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Q8(a)

Examine critically the concept of social stratification as a basis for sustaining social inequality.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · The Nature of Society

2.2 The Nature of Society: Concept of Society; Society and Culture; Social Institution; Social groups; and Social stratification.

Core demand of the question

- Define social stratification and explain how it sustains inequality
- Compare major theoretical explanations
- Use ethnographic and Indian caste/class/gender examples
- Critically include mobility, agency and intersectionality

Revision summary

Stratification is institutional ranking that produces unequal resources, honour and power.

Marx stresses property; **Weber** separates class, status and party.

Bourdieu explains reproduction through several forms of capital and habitus.

Dumont highlighted purity hierarchy; **Ambedkar** highlighted endogamy, graded inequality and coercion.

Srinivas showed Sanskritisation and **dominant caste**, mobility that need not end hierarchy.

Intersectionality, law and movements show both compounded inequality and resistance.

Introduction

Social stratification is the durable, institutional ranking of categories of people into unequal life chances, honour, resources and power. Difference becomes inequality when it is inherited, justified and reproduced through institutions.

Body**How hierarchy reproduces itself**

Karl Marx located class inequality in ownership of productive property: **dominant classes control labour and ideology**. **Max Weber** separated class, status and party, explaining why ritual honour or political power need not follow income exactly. **Davis and Moore** claimed unequal rewards motivate socially necessary roles; **Melvin Tumin** replied that inherited privilege restricts talent and lets elites define which work is valuable.

Pierre Bourdieu shows reproduction through economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. Schools can convert a dominant group's language and habitus into apparently neutral merit. **Louis Dumont's** Homo Hierarchicus interpreted caste through purity and pollution, while **B. R. Ambedkar** centred graded inequality, endogamy and coercion. **M. N. Srinivas's** Sanskritisation demonstrates mobility, but often mobility within rather than abolition of

hierarchy. **Dominant caste** links number, land and political office.

Endogamy transmits status and property; occupational closure restricts opportunity; ideology naturalises privilege; law and everyday discrimination enforce boundaries. Gendered unpaid care and control of marriage reproduce caste and class together. Dalit women's location shows **Kimberlé Crenshaw's** intersectional insight: axes of inequality combine rather than simply add.

Stratification is not perfectly closed. Reservation, urbanisation, social movements, education and democratic politics create mobility and counter-power. Yet wealth, networks, English-medium credentials, residential segregation and digital access can remake old advantage in new forms. Functional integration cannot excuse unequal dignity, and a purely ritual account misses land and violence.

Flow diagram

Unequal resources -> Institutions

Institutions -> Endogamy education occupation

Endogamy education occupation -> Legitimizing ideology

Legitimizing ideology -> Unequal life chances

Unequal life chances -> Unequal resources

Movements law and mobility -. challenge . -> Institutions

Conclusion

Stratification sustains inequality by turning resources into inherited status and then naming the result merit, purity or tradition. **Marx**, **Weber**, Bourdieu and **Ambedkar** together reveal material, cultural and political reproduction; agency and constitutional justice reveal that it is never uncontested.

Facts & figures

B. R. Ambedkar

Analysed caste as graded inequality reproduced centrally through endogamy, not merely a benign division of labour.

Dumont and critique

Purity/pollution illuminates caste ideology but can understate political economy, violence, history and change.

Dominant caste

Srinivas linked local dominance to land, numbers, status and political power rather than ritual rank alone.

Pierre Bourdieu

Showed how capital and habitus allow institutions such as schools to reproduce inherited advantage as merit.

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