particular manner. When you are interacting with your friends and peers you behave in a different manner. Why do you do this? Why is your behaviour not the same with all people you interact with? According to Parsons, this is because in the course of your interaction, your action (behaviour) is influenced by the actions of the other person. This makes you change or adapt your behaviour in different situations.

Activity 1

Discuss with other students at the study centre concerning the problem of order in society. Note down your findings in a notebook.

The regulation of your behaviour in different situations is mainly because you, as an individual, behave in a given manner because every body else behaves in a similar manner in the given situation. Moreover, you also know that if you do not behave in the prescribed manner a situation may be created which will give rise to disorder. For example, if you have behave in a rude manner with your friends as if the person in your enemy, a hostile situation will be created and you may lose the friendship. Hence you will behave with him or her in the manner which is expected.

Therefore we can assume that the action of any person is determined by whom he or she is interacting with. This in turn is determined by the rules of behaviour in a particular society or social system. The rules of behaviour are further based on the common consensus of the people and that is why it is taken as correct. This common consensus is what Parsons calls Values. Social values are therefore the shared beliefs of a society. The way in which these values are practised (the actions which results which results form these values) are known as Norms. Social norms are thus the rules of behaviour.

Parsons further states that social values and norms arise out of the need for every society to maintain order and stability. Values and norms will differ in each society because the needs of each society are different. But the common factor in the value system of each society is the need for stability. Hence each society devises its own values which are best suited for this purpose.

5.3.1 Value Consensus and Stratification

How does the value system of a society emerge? Parsons attempts to answer this question by stressing that values do not arise out the mind of an individual (king or priest in the earlier times). Values are shared beliefs. This means that all members of a society agree that the given values are the best means through which stability can be maintained in their society. In this way values are not only shared beliefs but they emerge out of consensus of the members of that society. This consensus emerges because all members of a society want order and stability in their daily life. Therefore, order stability and co-operation are based on the values consensus. There is an agreement by members on what is good for all.

Box 5.01

Parsons argues that it follows from the existence of values that individuals will be evaluated and therefore placed in some form of rank order. Thereto re the different strata in a society is based on a hierarchy which in reality forms its stratification system. Parsons stated that “Stratification is the ranking of units in a social system in accordance with the common values system.” Hence it is the value system which creates stratification in a society. Moreover, differences in the strata are justified by the values system.

In any society, those performing according to the social values are better rewarded. The type of rewards, according to Parsons, depends on what the values of that society define as superior. For example traditionally among the Rajputs high value was placed on bravery and valour. Hence any person displaying these qualities was better rewarded and given a higher rank. Among other communities higher value may be placed on business acumen and the ability to trade profitably. Hence those who prove themselves in these fields will be ranked high. Similarly in all societal systems the value system places higher rewards on some qualities and lesser rewards for other qualities. In case a person violates the social values he or she is punished. Hence in a society which places greater values on bravery a person who shows traces of cowardice will lose rank.

Modern industrial societies, according to Parsons, places higher value on individual achievement. Moreover the emphasis of such societies is on producing goods and services. Hence Parsons noted that in these societies (especially the USA) the value system places “primary emphasis on productive activity within the economy.” Thus those who excel in these will be better rewarded. In such societies it is possible for a worker to become a successful industrialist if he has the necessary qualities. After he proves his merit, his status will rise in the social system and he will not only be wealthy but also well respected. In companies the executives who are dynamic and successful get higher rewards in terms of salaries and other benefits. This in turn elevates their position in the stratification system.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Outline the functionalist theory. Use about five lines for your answer.

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- 2) Describe what is value consensus. What role does it play in social stratification? Use about five lines for your answer.

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Therefore, we can see that in explaining social stratification, Parsons placed emphasis on the differences that existed among people. These differences, he explained, was in consonance with the value system of that society and hence was necessary for the stability of the society. In fact since the value system justified the inequalities, they were accepted by all, including those who were in the lower ranks. For example, industrial organizations have elaborate stratification systems. There are differences among the workers on the basis of their skills and experiences. Those who are skilled and show leadership qualities are rewarded through promotions, higher wages etc. Similarly though both labour and management are needed to run an industrial organisation, the position of the management is superior to that of workers. These differences may cause conflicts but since they are backed by the value system, there are few instances of intensive conflict over these issues. Even a militant trade union accepts the fact that management is superior. This is because the value system allows for these differences. Hence, Parsons argued, the people by and large accept these differences and major conflict is prevented. All people, whether they be workers or in management, believe that this system is the best. If these values are challenged this would lead to instability in that society.

Therefore, we can summarise Parsons main points thus:

- Value consensus is an essential part of all societies.
- Social stratification is inevitable in all societies.
- The stratification system is seen as being just, right and proper for maintaining order and stability. This enables different people to get different rewards.
- Conflicts may occur between those who are rewarded and those who are not rewarded, but this does not threaten the existing system because it is kept in check by the value system.

5.4 DAVIS - MOORE THEORY

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore have further developed the functionalist theory of stratification. Both are eminent American sociologists and they were students of Talcott Parsons. They elaborated their view in an article titled, "Some Principles of Stratification". This article became very popular and controversial. Their views have been supported by functionalists and have been severely criticised by others. Their views are also referred to as the functionalist theory of inequality. Let us first discuss their proposition and then we can discuss some of the critiques.

Parsons stressed on the need for stratification in society. He showed that it was inevitable in every society. Davis and Moore elaborated on this and try to examine how stratification becomes effective in any society. In this way they attempt to extend Parsons' argument. The main problem they pose is why do certain positions carry different degrees of prestige? And, how do individuals get into these positions?

The authors support Parsons' view that the basis of the existence of societies is order and stability. All societies have their own functional prerequisites which help them survive and operate effectively. Let us elaborate on this point. Societies are not mere collection of individuals. These individuals have to perform specific tasks so that the requirements of society are fulfilled. There are thus a number of activities that exist in society. A society needs workers, industrialists, managers,

policemen, teachers, students, artisans and so on. Different individuals who have specialised skills do these different types of work.. Therefore the first functional prerequisite of any society is of allocating these different roles effectively. This will ensure that the right people are placed in proper positions.

There are four aspects of the above-mentioned functional prerequisite. Firstly, all roles in society must be filled. All societies have different types of occupations. These occupations are necessary for their existence. Hence it is necessary to ensure that these occupations are filled. At the same time, mere filled up occupations in not enough. If the wrong people (i.e. people who do not have the requisite skills) are selected for the tasks there will be instability in society. This in especially true if these position is important. For example if a power generation company employs a well known novelist, who has no idea of power generation, the work of the company will suffer and there will be stability not only hi the company but in the supply of electricity. Therefore the second factor is that the most competent people must fill in the positions. Thirdly, in order the best people are selected for the job it is necessary to train them for it. Training therefore is an effective means of ensuring that the best people are selected. In the case of that novelist who is made the head of a power generation company, had lie undergone training for fulfilling the needs of that position he could be regarded as the best person. Lastly, the roles must be performed conscientiously. This is very important for ensuring effective performance in the roles. As person may be trained and is the best in the field, but if he does not do his work with dedication the system will suffer. Hence all these four factors are necessary in order to meet the functional prerequisites of a society.

5.4.1 Functions of Stratification

Davis and Moore state that all societies need some mechanism for ensuring that the best people are selected for the positions and they perform well. According to them the most effective means for ensuring this is social stratification. This system is effective because it offers unequal rewards and privileges to the different positions in society. If all people are given the same rewards then there will be no motivation for people to work harder. There may also be a tendency for people to avoid taking up positions of responsibility or challenging jobs. They know that no matter how well they perform and no matter what position they occupy they will get the same rewards. Therefore stratification is necessary for the efficient functioning of the system.

Activity 2

What is the need for stratification in a society? Discuss with students in the study centre and note down your findings in your notebook.

The main contributions of a system of unequal rewards are two-fold. Firstly it motivates people to fill certain positions. When positions carry higher rewards people put in greater efforts become qualified for positions. For example if the position of a lecturer carries higher rewards than other professions bright students will strive to fulfil the qualifications for becoming lecturers. In this way society will get better teachers. Secondly, the rewards must be unequal even after fulfilling the position so that the persons who are appointed are motivated to improve their performance further.. If lecturers are rewarded for their teaching and research activities through promotions and increased salaries, they will perform their duties

better as they would like the higher rewards. In this manner the system of stratification, based on unequal rewards, is beneficial for societies.

Davis and Moore explain that this system of stratification holds true for both modern societies based on competition and for traditional societies that are based on ascription. In modern societies people occupy positions according to their skills and qualifications. Those who are better qualified get better rewards and they occupy positions of prestige. In traditional societies positions are ascribed through birth. In traditional caste oriented Indian society people occupied their positions not due to their competence but through the status they had by birth. The son of a labourer would become a labourer even if he had the intelligence to do other type of superior work. Similarly the son of a landlord would become a landlord even if he were totally incompetent for the job. In such a system the provision of unequal rewards would have no effect in improving the efficiency of the system. However Davis and Moore argue that in such societies the stress is on performance of duties attached to the positions. Thus even though the son of a labourer will remain a labour, if he performs his duties well he will be rewarded through other means.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) List down the functional prerequisites of Davis and Moore.
- 2) Say True and False for the statements that are given below:
 - i) All positions in society are of the same functional important.
 - ii) Limited people can perform functionally important roles.
 - iii) No training is required to perform functionally important roles.

5.4.2 Basic Propositions of Davis and Moore

In the above sections we have tried to explain the role of social stratification as a functional necessity of societies. In modern societies the basis of status is through achievement and not ascription. In other words the status of a person is determined by his or her merits and not by birth. Such societies are more dynamic and can fulfil their functional prerequisites. In order to achieve this Davis and Moore note that there are some propositions that are common for all these societies. These are:

- 1) In every society certain positions are functionally more important than the others. These positions carry greater rewards and higher prestige. For example, a position in the Indian administrative service is considered having more prestige than other jobs.
- 2) Only limited people have the necessary merit or talents to perform these roles. We can see that in the case of the IAS examinations several thousand appear for the examinations but only a handful are successful.
- 3) In most cases these positions require a lengthy and intensive training period. This involves sacrifices on the part of the people who acquire these posts. In our own society we can see that certain professions such as medicine, engineering, chartered accountancy etc. involve intensive and expensive training involving a number of years. According to Davis and Moore, this involves sacrifice on the part of the candidate. Hence they must be rewarded for their sacrifice through higher financial rewards and greater prestige in society.

The above propositions are based on the fact that in modern societies achievement values have replaced ascriptive criteria. In these societies a person's merit is more important than his or her birth. The occupations are arranged hierarchically and those at the top have greater rewards and prestige than those below. This system of higher rewards, along with the fact that all can compete for these rewards and only those who are competent will get them, provides motivation to people to strive to perform better. However the most important condition for such a system to survive is that there is social consensus on the importance of the different occupations. This means that the ranking of occupations in terms of their superiority is based on the value consensus of that society.

Box 5.02

Davis and Moore noted that there could be a problem in deciding which positions are functionally more important than others. It is possible that a position that is highly rewarded may not necessarily be functionally important. This in fact is one of the weaknesses of the theory that has been pointed out by its critics (we shall deal with this in more detail in the next section). Davis and Moore suggest that there are ways of measuring whether a superior position is functionally important or not.

It may be argued that an engineer in a factory is no different than a skilled worker, hence the higher reward for the engineer is not justified. Davis and Moore would argue that the engineer is functionally more important because he has the skills of a skilled worker in addition to his other skills which the skilled worker does not possess. Hence though an engineer can be a skilled worker, a skilled worker cannot become an engineer. The second measure is the "degree to which other positions are dependent on the one in question". Thus an engineer in a factory is more important than the workers are because they are dependent on his for direction in their work.

In brief, Davis and Moore have carried forward Parsons views on stratification by clarifying the reasons for social inequality. They have tried to show that the system of stratification based on unequal rewards and prestige are necessary for maintaining order in society and ensuring its progress.

5.5 CRITICISM OF DAVIS AND MOORE'S THEORY

On the face of it the Davis-Moore theory appears rational and realistic. After all in all societies which believe in social and occupational mobility. This is in contrast to a society where there is no mobility as people are assigned roles accordance with their birth. In India to the Constitution grants equal rights to all citizens. It bans discrimination on the basis of caste, race, religion and gender. This is similar to most modern societies where a person's ability is more important than his birth. Under these circumstances the Davis-Moore theory appears realistic as it offers an explanation for the existing inequalities in society. There have been several criticisms of this theory. In fact after it was published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1945, it aroused a great deal of interest. Several well-known sociologists of that time reacted by writing articles either in support or in

criticism or the theory. As a result this journal had a special issue containing these articles. It is widely recognized that of the critical articles Melvin Tumin's was the most comprehensive. We shall discuss the points he raised in the following paragraphs.

Tumin began his criticism with the statement that functionally important positions are highly rewarded. While it was a fact that rewards were unequal as some received more reward and prestige than others it could not be categorically stated that these positions are functionally more important. It is possible that some workers in a factory are more necessary for maintaining production than their managers are, though the managers are better rewarded. In such cases if the workers are removed production will be hampered but if some managers are removed it may be still possible to maintain production. Therefore, how could functional importance of a position be measured? A society needs doctors, lawyers, workers and farmers. Each of these positions are functionally important for the existence of a society. Davis and Moore have not provided the means of measuring the functional importance of these positions. In fact some sociologists argue that the importance of position is a matter of opinion and not an objective criteria.

Tumin argues that unequal rewards to people may not necessarily stem from the functional importance of positions. The role of power in determining the importance of positions and thereby appropriating higher rewards is also an important means of determining the rewards. For example in India workers in the organized sector are better paid and get more social security than the workers in the unorganized sector. This is mainly because the former are unionised and have greater bargaining power than the latter who are not unionised and hence have little protection. The type of work done by workers in both sectors is similar but the rewards as well as the prestige are higher in the organised sector. Hence power plays a more important role in determining higher rewards than functional importance.

Tumin challenges the justification of higher rewards on the basis that these positions involve greater training. He argues that training does not necessarily mean sacrifice as the individuals also learn new skills, gain knowledge and thereby benefit. Moreover the rewards for such cases are disproportionate to the sacrifices made during training.

The proposition that unequal rewards help to motivate people in improving their work is also not true according to Tumin. In reality there are barriers to motivation. The system of stratification does not allow the talented people to have equal access to better opportunities. Social discrimination is present in every society and this acts as a barrier. In India where social inequalities are higher it is difficult for the child of a poor person to get better education in order to improve his position. This is true in America as well where Afro-Americans and coloured people are economically worse off and hence they cannot compete for better positions.

There is every possibility that in a system of unequal rewards, those who receive higher rewards will ensure that their children get the same rewards. They will also create barriers to prevent others from getting into the same positions that their children are in. Doctors may be interested in getting their children into the profession. They will not only try to ensure that their children get in but will also try and prevent other children from getting into the profession. T.B. Bottomore in

his study *Elites and Societies* shows that even in developed countries such as Britain and France where the stratification system is more open an overwhelming majority of the civil servants were children of civil servants.

The fact is that those at the bottom of the social hierarchy do not have access to the improving their knowledge and skills which will make them competent enough to get the better position. Tumin notes that motivation through unequal rewards can be possible in a system “where there is genuinely equal access to recruitment and training for all potentially talented that differential rewards can conceivably be justified as functionally important. This is rarely possible in most societies.” Hence he asserts that “stratification systems are apparently antagonistic to the development of such full equality of opportunity.” Tumin therefore argues that those already receiving differential positions can manipulate functionally important positions. Hence Tumin tries to prove that the functional theory of social stratification is not realistic.

5.6 LET US SUM UP

Social stratification exists in all societies. Every society has its hierarchy in which the different individuals are placed. The main problems for the structural functionalists, such as Talcott Parsons, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore, was how individuals occupy these different positions, and who do we need these difference. They concluded that stratification was not only inevitable in all societies but it was also very necessary for them as it promoted stability and order.

Talcott Parsons tried to explain that all members of society accepted these inequalities because they believed that this was the only way order and stability could be maintained. Therefore the pattern of social stratification and social inequality become a part of the values of that society. He stressed on the role of the value consensus in determining the nature of stratification in a social system.

Davis and Moore extended Parsons argument and tried to examine why certain positions carry different degrees of prestige. They found that positions which are functionally more important for society carry higher rewards and greater prestige. They explained the reasons for this.

This criticism put forth by Melvin Tumin of Davis and Moore’s propositions show that functional importance is not the only criteria for deciding on which positions carry higher rewards. There are other factors such as power and status based on birth. Even the so called open societies are influenced by these criteria. He challenges all the major propositions in the theory and he feels that stratification can become antagonising to members of society.

5.7 KEYWORDS

Value consensus : Agreement by all members of a social system on what is accepted for all.

Functional Prerequisites : Those values that are necessary for promoting order and

stability and thus necessary for the survival of that society.

5.8 FURTHER READINGS

R. Bendix and S.M. Lipset (eds.), *Class, Status and Power*; Routledge and Kegan Paul 1967.

5.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress

- 1) Functionalist theory explains how a society is able to survive. The functionalists view society as an organism with various parts. Each of the part is separate but they form an integrated whole, and contribute to its stability. Thus the system of stratification in a society is also necessary for its integration and stability.
- 2) Values are shared beliefs. Thus values consensus emerges because all members of a society want order and stability in their daily life. Thus order, stability and co-operation are based on the value consensus. This value system is what creates ranking and creates stratification. Thus it is the value system which creates stratification in a society.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) This basic requirement for any society is to allocate various different roles effectively. There are four aspects to these:
 - i) All roles, in society must be filled.
 - ii) The most competent people must fill these positions.
 - iii) Training for the job is necessary.
 - iv) Roles must be performed consciously.
- 2)
 - i) False
 - ii) True
 - iii) False

UNIT 6 ATTRIBUTIONAL AND INTERACTIONAL THEORIES

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Early Explanations of Caste
 - 6.2.1 Religious Explanations
 - 6.2.2 Sociological Explanations
- 6.3 Attributional Theories to Caste
 - 6.3.1 G.S.Ghurye
 - 6.3.2 J.H.Hutton
 - 6.3.3 MN.Srinivas
- 6.4 Interactional Theories to Caste
 - 6.4.1 F.G. Bailey
 - 6.4.2 A.Mayer
 - 6.4.3 M.Mariott
 - 6.4.4 L.Dumont
- 6.5 Attributional and Interactional Theories: An Appraisal
- 6.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.7 Keywords
- 6.8 Further Readings
- 6.9 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- Outline early explanations of caste;
- Describe the attributional theories to caste;
- Highlight the main aspects of the interactional theories to caste; and
- Become acquainted with some of the limitations of the attributional and interactional theories to caste.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Caste identity is closely linked with the social fabric of a village, town or city. In the unit that follows we describe and analyze some of the major attempts to explain the ranking order that is ubiquitous so far as caste formations are concerned. To acquaint you with these approaches we will point out to you some of the early religious and sociological explanations of caste. This will set the backdrop for the attributional theories to caste which analyze caste hierarchy in terms of the various immutable characteristics of caste. The incursion into these approaches is followed by the interaction approaches to caste hierarchy. Finally the unit picks up the threads of the approaches described and analysed in the unit and points out the limitations of the types of the approaches that have been presented. This will round off our discussion on caste identity and how it maintains itself or mutates.

6.2 EARLY EXPLANATIONS OF CASTE

Various explanations of the origin of the caste have been forwarded, and early explanations often veer around the notion of 'attributes' or 'inalienable characteristics' of caste. Since we will be examining some of the explanations it would be better if we provide some idea of these characteristics. These are provided by religious theories and by secular sociological explanations. Let us now turn to the religious theories at first.

6.2.1 Religious Explanations

Religious explanations of caste origins in Hinduism refer to first of all the theory of 'divine origin' of caste. The idea in this theory is developed from verses in the Rig Veda right up to the Bhagavad Gita in contemporary times. It must be added that this is a Brahmanical version and not shared by many other communities.

Box 6.01

The legend goes that in the beginning of time the original Being 'produced' the various Varnas from different parts of his anthropomorphic body. Thus the Brahmins were created from his head; the Kshatriyas from his chest; the Vaisyas from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet. The dimension of the 'rank order' or hierarchical ordering was attached to the work that each of these categories were to perform. The topmost or highest social duties were assigned to the Brahmins and these were functions of the preserving knowledge and performing priestly duties. In the case of Kshatriyas the duties to be performed were that of the defending society from invasion, stable administration and protection of society in general. The Vaisyas were the bastions of trade and commerce and this was to be done in a fair and honest way. The shudras which came lowest in the hierarchy thus laid down were a service varna which was to cater to the needs of all the varnas above them.

The varna scheme is a four fold scheme. It is further pointed out with reference to the theory of divine origin that over time each of the varnas developed into jatis or caste groups with specific attributes. The first three groups made up a category of the "twice born" and were initiated into the caste by the Sacred thread ceremony (yagyapavita). Each of the groups began specializing in particular type of profession and was restrained from performing the work of any other caste. Hierarchy was manifested both in attributional and interactional modes.

A second type of religious explanation is based on the guna theory, which is to be found in the religious literature including the Bhagavad Gita. This theory talks of the inherent qualities that characterize human beings. These three gunas are as below:

- i) 'sattva'. or the quality of truth, Knowledge, goodness, virtue and alertness;
- ii) 'rajas' or the quality of activity, courage, bravery, force, power and passion;
- iii) 'tamas' or the quality of gloominess, dullness, stupidity and indolence.

It is easy to see how the above qualities were associated hierarchically with the Brahmins being considered 'Sattvic'; the Kshatriyas and Vaisyas being considered below the Brahmins, and being rajasic. Finally on the lowestrung of the ladder were the "tamasic" Shudras.

6.2.2 Sociological Explanations

Unlike religious explanations the early sociological explanations of caste moved toward socially recognizable reality. Let us consider this briefly in the work of i) Karl Marx ii) Max Weber and iii) Celestin Bougie.

- i) For Marx the relationships of social groups to land and its ownership determined the groups position in society. Thus for him in the Indian village these were:
 - (a) castes working on land
 - (b) artisans and service classes

The castes working on land produced a surplus which according to Marx, they gave to the artisan castes. These in turn gave the former a part of the traditional craft. Thus both castes produced for their own needs and for exchange, and harmony prevailed. This "village republic" model has since been criticized as utopic.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Outline the early Sociological explanation of caste according to Karl Marx in about five lines.

In the case of Max Weber, caste was considered to be a 'status groups' whose group members were recognize by their social, and economic position. These entailed a particular life-style, which in itself was curtailed by certain restrictions on interaction, including the kind of work which could be done. The relationship between castes was also determined by the ritual opposition between the states of 'purity' and 'pollution' which could be associated with persons or objects. Thus castes were placed in a hierarchy according to their level of purity. Thus the Brahmins level of purity was highest as they followed 'clean' occupations such as priesthood. It was important too that the 'purity' be maintained through avoidance of those who were impure. For this reason Weber argued that caste was an extreme form of stratification.

For Bougie who wrote after Weber a caste was recognized by its place in the hierarchy and by the occupation its members followed. Castes were constrained and other social restrictions that were imposed upon them. Thus hierarchy and separation between groups were the attributes that helped maintain the status of a caste in the hierarchy order and determined interactional patterns.

6.3 ATTRIBUTIONAL THEORIES TO CASTE

We now turn to some other scholars who used the early insights of Marx Weber and Bougie to develop what has come to be known as the "attributional approach". Attributional approach discusses primarily the significant features of the caste system qua system and what distinguishes it from other forms of the social stratification.

Attributes are inherent inalienable qualities associated with the caste system. As such every ° caste must necessarily partake of these attributes.

6.3.1 G.S Ghurye

Ghurye wrote in the 1930's and considered that each caste was separated from the other in a hierarchical order. This ordering sprang legitimately from its attributes of a caste. These were:

- i) Segmental Division. Thus membership to a caste group is acquired by birth and with it come the position in the rank order relative to other castes.
- ii) Hierarchy. Following from the above society was arranged in rank orders, or relations of superiority or inferiority. Thus Brahmins were accepted as highest in the hierarchy and untouchables at the very bottom.
- iii) Caste Restrictions. These were placed on every caste which gave permission to its members only to interact with particular groups of people. This included its dress, speech, customs, rituals and from who they could accept food. The system was geared to maintain purity of the group members, hence of the caste group itself.
- iv) Caste Pollution. In this idea the whole effort of a caste was to avoid contamination from polluting objects (those involved unclean occupations, or of the lowest caste). This shunning of pollution is reflected in the residential separation of the caste groups.
- v) Traditional Occupation. Ghurye felt that every caste had a traditional occupation the clean castes had clean occupations whereas the unclean and impure caste had defiling ones.
- vi) Endogamy. This trait of the castes was very distinct and essential to keeping it together as a group that maintained its own distinct character. Essentially it maintained that one could only marry within ones caste.

Thus through six attributes Ghurye sought to define the process by which a caste group maintained its caste identity. By preserving the various attributes of segmental division, hierarchy, caste restrictions, caste pollution, traditional occupation, and marriage within a particular caste circle, the caste group maintained its own separate (through interrelated) identity which it sought to perpetuate over generations.

Activity 1

Discuss the attributes of caste according to G.S. Ghurye with fellow students.
Note down your findings in your notebook.

6.3.2 J.H. Hutton

Hutton had described the caste structure in his book *Caste in India*. Hutton held that the central feature of the caste system was endogamy. Around this fact are built up the various restrictions and taboos. Interaction must not violate these restrictions placed on the various castes. Another important feature of the caste system as seen by Hutton was the taboo on taking cooked food from any caste but one's own. Such restrictions raise questions in themselves:

- i) Who cooks the food?
- ii) What type of pot was the food cooked in?
- iii) Is the food “kaccha” uncooked or (cooked in water) or ‘pakka’ (fried in oil). The latter is acceptable from other castes as well.
- iv) There is a hierarchy of food and vegetarian food is ranked higher than non-vegetarian food. Brahmins are usually vegetarian but not everywhere in Bengal and Kashmir Brahmins eat non-vegetarian food as well.

These restrictions reflect the process of the formation of caste identity. They are reflective of separation and hierarchy between the caste groups. Thus non-acceptance of food reflects superiority of rank. The whole idea of maintaining purity’ and reducing pollution’ is also found to permeate the interactions.

In parts of the South India for instance the fear of pollution gets translated into physical distance being maintained between the superior and inferior caste. Again the castes low in rank order have to avoid village temples and well and maintain a physical distance in their interaction with higher caste members. Thus Hutton explains caste interactions with the notion of attributes of a caste, primarily in terms of endogamy, purity and impurity and restrictions on commensality. You will have noticed the overlap in Ghuryes Hutton’s approaches.

6.3.3 M.N. Srinivas

Before proceeding further it may be mentioned that the scholars using the attributional approach stress the attributes of a caste. However each of them lays emphasis on one or other of these attributes and how they affect interaction. In the case of Srinivas writing in the 50’s we find that he chooses to study the structure of relations arising between castes on the basis of these attributes. Thus he introduces a dynamic aspect of caste identity very forcefully.

This aspect becomes clearer in Srinivas’s work on positional mobility known as ‘Sanskritization’. Sanskritization is a process whereby a caste attempts to raise its rank within the caste hierarchy by adopting in practice, the attributes of the caste or castes above them, in the rank order. This is to say the ‘low’ attributes are gradually dropped and the ‘high’ attributes of the castes above them are imitated. This involves adoption of vegetarianism, clean occupations of so on.

Closely connected is the concept of dominant caste. The dominant caste in a village is conspicuous by its:

- i) Sizeable numerical presence
- ii) Ownership of land
- iii) Political power.

Thus a dominant caste has numerical significance as well as economic and political power. It is also interesting to note that the dominant caste need not be the highest ranking caste in the village caste hierarchy. The dominant caste commands the service of all other castes.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Give a summary of the attributional theory of caste according to M.N. Srinivas in about 10 lines.

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6.4 INTERACTIONAL THEORIES TO CASTE

Interaction approach takes into account how castes are actually ranked with respect to one another in a local empirical context.

We have already seen how attributes of a caste be used as a approach to study caste. It would also have come clear to your that a set of attributes denotes its own interactional processes. Thus we cannot say that attributes have no bearing or interaction. On the other hand we find that the interaction too has its attributional aspects. So the questions comes down to which of these aspects in emphasized more than the other, and given primacy in analyzing the caste dynamics and identity formation. Let us study some of the pioneering works so for a interactional approaches to the study of caste are concerned.

6.4.1 F.G. Bailey

Bailey feels that caste dynamics and identity are united by the two principles of segregation and hierarchy. He feels that “Castes Stand in ritual and secular hierarchy expressed in the rules of interaction”. The ritual system overlaps the political and economic system.

Box 6.02

The relationship between castes does not comprise rituals alone-there is a power dimension because there exists a dominant caste to which other castes are subordinate. Rank and caste identity are expressed by a lower caste attempting to emulate a caste which is higher in rank. Thus the interaction pattern becomes indicative of ritual status the rank order hierarchy. Interactional pattern itself involves attitudes and practices towards the question of acceptance and non acceptance of food, services, water, smoking together, seating arrangements at feasts and the exchange of gifts.

Bailey explained his viewpoint with reference to village Bisipara in Orissa; and showed how the caste situation in Bisipara become changed and more fluid after Independence when the Kshatriyas lost much of their land. This caused a downslide in their ritual ranking as well. There was a clearly discernable change in the interaction patterns which we have delineated above e.g. acceptance and non acceptance of food from other castes.

6.4.2 A.Mayer

Mayer studied Ramkheri village in Madhya Pradesh. To understand the effect on caste hierarchy Mayer observed interactive between castes in term of:

- i) Commensality of eating drinking water and smoking
- ii) Food type exchanged whether is “kaccha” or pakka’
- iii) Context of eating, ritual or otherwise
- iv) Seating arrangements at eating
- v) Who provides food and who cooked it
- vi) The vessel in which water is given - metal or earthen.

Thus the commensal hierarchy is based on the belief that any or all of the above factors can lead to greater or lesser pollution for a caste thus affecting its identity and ranking in the hierarchy order. Those at the top of the hierarchical order will ensure that only a caste or type of food and water vessel which will not pollute them is accepted or used by them. For example pakka food may be accepted from a lower caste but kaccha food will be accepted only from within the same caste or subcaste.

6.4.3 M.Marriott

Marriott analyses caste hierarchy with reference to the local context. Marriott studied the arrangement of caste ranking in ritual interaction. Marriott confirmed that ritual hierarchy is itself linked to economic and political hierarchies. Usually economic and political ranks tend to coincide. That is to say both ritual and non-ritual hierarchies affect the ranking in the caste order though ritual hierarchies tend to play a greater role. In this way a consensus emerges regarding caste ranking and this is collectively upheld. It must be made clear here that this process is not as clear cut as it first seems. This is because the sociologist enters the field when this process of caste ranking is in its full blown form and he or she does not observe the historical process and took place by deduces or infers about the same, from the data that is available on hand.

Marriott studied Kishan Garhi and Ram Nagla two villages in the Aligarh District of U.P. in 1952. Marriott’s study showed that there is consensus about caste ranking in these villages. The basis on which this is done is on the observation of ritual of ritual interaction, in the village itself.

In the villages Marriott studied we find that the important indicators or rank are:

- i) Giving and receiving of food
- ii) Giving and receiving of honorific gestures and practices
- iii) Thus Brahmins are ranked high since they officiate at the most exclusive and important rituals. They simultaneously receive all services from the other castes. Again Brahmins accept only “pakka” food from another group of high castes. Thus a caste can be considered high if Brahmins accept ‘pakka’ food from them and low if Brahmins accepting ‘kaccha’ food from them. There were ten such ‘high’ castes in Kishan Garhi and four such ‘high’ castes in Ram Nagla. The lowest caste does not receive any service from other castes, but has to provide its services to all other castes and had made it a practice to accept ‘Kaccha’ food from them as well.

Activity 2

Discuss the important indicators of rank according to Mayer and Marriot with students and friends. Note down your discoveries in your notebook.

Food and services, and how they are offered and accepted are therefore major indicators of caste ranking. However Marriott observed that there were rules also about:

- i) smoking together,
- ii) the arrangement of the housing complex
- iii) details and bodily contact
- iv) feasting ;md the order in which the food is served.

In Kishan Garhi political and economic dominance matched the ritual hierarchy. Let us see how ritual status and economic power (land ownership) overlap:

Rank and Land Ownership in Kishan Garhi

Brahmins

High Caste

Low Caste

Lowest Caste

Thus there is a tendency among castes to transform their political and economic status into ritual status.

However inconsistencies can and do exist. This gives room for social mobility. Again, though it is true that the local interaction is important, but a reference to other villages can also help determined local rank. However, by and large the ritual hierarchy tends to be consistent with political and economic dominance. Interaction sustains a given ranking order which can be witnessed in the various facts that have been mentioned.

6.4.4 L. Dumont

Dumont added a new dimension to the studies of caste in an interactional perspective. His study of caste emphasizes relations between castes rather than attributes. Attributes can be only be explained with reference to the relationship between castes. According to Dumont the local context has a role in caste ranking and identity, but this is a response to the ideology of hierarchy which extends over the entire caste system. Thus for Dumont caste is a set of relationship of economic, political and kinship systems, sustained by mainly religious values. For Dumont caste is a special type of inequality and hierarchy is the essential value underlying the caste system, and it is this value that integrates Hindu society.

The various aspects of the caste, says Dumont are based on the principle of opposition between the pure and impure underlying them. 'Pure' is superior to the impure' and has to be kept separate. Thus the caste system appears to be rational to those because of the opposition between the pure and the impure.

Dumont also feels that hierarchy in the caste system indicates ritual status without accepting the influences of wealth or power authority. Thus hierarchy is the principle through which the elements are ranked in relation to the whole. Ranking is basically religious in nature. In Indian society Status (Brahmins) has always been separated from power (King). To go further, power has been subordinated to 'status'. The king is subordinate to the priest, but both are dependent on each other. Thus hierarchy is something ritualistic in nature and supported by religion. Only when power is subordinated to status, can this type of pure hierarchy develop. The Brahmins who represents purity is superior and at the top of the whole system. But the Brahmin along with (the king opposes all the other categories of the Varna system.

For Dumont the Jajmani system of economic interaction is a ritual expression rather than an economic arrangement. Jajmani system is the religious expression of inter dependence where interdependence itself is derived from religion. Similarly, commensal regulations emphasize hierarchy rather than separation. However, the question of purity does not arise on all such occasions of commensality. Thus the washerman is a purifier" and can enter the house freely. But he cannot attend a marriage party with similar caste.

Let us appraise now both the attributional and interactional approaches.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Briefly outline Dumont's theory of interactional caste ranking in about 10 lines.

6.5 ATTRIBUTIONAL AND INTERACTIONAL THEORIES: AN APPRAISAL

We are now in a position to point out some of the anomalies found in both the attributional and interactional approaches. Let us take first the attributional approach.

- i) M. Marriott points out that there were cases in Kishangarhi where the castes he examined did not seem to derive their position in the social hierarchy from their attributes. Thus he found that diet and occupational restrictions in some cases did not negate caste rank or identity.
- ii) Again the placement of castes in Kishan Garhi did not follow from highness and lowness of occupation. Thus the facts did not fit the theory.
- iii) There may in fact be discrepancies between attribute of a caste and its rank: Thus in a Mysore village studied by Srinivas the traders caste is vegetarian and follows a clean occupation relative to the peasants. Yet peasants are ranked above traders.
- iv) There is also the problem of which of the attributes is more and which of the attributes is less important for ranking of castes.

It was due to these anomalies that the interactional approach was proposed as an alternative to the attributional approach. This has been presented earlier but is itself subject to some problems. Let us turn to these now.

- i) The interactional approach subsumes within it the importance of attributes. Thus interaction alone cannot account for rank without reference to attributes
- ii) Apart from Dumont interaction theory localizes hierarchy and propounds that ranking is an outcome of interaction. Thus there is an emphasis on separation rather than hierarchy. Dumont's position is that the ideology of purity and pollution relates to the whole of Hindu society rather just a part of it.
- iii) In the case of Dumont however the work is historical to a large extent, and the caste system appears to have remained stagnant over the ages, which is not true.
- iv) Although Dumont makes a clear separation between 'power' and status' it has also been argued that power has been historically converted to status.
- v) Finally the view of the caste as a university accepted ordered system of values (ideology) does little justice to the protest movements that have questioned caste division itself. The element of conflict is missing while the integrative function of caste is highlighted

6.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have explored the features of caste rank and identity. We began with early explanations of caste, including the religious and sociological explanations. We then moved on to a presentation of the attribution approaches to caste including those of Ghurye, Hutton, and Srinivas. Following this we described the interactional alternative to caste ranking and identity, including the work of Bailey, Mayer, Marriott and Dumont. Having presented this view we appraised both of the approaches to caste ranking and identity, and found that there difficulties present in both. It is clear however that the work. Discussed presents a tremendous advance over the early religious and sociological explanations of caste hierarchy and ranking.

6.7 KEYWORDS

Attributes	: Qualities and features
Commensality	: Eating together or sitting together
Dominant Caste	: A caste which is influential in a village due to its economic and political power.
Endogamy	: Marriage only within a particular groups
Hierarchy	: Rank order in which items are arranged from high to low
Ideology	: A coherent consistent of set of ideas
Jajmani System	: Custom of ritualised, personal, specialized services offered by the dependent castes to the dominant castes.
Kaccha food	: Food that is uncooked, or cooked in water
Pakka food	: food cooked in ghee or oil
Pollution	: A state created by coming into contact with 'unclean' items or castes
Purity	: A state of ritual cleanliness, or being free from all polluting things and persons.

6.8 FURTHER READINGS

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6.9 SPECIMEN ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Early Sociological explanations regarding explanation of caste were notable for moving away from strictly religious explanations. Thus in the work of Karl Marx it was the relationship to ownership of land that determined the group “s position in Society.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Srinivas sees caste as a segmentary system. All castes are divided into sub-castes which are; i) endogamous; ii) have common occupation; iii) are units of social and ritual life; iv) follow a common culture; v) are governed by the village council or ‘Panchayat’. The factors of hierarchy, caste occupation commensality and restrictions, principle of pollution and caste panchayat are also considered by Srinivas. Thus Srinivas’s concept of ‘Sanskritization’ talks of a lower caste emulating higher caste attributes on order to rise higher within the ranking system.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) For Dumont the ideology of purity and pollution is a general one and not confined to any local context along. Thus for Dumont caste is a set of relationship of economic political and kinship systems, sustained by mainly religious values. Hierarchies is the essential value underlying the caste system and it is this value that integrates Hindu Society. Caste has the principle of pure and impure underlying it.

‘Pure’ is superior to ‘impure’ and has to be kept separate. For Dumont power has been subordinated to status and thus the king is subordinate to the priest. **Hierarchy is thus ritualistic and supported by religion.**

