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Q2(a)

Elucidate the basic premises of Davis' structural-functional theory of social stratification. How far is it relevant in understanding contemporary Indian society.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Stratification and Mobility: Concepts

Stratification and Mobility: Concepts - equality, inequality, hierarchy, exclusion, poverty and deprivation; Theories of social stratification - Structural functionalist, Marxist, Weberian; Dimensions - Class, status groups, gender, ethnicity and race; Social mobility - open and closed systems, types, sources and causes.

Core demand of the question

- Elucidate the basic premises of Davis' structural-functional theory of social stratification. How far is it relevant in understanding contemporary Indian society
- Keep the elucidation within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

- **Davis-Moore:** unequal rewards motivate talent into functionally important, scarce positions.
- **Premises:** universality, positional inequality, motivation through prestige and pay.

Tumin, Marx, Weber, and Merton show tautology, exploitation, status, and latent privilege.

- **India:** exams look like contests; **informal labour**, caste, and care refute the general claim.

Relevant as merit ideology and some professions; not as the theory of Indian stratification.

Introduction

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore argued that stratification is a functional necessity. Unequal rewards attach to positions so that scarce talent is placed where it is most needed. The premises are neat. Contemporary India shows both the sorting story and its tautology.

Body

Basic premises

- Some positions are more functionally important and more scarce in qualified personnel.
- Society must motivate the talented to train and to occupy those positions.
- Unequal material and prestige rewards are the mechanism of motivation.
- Stratification is thus universal and functionally explained, not a historical accident.
- The theory is about positions, not about eternal families; mobility is thinkable.

Internal problems already named

- **Melvin Tumin** asked **how we know importance except by the reward itself:** tautology.
- Training can be blocked by property, caste, and gender, so the pool of talent is socially produced, not found.
- **Dysfunctions:** wasted talent, hostility, and the hiding of alternative motives such as service or coercion.

- **Karl Marx:** class is exploitation, not a team sorting nurses and CEOs for the common good.
- **Max Weber:** status honour and party power allocate reward beside "function".
- **Robert K. Merton:** apparent functions can hide latent privilege.

Contemporary India: partial relevance

- Exam competition, IITs, and medical seats look like Davis-Moore contests for scarce skill.
- Public office and specialist medicine do need trained personnel; unequal pay is partly a labour-market fact.

Where relevance fails

- Caste and unpaid care, as Ann Oakley-type analysis shows, sort people before "talent" is measured.
- **Informal labour is the majority:** functionally crucial work, low reward, opposite of the premise.
- **Mandal** politics treats ascription as a claim on office, which the theory reads as interference rather than as a correction of blocked talent.
- Property and English-medium coaching sponsor mobility, Ralph Turner's sponsored type, not a pure contest.
- NFHS nutrition and schooling gaps show that the talent pool is stratified in childhood.

How far

- Relevant as a folk ideology of merit and as a description of some professional labour markets.
- Weak as a general theory of Indian stratification, which remains a mix of class, caste status, and party, in **Weber's** three orders, under a capitalist mode in **Marx's** sense.

Flow diagram

Important scarce positions -> Unequal reward
 Unequal reward -> Talent sorted
 Tumin tautology -> Critique
 Caste care informal -> Critique

Conclusion

Davis-Moore premises treat unequal reward as a functional sorter of talent. **Tumin**, **Marx**, **Weber**, and Merton dismantle the tautology and the harmony. In India the theory fits some credential races and fails the informal majority, caste closure, and gendered care. Use it as a claim to test, not as the map.

Facts & figures

Davis and Moore

1945 argument that stratification is a functional necessity for placing talent.

Tumin

Showed circular measurement of "importance" and the waste of blocked talent.

Informal labour

Large Indian workforce that is functionally essential and poorly rewarded.

Mandal

Ascriptive political correction of blocked access, unintelligible as mere "interference" with function.

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