

DSE-2A Social Geography

Essay on Social Class

Prepared by: Syfujjaman Tarafder, Gour Mahavidyalaya, Malda

One of the important elements of social stratification is the 'Class'. A social class is 'a category or group of persons having a definite status in society which permanently determines their relations to other groups'. Social classes have been defined by various thinkers "in different manner. The notion of objectivity of class existence is the main contribution of Karl Marx. His emphasis is on the economic factors. Power, style of life and property determine the class status of individuals in the society.

Karl Marx defined the social classes by their relation to the means of production (ownership or non-ownership). In modern capitalist society there are two principal classes the capitalist and the proletariat.

Max Weber, like Marx, is another German thinker who has seen the importance of economic factor in the classification of a society. He has defined class as a group of persons having the same 'life chances' or social opportunities, as determined typically by economic conditions. He agreed with the fundamental tenet of Marx that control over property is a basic fact in the determination of the life chances of an individual or a class.

That is to say, the members of a particular class will have more or less chance of getting good things of life – things such as a high standard of living, leisure etc. Thus, Weber's definition of class is broadly similar to that of Marx. To the economic dimension Weber added two other dimensions, prestige and power. He saw these factors as separate but interacting bases of social hierarchy.

His notions are that property creates classes, prestige creates status groups and power creates parties. Like Marx, Weber recognized the important role of property in giving rise to status group. However, he gave it less importance than Marx did. Weber had given emphasis on life-style in deciding status group. Weber says that status groups are formed on the basis of prestige and honour. He admits that difference in property can constitute the basis for differences in honour or prestige.

Many modern sociologists regard status as the basic criterion of social class. "A social class" as defined by Maclver and Page, "is any portion of a community marked off from the rest by social status". According to this view, classes arise wherever social differentiations in terms of language, locality, faction or specialization are associated with a status hierarchy. These differentiations may give rise to significant class phenomena only when they develop common sentiments.

These sentiments imply feeling of equality among the members of one's own class, a feeling of inferiority in relation to those above in the social hierarchy and a feeling of superiority to those below. What is most important in making class distinction is the sense of status which is sustained by economic, political or ecclesiastical power and by the distinctive modes of life and cultural expression corresponding to them. In this sense the status separates one class from the other. Thus, classes are status marked and group conscious strata.

It follows that the division of society into classes on the basis of status is unavoidable. But the primary determinant of status is unquestionably economic. In a class-ridden society, a

man possessing wealth has resources through which he can exercise both economic and political power. Weber's approach is, sociologically, more agreeable because he referred to the conditions which led to the different types of classes in a society. Social class are defacto groups and their basis is mainly economic. But they are more than economic groups.

The Nature of Social Class (details)

1. Class is an economic group:

Although a social class is mostly determined on the basis of the location of the production and distribution of social wealth, they are not mere economic groups or divisions. It also includes both the subjective and objective criteria such as, class consciousness, class solidarity and wealth, property, income, education and occupation. Marx considered class on the economic basis.

2. Class is also a status group:

Class is also related to status dimension. The consideration of the class as a status group is applied to a society which has many strata. Status groups are composed of persons having the same life style and receiving about the same social honour from others. Therefore, the status consciousness separates the individuals both physically and psychologically.

3. An achieved pattern:

Status is achieved in a class system and not ascribed. As such, birth is not the basis of acquisition of one's status and one's status is not fixed throughout his life. One may improve his status if he acquires capability and talent necessary for that. On the other hand, one may also lose his status, if he fails to maintain his ability and talent.

4. The class system is ubiquitous:

As a universal phenomenon class system is prevalent in all the modern and complex social systems. However, small, simple and primitive societies are mostly free from such a pattern of stratification.

5. Feeling of class-consciousness:

Feeling of class consciousness is experienced among the members of a particular class at three levels. First, the members feel a sense of equality within their own class. Secondly, the feeling of inferiority inheres in the minds of those who occupy the lower status in the socio-economic hierarchy. Thirdly, the members of a class experience the feeling of superiority in relation to those who are placed in the lower range in the hierarchy. Such feelings cause class consciousness and finally result in strengthen the basis of class.

6. Prestige dimension:

Wealth, income, education and occupation are some of the basic determinants of class. As it is an open system, anyone who satisfies the basic criteria can become its member. Therefore persons belonging to a particular class develop status consciousness and this is reflected through the status symbols of different class groups. The status symbols of the upper classes are considered prestigious, whereas the status symbols of the middle classes are considered less prestigious.

7. Relatively stable group:

A class is characterised by an element of stability, unlike a crowd or mob of course, social mobility is possible due to the openness of the system, nevertheless it cannot be interpreted as transitory. Under certain extraordinary situations the class is subject to rapid transformation. Such circumstances include crises in the social, economic and political spheres, revolutions, movements, wars etc.

8. Open to social mobility:

An open system of stratification is characterised by vertical mobility pattern in which upward and downward movements of individuals in the social hierarchy are possible. This is not to say that there is no resistance at all, but the resistance is mild and not so severe as found in the caste system.

9. Varieties of life styles:

A particular social class is marked off from the other classes by its 'life styles' which comprises the mode of living such as, the dress pattern, the type of house and the social environment, where the members live, the leisure time activities, the mode of consumption, the pattern of relationship between the spouses and their off-springs, the exposure to media, the circle of friendship, the mode of conveyance and communication, ways of behaving etc. All these make differences between different classes and exhibit the class- values and caste preferences.

11 Important Nature of Social Classes

1. Universality:

A class is a universal phenomenon. The class system is found in almost all the modern complex societies of the world.

2. Class is an economic group:

Economic factor has been widely accepted as the principal basis for the formation of class. It does not mean that other factors such as, political clout, intellectual capability; education, occupation etc. are not responsible for class formation.

It only indicates that in modern societies economic factors play a crucial role in the formation of classes and sub-classes.

3. Class is a status group:

Status is the basic criterion of social class. In other words, class is a status group. In the words of Maclver and Page, "It is the sense of status, sustained by economic, political or ecclesiastical power and by the distinctive modes of life and cultural expressions corresponding to them, that draws class apart from class, gives cohesion to each class and stratifies a whole society."

4. Feeling of class consciousness:

This is one of the fundamental reasons of the origin of class. Class consciousness signifies that every social class is aware of its social prestige relative to other social classes. This feeling determines the behaviour of members of different social classes. Feeling of class consciousness is experienced among the members of a particular class at three levels. First, there is a feeling of equality in relation to the members of one's own class.

For example, there is a feeling of equality among the peons working in a government establishment. Secondly, there is a feeling of inferiority in relation to those who occupy the higher status in socio-economic hierarchy.

For instance, clerks suffer from inferiority complex in relation to the officers serving in the same establishment. Thirdly, there is a feeling of superiority in relation to those who are placed in the lower range in the hierarchy. For example, clerks consider themselves to be superior to the peons.

5. An achieved pattern:

So far as class system is concerned, status is achieved and not ascribed like the caste. Several factors like income, wealth, occupation, education, life-style etc., go a long way in determining the class of an individual.

6. Mutually dependent:

The smooth functioning of the society depends on the co-operation among various social classes. Hence all social classes interact with one another in one form or the other keeping social stability and social prosperity in view.

7. Hierarchical gradation:

Society is composed of innumerable social classes. Hence it is quite natural that we see a whole spectrum of hierarchical gradation of these social classes.

8. Prestige dimension:

The relative position of the class in the social scale is determined by the degree of prestige attached to the status. Thus, the prestige enjoyed by a professor is higher than that of a research assistant.

The prestige that a class enjoys depends upon the scale of values prevalent in the society at a given period. In many societies knowledge, purity of race or descent, religion, heroism, wealth, bravery and similar other qualities are given weight age while according prestige to an individual.

9. Stability:

A class is relatively a stable group. It is not short-lived like a crowd or a mob. However, the 'stability element' of a class is vitally affected under certain extraordinary situations such as crises in the social, economic and political spheres, wars, revolutions etc.

10. Open to social mobility:

A social class is an open group. It believes in vertical mobility. In the class system upward or downward movement of individuals in the social hierarchy is rendered possible. This should not be construed to mean that there is no resistance at all in the class system. But the resistance to social mobility is very mild.

11. Mode of living:

Each class has its life-style. Life-style includes the dress pattern, the type of house and the social environment where the members live, the means of recreation one resorts to, the circle of friendship, one's mode of conveyance and communication, one's way of spending money etc. Differences in classes are expressed in different life styles.

Social Class in India: Class Typology and Class Consciousness

"Any portion of a community marked off from the rest by social status. Where a society is composed of social classes, the social structure looks like a truncated pyramid. At the basis of the structure lies the lowest social class and above it other social classes, arranged in a hierarchy of rank and distinction"-Maclver and Page.

The stratification or the division of the society into several ranks on the basis of super ordination and subordination is a characteristic feature of most of the social systems. Social scientists use class as the most powerful concept of stratification for explaining social organisation, social movements and power structure. A Social class is a stratum with a definite identity recognized by its members and others. It is concerned with a group of individuals which cuts across castes and religion. "Many men many minds" is aptly applicable to the class phenomenon. In our society classes are distinguished by their 'position' and 'status'. Some classes are privileged while others are underprivileged.

A Social class may be interpreted in a couple of ways. First it may be defined in terms of some objectives, normally economic. According to Karl Marx, classes are large groups of people who differ from another by their relation to the means of production, by their role in

the social organisation and labour and consequently by the mode and dimension of acquiring the share of social wealth of which they dispose.

Thus accepting such explanations social scientists and political thinkers have tried to analyze the presence of classes in the industrial setting and the agrarian social structure in India. Some social scientists, being inclined towards Marxists' understanding of class, have gone to the extent where they suggest the existence of classes in India even during the ancient period. Yet, the Marxian explanation of class often lacks in conceptualizing the, social reality as such in rural India.

Max Weber defined class as group of persons having the same 'life chances' or social opportunities. He, thus, added the 'status' dimension to determine one's class. By status, Weber meant social honour or social esteem and this, he said "normally stands in sharp opposition to the pretensions." Thus a class for Weber is composed of all persons, in the same economic situation, who have about the same probability of procuring goods, gaining a position in life, and gratifying their wants, in so far as this probability rests on the control of goods and services and the access to opportunities within the given economic system.

Modern sociologists like Maclver and Marshall regard status as the basic criterion of social class. Maclver and Page define social class as "any portion of a community marked off from the rest by social status. Where a society is composed of social classes, the social structure looks like a truncated pyramid. At the basis of the structure lies the lowest social class and above it other social classes, arranged in a hierarchy of rank and distinction." Thus, secondly, a class is interpreted on the basis of status.

The member of each social class constitute many attributes of an in-group they recognize one another as their social counterparts and draw a line of demarcation between themselves and the members of other classes. Usually they live with the members of their own class.

In a nutshell, each social class is a society within a society, though not complete and independent. A social class has its own distinctive ways of life in matters of the consumption system, type of conveyance, the way of recreation and leisure. The members of the upper classes are considered masters rather than servants. They are free from manual labour and their life style is completely marked off from the rest.

Class Typology:

There is no unanimity among sociologists regarding the classification of social classes into various types. Sorokin has given a three-fold classification of classes, such as social division based on economic, political and occupational criteria.

Warner and Lunt have given a six-fold classification comprising:

- (I) The upper-upper class
- (II) The lower-upper class,
- (III) The upper-middle class

(IV) The lower-middle class

(V) The upper-lower class and

(VI) The lower-lower class.

This classification of Warner and Lunt is supposed to be a further sub-division of the three traditional class divisions of society such as upper, middle and lower classes. Most of the sociologists conceive of the above three-fold class division of the society. Giant German sociologist Karl Marx speaks of a couple of major social classes in the modern capitalistic society, the capitalists and the workers or the bourgeois and the proletariat. T.B. Bottomore has advanced a four-fold division of social classes, such as the upper class, the middle class, the working class and the peasantry.

Class Consciousness:

Class consciousness is the awareness of similarities and transformation of people into common group activity for the realization of common group interest. It refers to those sentiments of people in a class which impel them to help, cooperate and sympathies with the people belonging to the same class.

Class consciousness was not very much developed in the past and people belonging to different classes usually mixed and assisted each other. But in the world today class consciousness has considerably increased. This has resulted in the causation of many frictions and disputes on that account.

Some important causes may be attributed to the rise in class consciousness.

Those are:

(a) Endeavor made by each class for preservation of its own solidarity and supremacy on account of analogous ideas and approach to important problems

(b) The belief that it is helpful for them in safeguarding their own interests,

(c) The ability to social mobility and

(d) The restraint that prohibits a class adopting an aggressive attitude towards other classes and interference in their affairs.